

余光中：中國山水遊記的感性

# The Sensuous Art of the Chinese Landscape Journal

By Yu Kwang-chung

Translated by Yang Qinghua

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*Yu Kwang-chung claims to be ambidextrous: a poet with his right hand and a writer of prose with his left. But he must surely be a reincarnation of the legendary Buddha of a thousand hands, so continuous and varied has been his output: translations, of modern English and American poetry, of a life of Van Gogh and recently of Turkish poetry and Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest; familiar essays and critical essays; and all this in addition to his own poetry, and his teaching and participation in a wide variety of cultural activities during all the years since his undergraduate days. After teaching in Taiwan and U.S.A., he has been a Reader in the Chinese Department of The Chinese University of Hong Kong for the past nine years. He is considered by many the doyen of modern Chinese poets, and was voted by Taiwan's young poets the 'uncrowned Poet Laureate' in 1983.*

*His thirteenth volume of verse was published in 1983. But the work of his left hand is not to be treated lightly. In prose he is a master stylist, blending classical allusion with a modern sensibility, and at the same time creating a fluent and idiomatic Chinese style free from the prevalent Anglo-Americanisms. His latest series of three articles on the Chinese landscape journal demonstrates the wide range of his scholarship and his penetrating critical insight. It is a modernist's sympathetic treatment of a neglected traditional genre.*

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THE VARIETIES of prose are so numerous and diversified as to defy any attempt at classification. But if one were to endeavour to bring about an assortment in terms of psychological effect, then they would fall under two categories: the sensuous and the intellectual. The landscape journal, consisting as it does of narrative and scenic description, belongs, by its nature, to the sensuous category. Its author's sensory perceptions are extremely fine; they are data recorded by highly acute sense organs. We can talk of a writer as "highly sensuous" if in his writing, in his narrative and description, his use of sensory data enables the reader to visualize, to be there, and share the experience. And visualization on its own is really in-

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sufficient; the other senses must also be exploited, hearing, smell, touch, taste, etc. Sensory experience is a natural part of human experience, but when it comes to expressing it in words, ordinary people, even the common run of writers, resort to clichés, and produce puerile, vague generalizations. Only prose-writers of real distinction can transcend limitations of language and get directly at the essence of things. Archibald MacLeish, the American poet, says in his "Ars Poetica":

A poem should not mean  
But be.

This profound aphorism can equally be applied to prose.

Let us see how Wang Zhi 王質 of the Song dynasty describes the moon:

Boundless mountains and hills, shadowy trees. An eyebrow of new moon hung above the towering cliffs, modulating its pace to the movement of man.

—from his "Donglin Journal"

We often compare the new moon to an eyebrow or talk of an eyebrowlike new moon, but it is certainly novel to employ "eyebrow" as a measure word. The expression "modulating its pace to the movement of man" 遲速若與客俱 is reminiscent of Li Bai's lines:

*Descending the verdant hills at nightfall,  
We were followed home by the mountain moon.*

暮從碧山下，  
山月隨人歸。

But Wang's expression is more sensuous, more dynamic, more cinematic. What a vivid conception of the moon, to say that it will follow us slowly if we move at a leisurely pace, and will increase its speed as we accelerate. Let us see again how the same author describes a boating experience:

Nothing but lotuses were to be seen. The wind came from ashore, bowing the plants before it. They were a-rocking and stirring, a confusion of sprawling red and prostrate green, and wafts of heady fragrance filled the air, clinging obstinately to our breasts and sleeves. We moored our boat by the roots of an ancient willow tree, and purchased a couple of jarfuls of wine and some water caltrops. Back in the lotuses again, we broke into riotous singing and laughter, which was echoed back to us by the surrounding valleys. A light breeze arose on the water, and ripples were born like fine scales. Fireflies flitted to and fro, as if in alarm or fright. The night was now far advanced. The peaks towered higher than ever, yet seemed near, looming over our heads as if they were about to reach down and snatch us. Not a trace of cloud could be seen in the sky. The stars were all out and shining brightly, tumbling in the water, like pearls rolling on a mirror, irretrievable.

—from "Donglin Journal"

As scenic depiction this is really superb. Visual, auditory, and olfactory experiences are all woven together and brought to life. When fragrance “clings obstinately to our breasts and sleeves” 冲懷冒袖, 掩苒不脫, the olfactory experience is fused with the visual and the tactile. And the visual experience is so dynamically expressed: when the lotuses respond to the motion of the wind, they begin “a-rocking and stirring, a confusion of sprawling red and prostrate green”; a light breeze brushes the water, and ripples “are born like fine scales”; the ghostly flame of the fireflies flits “to and fro, as if in alarm or fright”; and the peaks “loom over our heads as if they are about to reach down and snatch us”.<sup>1</sup> But most vivid of all is the description of the stars reflected in the water, likened to “pearls rolling on a mirror, irretrievable”. Pearls as an image of stars and mirror as an image of water: these are static comparisons, and commonplace enough. But to speak of “pearls rolling on a mirror” is to bring motion into the matter. The fluctuation of the ripples on the surface of the water is thus brought out in a highly sensuous manner. From this we may draw the general conclusion that the best way to describe a scene is in fact to narrate it. Even the most static of scenes should be made to appear somehow in motion. In this way the landscape comes alive. To put it another way, run-of-the-mill scenic descriptions use a lot of epithets, but a truly striking description uses more verbs. In this respect it is cinematic.

Now let us look at a passage by Ma Ge 麻革 of the late Yuan dynasty. This is from his “Trip to Dragon Mountain”:

(We) went to sit again under Manjusri Crag and began to treat ourselves to some drinks. The sun had set, and a light mist and vaporous clouds mingled with the approaching dusk. Presently, a cool moon rose, casting a pale gleam over the rocks. The doleful murmuring of the pines was carried to us from the nearby ravines. We all looked around us in awe and hearkened in silence. The more rarified the atmosphere grew, the more remote were our thoughts from the world. Then said we to each other: “Could anyone in this world know joy greater than this?”

Both visual and auditory senses are involved here. The author has succeeded not only in conjuring up the moonlit night and the murmuring of the pines, but also in summarizing in a few pithy words the human response to both: “We all looked around us in awe and hearkened in silence.” In scenic description and narrative, it is indeed sometimes more effective to state the results of perceptions, rather than their causes. For instance, if one wishes to evoke the beauty of a girl, it is

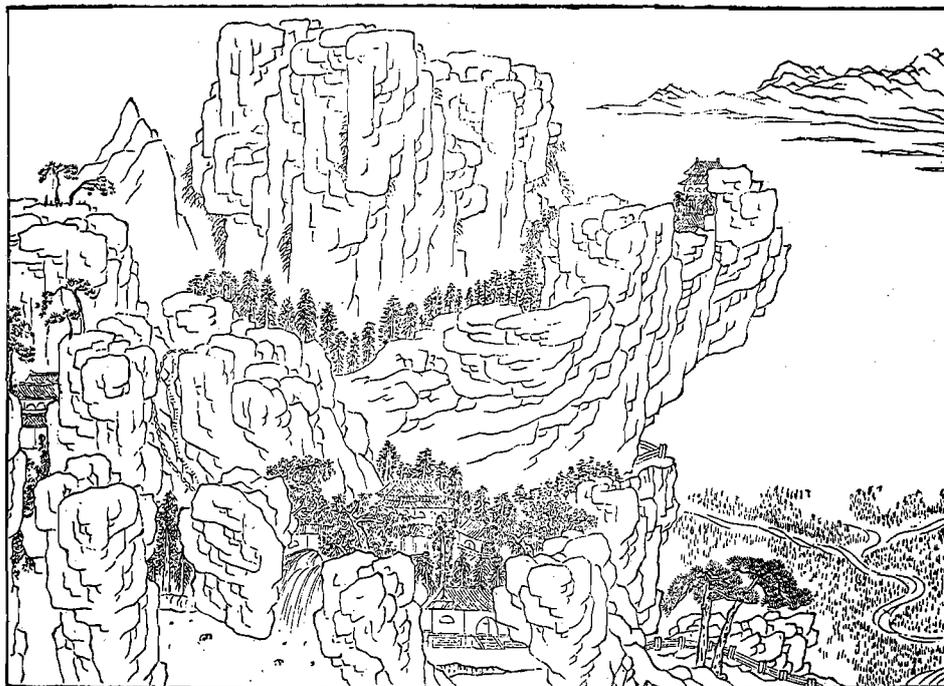
<sup>1</sup> A pity that parts of this description plagiarize the Tang dynasty poet Liu Zongyuan’s 柳宗元 “Yuanjiake Journal”, which I quote here for comparison:

The wind would often descend from the mountains all around, shaking the tall trees, bending the multitudinous blades of grass, leaving a confusion of jumbled red and frightened green. Heady wafts of fragrance filled the air. The brook dashed on, with swift eddies, and formed pools in the depth of the valley.

The lush vegetation was rocking and stirring all the time.

The author also plagiarized Su Shi’s “Trip to the Hill of the Stone Bells” which contains the following sentence:

A gigantic rock towered by the side a thousand feet high, resembling some ferocious animal or hideous ghost about to reach down and snatch us.



MT. HUA, SACRED PEAK OF THE WEST. Ming dynasty woodcut, from *Ming kan mingshan tuban huaji* 明刊名山圖版畫集, Shanghai People's Art Publishing House.

sometimes a better strategy to show the admiration and wonder her beauty inspires in the beholder, rather than to give a direct account of her charms. Similarly, a direct description of a ghost or hideous monster is less effective than an account of the horror it instils in the hearts of those who encounter it. The human response ("we all looked around us in awe and hearkened in silence") throws the objective reality into relief most effectively, and keeps the reader in suspense (a trick all movie directors are familiar with).

Narrative can be every bit as sensuous as description. Take the following example from the "Mt. Hua Journal" of the great traveller Xu Xiake 徐霞客 of the late Ming dynasty:

Descended to Shaluo Flat. Night pressing in; hurried out of the valley. Dark-walked for 3 *li* and stayed the night at Shifang Convent.

Night falls more slowly on the plain. "Night pressing in" is a mountain phenomenon, and dusk fell even more speedily for the author, as he was walking down the mountain. The words "pressing in" lead naturally on to the word "hurried". But all the hurry was to no avail, for man cannot outstrip the heavens, which were already dark by the time the traveller was out of the valley. In other words, night had overtaken him. The three expressions "pressing in", "hurried", and "dark" bring out the mobile relationship between night and man in a manner that is both urgent and dramatic. The highly dense expression "dark-walked" is sensuous to the point of saturation.

Xu Xiake, in his narrative, often employs singular expressions. This singularity is sometimes caused by his highly individual way of seeing things. The following passage, also from his “Huangshan Journal”, is a good example of this:

A small band of monks slowly alighted from the sky, where the pines and the rocks were lost in a tangle. Claspings their hands in salutation, they told us that they had been snowbound for three months and had fought their way through in search of food. They inquired how we had managed to climb this far up.

Xu Xiake and his party had braved the snow in order to attempt the hazardous ascent. Looking up, they saw this small group of monks descending from the very summit. Hence the singular expression, “slowly alighted from the sky”. Even King Hu 胡金銓 would find it hard to outdo this, in one of his “kung-fu” adventure films.

Another shift in the camera-angle, and we find ourselves looking downwards from above, as in the following scene from Xu Xiake’s “Yunnan Journal”:

(I) then clambered to the summit of the peak again. Walking all the way round, I had a view of the southern face, which was dotted with little shrines from top to bottom, like cells of a honeycomb or swallows’ nests, ready to tumble down at any moment. They were all outbuildings of the Lohan Temple to the north and south of it.

In the postscript to his “Huangshan Journal” Xu has the following sentence describing a similar view:

Leaning on my staff, I ascended in the direction of Cinnabar Convent. A climb of 10 *li* brought me to Huangni Ridge. The peaks which had loomed so high in the clouds emerged one after another and then dropped below my staff.

That the misty peaks dropped one by one below his staff demonstrates clearly the height he had scaled. It is surely an expression at once delightfully attractive and full of a sense of motion.

Chinese mountains and Chinese men of letters seem to exist in a symbiotic relationship. They need each other in order to be fully accepted into the halls of fame. Nature needs the *imprimatur* of the Muse, the Muse requires the *nihil obstat* of Nature. Thus every one of China’s Great Peaks has at one time or another been immortalized by one of her Ancient Bards or Old Masters. Huangshan is known for its beauty all over China, and Huangshan Journals of one sort or another are too numerous to mention. The most renowned in ancient times are those from the hands of Xu Xiake, Qian Qianyi 錢謙益 and Yuan Mei 袁枚, while among contemporary writers, there is Ji Xianlin 季羨林. The journals written by these four writers differ in length, but even the shortest runs to approximately one thousand characters, and is therefore too long to be reproduced in full. In order to achieve a comparison, I shall cite passages describing pine trees:



HUANGSHAN. Ming dynasty woodcut, same source.

Every sheer precipice and overhanging crag is, without exception, encrusted with knotty and fantastic pines, the taller measuring less than ten feet and the smallest only a few inches. They are flat-headed, with short bristling branches, convoluted roots and knotted trunks. The shorter the older; the smaller the more extraordinary. Who would have thought to find such a singular phenomenon as this, in a mountain landscape that is already singular enough in itself? . . . On the way down from Guide Cliff, halfway over a snowy slope, a crag rose abruptly before us. From a crevice on its summit sprouted a pine tree less than two feet high, its branches extending obliquely, twisting round and round, coiling into a verdant canopy that stretched over thirty feet. Its roots threaded their way up and down through the rock, almost spanning its entire height. This is known as the Disturbed Dragon Pine.

—from *"Huangshan Journal"* by Xu Xiake

The top of Old Man Peak was gained. Many strange-shaped pine trees could be seen growing over the precipices, jutting dangerously out from the rock-face. Thenceforward, every tree, without exception, was a pine. And every pine, without exception, was in some way grotesque. There were some with a trunk no thicker than a man's calf, but with roots coiling over almost one sixth of an acre. There were some whose roots did not cover more than ten feet, but whose branches extended a long way, providing a dense shade over the path by their side. Others

followed the contour of the hillside and their extended boughs formed an arch over a gully. Yet others burst from a crevice and seemed to be growing almost horizontally. Some were light as feathered canopies, some writhed like dragons. Some ran close to the ground, then rose into the air, then returned to the ground again. Others projected sideways, came to a sudden halt, and then continued to project sideways again . . . . Standing on the north slope of Shixin Peak, one could see a pine growing out of the southern rock-face opposite, its boughs extending right across the gorge in between. That was what is generally known as the Guide Pine. To its west, a gigantic crag projected vertically upwards, surmounted by a pine which was only a little over three feet high, and yet covered almost one sixth of an acre. Its crooked trunk emerged from the rock and worked its way down and through it, splitting it in two near the middle. Its twisted and intertwined branches snatched at one another. This was the Disturbed Dragon Pine. On the peaks of Stone Bamboo Shoot Cliff and Elixir Refining Bluff, every rock was a carefully placed part of the whole. There was no part that was superfluous or out of place. And every isolated piece of rock was topped by a solitary pine and looked like a head with a hairpin, or a carriage with a canopy. Viewed from afar, silhouetted against the sky, they resembled so many blades of grass. It was indeed a fascinating sight, beyond imagination and quite indescribable. These pines did not grow in the soil, but on the bare rock. Their trunk and bark were stone. Nurtured by the rain and clouds, enduring snow and frost, they were

HUANGSHAN, THE CRANE-CRESTED PINE, by Huang Binhong 黄宾虹.

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HUANGSHAN SCENE, painted by Huang Binhong in 1954.

conceived from the very life-essence of Nature and engendered from the depths of antiquity. They belong with the elixirs and magic mushrooms of legend and are certainly not ordinary plants. And yet there are vulgar people who think of digging them up and keeping them in pots for their entertainment.

Ascending a snowy steep and turning east, we encountered a giant prostrate pine, wriggling its way across our path. Reduced to its present state by a thunderbolt, it stretched along the ground, spanning a distance of hundreds of yards, twisting and turning, with ruffled scales and angry bristling whiskers. Passers-by all thought it a sad sight. But I gave a chuckle, and said: "Isn't this a master stroke of Providence, to have thwarted it thus? Think what a still more imposing sight it will be in centuries to come when it becomes even more entangled and knotty."

—from *"Huangshan Journal"* by Qian Qianyi

Climbing Lixue Terrace, we came across an ancient pine. Its roots were in the east, while its trunk stretched along the ground westward, and its treetop extended southward. The whole tree had grown into the rock and then broken through and burst out of it. The rock seemed alive and hollow, sheltering the pine within itself. Rock and pine were totally assimilated with each other. It also seemed as if the pine stood in fear of heaven and did not dare to grow upwards. Its height was less than two feet, but it took quite ten people to link their arms around it. Other pines, there were, as bizarre as this, and too numerous to be mentioned.

—from *"Huangshan Journal"* by Yuan Mei

The pine trees found on Huangshan are even rarer than those in other places. They are the rarest of the rare. You only have to look at the names of the more noted ones, to have some idea of this: "Hassock Pine", "Interlocked Pines", "Fan-shaped Pine", "Black Tiger Pine" . . . "Guide Pine", and innumerable others, besides all the nameless tall pines, dwarf pines, ancient pines, young pines, pines growing on overhanging cliffs and sheer precipices, in the most unimaginable places. Endowed with myriad graceful forms, bizarre beyond all measure, they grow in violation of all the rules by which trees normally grow. In any other place, pines a thousand years old would look quite dodderly and senile; but here, they are still young maidens in their prime, and their branches and trunks are not that thick either. In any other place, pines grow only in the soil. Here, they grow on the bare rock-face. In any other place, pines bury their roots in the earth. Here, the trees expose their roots quite unashamedly, all of them, bigger ones, smaller ones, thick ones, fine ones, on the surface of rocks, to the anxiety of the onlooker.

—from "Climbing Huangshan" by Ji Xianlin

Huangshan is famous for four things. First and foremost among these are its pine trees. No account of Huangshan would be complete without a mention of them. If we compare the four passages quoted above, we are obliged to rank Qian's first, Xu's second, Yuan's third, and Ji's last. It seems that when it comes to writing "Huangshan Journals" we Chinese are going gradually downhill. Huangshan is indeed the most extraordinary of all mountains; and the pine trees on Huangshan are the most extraordinary of all pine trees. It is only fitting therefore that there should be

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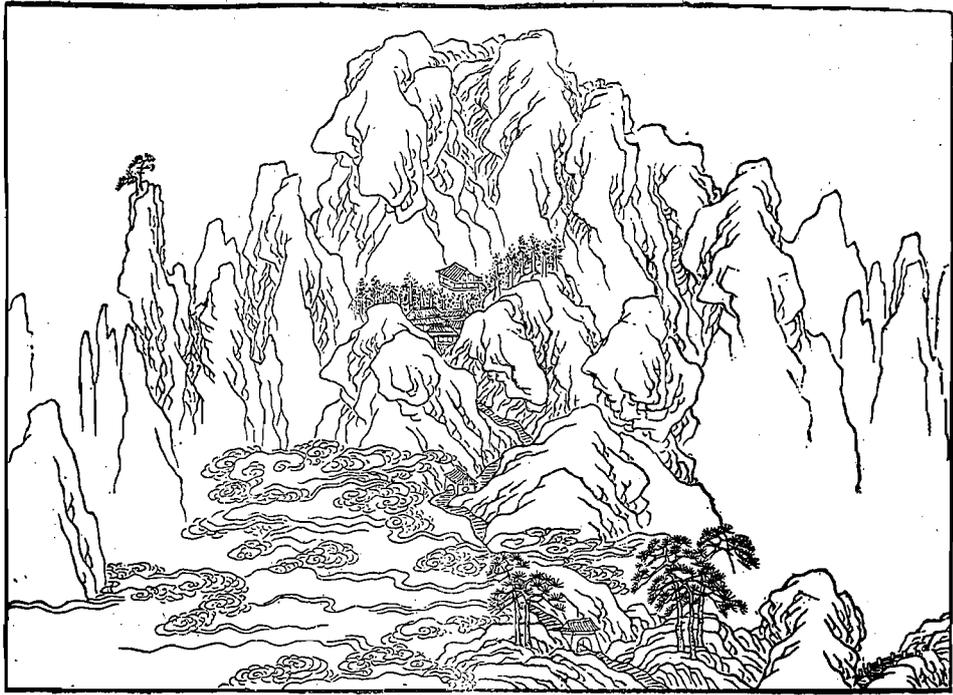
HUANGSHAN,  
by Liu Kuo-sung (1966)

something extraordinary in the way of prose to celebrate them. The grotesque beauty of Disturbed Dragon Pine won the acclamation of three distinguished travellers successively from the Ming and Qing dynasties. It should truly be named a wizard among pines. Yuan Mei made his trip to Huangshan one hundred and sixty-seven years after Xu Xiake,<sup>2</sup> and the tree was then still in full vigour. It must have been in existence for hundreds of years. But Ji Xianlin, enumerating as he did twelve celebrated pines of Huangshan in one breath, did not even mention it. Can it have freed itself from the rock and flown away? Qian Qianyi, in his descriptions of the pines of Huangshan, employs both panoramic long-shots, and close-ups. His close-ups of the two grotesque pines are highly sensuous. The images he creates are condensed and charged with tension. In his long-shots the other queer pines are also presented in a lifelike and animated way. Ji Xianlin, on the other hand, does a very perfunctory job, resorting to such abstract and unimaginative clichés as “endowed with myriad graceful forms”.

A writer's ability can often be gauged by an examination of the way he uses figures—whether he uses them appropriately, vividly, uniquely. Qian's comparison of the solitary pine on the isolated rock to a hairpin on the head or a canopy on a carriage is highly graphic; the hairpin is an especially ingenious conceit. In his description of a prostrate pine, he uses first the expression “twisting and turning” and then “with ruffled scales and angry bristling whiskers”. The apt reference to a dragon thus recurs like a motif. Neither Xu nor Yuan take any particular pains to give an elaborate description of the pines, yet the images they create are unforgettable. Ji Xianlin, by comparison, is very disappointing. Though he gives a whole string of names for these extraordinary trees, he fails to be at all specific and only succeeds in leaving a vague and generalized notion in the reader's mind. Time and again he resorts to enumerations: the pines are “tall, dwarf, ancient and young”; their roots are “bigger, smaller, thick and fine”; and all this with the avowed intention of demonstrating their “myriad graceful forms”. Such rollcall-like enumeration, however, is sadly one-dimensional; it lacks perspective or texture. It is, in sensuous terms, impoverished. The sensuous quality of a piece of writing can roughly be assessed by an examination of the way the writer uses verbs. Ji's pine trees “grow”, “bury” and “expose”; whereas Qian's pines “coil”, “snatch”, “twist and turn”, “wriggle”, “ruffle and bristle”—all, again, hinting at dragon motion. It is plain at a glance which set of verbs is the more expressive; which is the more sensuous.

Mount Tai is universally renowned, and has even found its way into many old Chinese sayings. Many accounts have been written of it, among which the most celebrated is probably the “Ascent of Mount Tai,” by Yao Nai 姚鼐 of the Qing dynasty. The most acclaimed section of this journal is the passage describing the sunrise. The high point of the “The Southern Sacred Mountain”, by another Qing dynasty traveller Qian Bangqi 錢邦芑, is similarly a sunrise description. We may compare the two by juxtaposition:

<sup>2</sup>Xu Xiake made two visits to Huangshan. The first was in the 44th year of the reign of Wanli (1616 A.D.). Yuan Mei's visit was in the 48th year of the reign of Qianlong (1783 A.D.).



MT. TAI, SACRED PEAK OF THE EAST. Ming dynasty woodcut.

Far, far away, along the horizon, stretched a thin streak of cloud of a rare hue. In another instant it was dappled pink. The sun was rising, vermilion like cinnabar, borne on a bed of stirring red light. Some said this was the Eastern Sea. I turned to look at the peaks to the west of the Sun Observing Peak; part of them had caught the sun, part had not, so that they were streaked red and white. But all of them appeared to bow before Mount Tai.

—from *“Ascent of Mount Tai”* by Yao Nai

The deep gloom gradually receded, but the air was still frosty against one’s brow. To the east in the whitish mist a thread of rosy cloud soon broke into bright gold. It stretched the length of the eastern sky, from south to north, thousands and thousands of miles. Soon it grew brighter still, and multi-coloured, while the red glow in the due east became more luminous than ever. Another instant, and a disc of blood scarlet struggled up from beneath layers of cloud, radiating a myriad shafts of dazzling light. The earth was restored to brightness again. Heart and eye felt free.

—from *“The Southern Sacred Mountain”* by Qian Bangqi

In the last sentence of the first passage cited above, Yao has endeavoured to describe the effect of the first rays of the risen sun on the various peaks. Some had caught the sun and turned rosy in colour; others were untouched by the sun and retained the pristine white of their snow drifts. But all were lower than Mount Tai and seemed to be bowing to it. By comparison the last part of Qian's description, consisting of sixteen Chinese characters, is flat and insipid and far inferior. But in describing the sunrise itself, Qian seems somewhat more successful; his prose is more colourful and abounding in the sense of motion. Yao has a magnificent phrase "borne on a bed of stirring red light" 下有紅光, 動搖承之, which expresses the sense of motion most vividly. But Qian's range of colour is much wider, and shows more gradation, from "deep gloom" to "frosty nip", from "whitish mist" to "a thread of rosy cloud", from "bright golden" to "shining red" and "blood scarlet". The verbs Qian employs are also more diversified ("recede", "break", "stretch", "dazzle" and "struggle"), and more intense in feeling. The Tongcheng School of the Qing dynasty, to which Yao Nai belonged, prided itself on a prose style that was "light in flavour, scanty in words, orderly in appearance and leisurely in pace" 味淡聲希, 整潔從容. We would expect the works of that school to be characterized by a flatness of expression and a slackness of tempo. Yao's passage quoted above is mainly composed of short sentences, many of them conventional four-character locutions, and they inevitably fall short of the thrilling climax of Qian's "a disc of blood scarlet struggled up from beneath layers of cloud". In a word, Qian's prose is more sensuous.

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In ascending Mount Kuocang by the water route, beyond Exi, the boat must inch its way forward, the boatman's sweat mingling with the water of the stream. The sky is brow-beaten by the mountains, the water begs the rocks for release. Only on arrival at Xiaoyang does the vista open out.

Wu Hongzhong brought Ruiru to see me off, and they sat with me on the bow. We had a few drinks, and the boatman entertained us with boating songs. We were at the game of finger-guessing, when suddenly we looked up and gave a loud cry of astonishment, for the colours we saw were not those of this world. But as I am ignorant as to how colours are named in heaven, I shall have to content myself here with their worldly approximations.

The setting sun was half a disc on the horizon, a ball of rouge fresh from the furnace. West of the river the peaks were verdant as the feathers of a parrot or blue-black as the rear-plumes of a crow. Overhead a vast expanse of scarlet cloud stretched for five thousand feet across the sky, a huge rift revealing a patch of azure firmament, all this reflected in the water, like red agate against an embroidered cloth.

The sun went further down. The sand-dunes were soft blue and tender white, and across the river, reeds and moon-reflections were scarcely distinguishable from one another. The mountains were now the hue of old watermelon-rind, and seven or eight flakes of downy cloud, a mellow lychee gold, converged into two banks, which began to

glow a translucent grape-purple. Waves of night vapour rose up in the air, silvery white like the belly of a fish. They penetrated the furnace-fresh vermilion above, and all merged in a haze of glittering gold. At that moment, the whole universe, sky, earth, mountains, waters, the glorious sunset, the rosy clouds, all was in concert to present a most magnificent spectacle. One cannot help wondering why Nature should have troubled to produce such a masterpiece of painting and dyeing. Could it be that she wished to arouse the jealousy of the Fata Morgana, to outshine the Buddha Aksobhya, by giving us this glimpse of her own unsurpassable beauty?

—from “Xiaoyang” by Wang Siren 王思任 (Ming dynasty)

This sunset description is even more sensuous than the two sunrise descriptions quoted above. Sunrise and sunset are breathtaking visual experiences, and descriptions of them are frequently to be encountered in Chinese literature. But the painter is better equipped to capture the richness of such fleeting and variegated colours. Words can seldom do justice to such a subject, and the writer will more often than not heave a sigh of helpless wonder when confronted with such grandeur. If he tries to push his medium to its limits, he may possibly rival Xie Lingyun’s 謝靈運:

*Clouds and sun help each other’s brilliance,  
Air and water are equally crystalline and fresh.*

*It was still early when we left the valley,  
But the sun was already fading when we boarded the boat.  
Trees and dales garnered the dusk,  
Clouds and mists closed the evening.*

Famous lines; but not what one would call richly sensuous. And it would take a prose genius to equal Su Shi’s 蘇軾 line:

*Scales of sunset-cloud stretching down the sky, fish-tail red.*

Such a grandly conceived, masterfully executed and totally graphic representation of the roseate splendours of the sunset as Wang Siren’s is really quite unprecedented in Chinese prose. As a matter of fact, in the whole realm of Chinese literature, including poetry, such sensuous depictions of visual beauty are extremely rare. The great novelist Cao Xueqin, in describing female costume and ornaments, paid a lot of attention to the discrimination of colours. He was never so crude as to represent things in sheer red or green. There is a passage in the forty-ninth chapter of his *Story of the Stone* which goes:

[Dai-yu] put on a pair of little red-leather boots which had a gilded cloud-pattern cut into their surface, a pelisse of heavy, dark-red bombasine lined with white fox-fur, a complicated woven belt made out of silvery-green shot silk, and a snow-hat.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Tr. Hawkes, Penguin Classics, pp. 478-9.



MT. EMEI. Ming dynasty woodcut.

But Cao's marvellously delicate sense of colour is mainly devoted to the description of costume and objects of beauty. It is seldom applied to matters such as the clouds and the sky.

Chinese painting has traditionally been divided into two schools: the Northern and the Southern. The Northern School was founded by Li Sixun 李思訓 of the Tang dynasty, famous for his "blue-and-green" landscapes, with their gold and red highlights. The Southern School is descended from the poet-painter Wang Wei 王維 of the Tang dynasty, whose paintings were characterized by large areas of tonal wash and relatively little linear detail. Later on, the monochrome ink-and-wash paintings of the Southern School, with their "mild" brushwork and "remote" inspiration 筆淡意遠, occupied a dominant position with critics of traditional Chinese painting, and the use of colour was very much relegated to second place. As to the problem of light and shade, this was of even less concern to the Chinese painter. No wonder Constable complained that the Chinese "have painted for 2000 years and have not discovered that there is such a thing as chiaroscuro". Wen Zhengming 文徵明 of the Ming dynasty wrote of landscape painting:

I hear that in ancient times most painting was done in colour, and the use of ink was considered a secondary technique. Therefore most paintings were executed in blue and green. Later, in the middle ages, people began to paint in umber and varieties of ink and wash also made their appearance.

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LANDSCAPE,  
by Lui Shou-kwan  
(Lü Shoukun 呂壽琨), 1963.

In the umber landscapes of Huang Gongwang 黄公望 of the Yuan dynasty light strokes in umber and indigo are added to a groundwork in ink and wash. After the Yuan dynasty, literati paintings became progressively more “mild” and “remote”, using more ink and less colour.

Laozi's saying, “The five colours make men blind”, is somewhat hard to accept in the 1980s, when people spend so much of their time watching colour movies and colour television. But it is very much in accordance with the Daoist predilections of ancient Chinese painters. In all the world the Chinese must surely be the race most capable of appreciating the charm of black and gray. Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 points out, however, in his essay “On Chinese painting and poetry”, that whereas “in the field of Chinese painting, the beauty characteristic of the Southern school —dilute, mild, limpid and remote 冲淡清遠—has gained wide acceptance, the similar views of the ‘spiritual harmony 神韻’ school of poets has never been accepted into the mainstream of Chinese poetics.” Such a statement is correct in a certain sense; but as Qian himself has also observed, to a non-Chinese eye, such differences of emphasis in Chinese poetry and painting are relative, more quantitative than qualitative. A typical Chinese classical poem, in terms of its colouration, is still ink and wash, or, at most, umber from the brush of Huang Gongwang. We may explore this idea further by looking at the poems on painting by some of the great poets. Du Fu 杜甫 had one of the keenest eyes for graphic art, and wrote many poems about paintings. These poems, though highly vivid, are strangely “mild” in terms of colour. This is true not only of his poems about pictures of horses, but also of those on

## THE FIVE PEAKS

至少五嶽還頂住中國的天

*At least the Five Peaks  
Are still supporting the Chinese sky.*

Yu Kwang-chung: "Music Percussive"

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EAST CHINA AND  
THE FIVE SACRED PEAKS,  
with Huangshan added;  
from *Hua Shan*  
(Hong Kong, Vetch &  
Lee, 1973).

THE FIVE SACRED PEAKS, from an ink-squeeze of an inscription incised on a stone stele at Songshan. The five curious Daoist ideographs represent the 5 Peaks, East, South, West and North (clockwise) with Songshan in the Centre.



The connection between religion and the surface of the ground originates in the conception of Chinese sacred mountains. The whole country is divided according to the points of the compass by the five Sacred Mountains, one in the north, south, east, west and centre . . . . The conception of these mountains characterizes to a high degree the need of the Chinese to find a perfect equality between their innermost convictions and nature herself . . . . The whole country should be regarded as a single temple.

*Ernest Boerschmann,  
Picturesque China (London,  
Fisher Unwin, circ. 1910).*

landscape paintings, such as “Song on a painted landscape screen newly drawn by the Vice-prefect Liu of Fengxian County”, and “Lines written in jest on a landscape by Wang Zai”. Su Shi also loved to write poems about paintings, and his use of colour is equally muted. See for example his “Lines on Wang Jinqing’s Misty Rivers and Peaks, in the collection of Wang Dingguo” and “On Li Sixun’s Yangtse River and Precipitous Isles”. In the former poem, we can still find some sense of colour, as in the lines:

*Crows brushing scarlet maple leaves settle by the waterside for the  
night;  
Snow falling from tall pines startles a daytime nap.*

But the latter poem is entirely monochrome. This is worth noting, since Li Sixun, the painter in question, is precisely the founder of the gold-and-blue school of landscape painting of the Northern Song dynasty. And Wang Jinqing is another important painter of the same school. If poems about paintings of the Northern school are so lacking in colour, how much more so poems on works of the Southern school?

The “mild limpidity” of the ink-wash paintings of the Southern school was further promoted in the literati-paintings of the Yuan and Ming dynasties and later. No wonder the literati writers were influenced by it in their landscape journals. I have already quoted passages from ancient Chinese landscape journals characterized by a particularly strong sensuous appeal, but such prose is by no means common. The authors ordinarily exhibit an understated charm, a “mild limpidity”, rather than a vigorous sense of grandeur and colour. The landscape sketches of writers such as Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道, Zhong Xing 鍾惺, Tan Yuanchun 譚元春, Li Liufang 李流芳, and Zhang Dai 張岱, are all executed in simple strokes and “mild” washes, creating an impression of viewing the landscape at a distance. The prose of the Tongcheng School of the Qing dynasty is never sensuous, and this deficiency is most apparent in the landscape journal. The literary heyday of the Tongcheng school was rather short-lived. Yao Nai, a third generation Tongcheng writer, still produced several readable pieces in this genre. With Guan Tong 管同, however, of the fourth generation, the movement was more or less on its last legs:

Lying alone in the dead of night, I felt so inexpressibly happy, listening to the sound of the sighing wind and the roaring billows on my pillow, dreaming often of dragons and fish dancing in the waves. In the fourth month, in early summer, Zhou Baoxu of Jingxi came from Soochow. A good friend of mine, he had always been fond of unusual sights, and on the sixteenth night of the lunar month we went together to watch the sea from the bund. The waves came in like crumbling mountains, the moon shone on the sea like fragments of silver. It was all so vast and cool. We looked at each other as if we were in another world. I was immensely delighted.

—from “Baoshan Journal” by Guan Tong

Journals such as this are lacking in sensuous appeal, are written in a language that is positively banal, and contain many expressions derived from earlier writers. In the same journal from which this excerpt is taken, we find a passage describing the sunrise:

Several days later we went together again to watch the sunrise. It was still dark when we arrived. We could make out nothing even at close quarters, and only heard the roaring of the waves, which was like the sudden breaking of a storm. In a little while, the dawn came. And the sun rose. But it did not rise at once. First a thin thread of light was seen, and the sun loomed behind it, sometimes higher, sometimes lower. It struggled like this for quite a moment, and then rose.

By writing of the sunrise in such a dull and indifferent manner, without animation, totally devoid of artistry, Guan proves himself inferior to his master whose description of the sunrise on Mount Tai we have reproduced above. Therefore, we can see that in the entire literature of both the Ming and Qing dynasties there was no one to equal Wang Siren's masterly and uninhibitedly sensuous description of the glorious afterglow. To rival such dazzling light and brilliant colour, we would have to go to the paintings of the French Impressionists. And for the depiction of colour in words, we can perhaps only find another example of similar brilliance in John Ruskin's famous description of J. M. W. Turner's painting "The Slave Ship".<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>See *Modern Painters*, Vol. I, Part II, Section V, Chapter 3. I am of the opinion that Wang Siren's description is even more commendable, for he had to des-

cribe Nature directly, while Ruskin had the painting of the same title to use as the basis of his description.