

The Natural Philosophy of Northern Song Landscape Painting: A Case Study of Early Spring and Travelers among Mountains and Streams

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Abstract: The Northern Song Dynasty, marked by political stability and economic prosperity, fostered a vibrant cultural atmosphere under its policy of “prioritizing literature over military power.” As Neo-Confucianism emerged in this period, traditional philosophical thoughts like Taoism and Confucianism blended with each other, deeply influencing the concepts and styles of artistic creation. As classic works of Northern Song landscape paintings, *Early Spring* and *Travelers among Mountains and Streams* show the breathtaking natural scenery with superb skills and artistic conception. While previous studies on famous paintings have mostly focused on the technical aspects of art, this paper selects these two paintings as research objects, integrating art history research, visual analysis, and philosophical thinking to study the similarities and differences in philosophical ideas of the two paintings. Through comparative analysis, this paper reveals that the common point of these two paintings is that they express the concept of “unity of heaven and man” expressed by the two paintings, as well as their unique natural orders and worldviews. *Early Spring* showcases the flexibility, cyclicity, and vitality of nature, while *Travelers among Mountains and Streams* conveys a sense of stability, eternity, and awe.

Keywords: Northern Song Dynasty, Landscape Painting, Early Spring, Travelers among Mountains and Streams, Natural philosophy

1. Introduction

The Northern Song Dynasty represents a peak in the development of traditional Chinese landscape painting and holds a significant position in the history of Chinese art. Previous studies have extensively explored technical aspects such as brushstroke techniques, coloring methods, and stylistic genres. For example, Ji Haoran, in *The Evolution of Brush and Ink Techniques in Song Dynasty Landscape Painting*, systematically analyzed the various brush and ink techniques used in Northern Song landscape painting [1]. Similarly, Liang Yan, in *The Aesthetic Transformation of Landscape Painting Composition in the Five Dynasties and the Two Song Dynasties*, explored the transition of compositional techniques in landscape painting [2]. However, there has been relatively less in-depth research from the perspective of cultural connotations and philosophical thoughts. Based on previous studies on painting techniques, this article explores the philosophical ideas of painting, attempting to make up for the shortcomings of existing studies in this respect. This paper takes Guo Xi’s *Early Spring* and Fan Kuan’s *Travelers among Mountains and Streams* as the starting points. The former

showcases the vitality of all things reviving in early spring, while the latter, with its grand and magnificent panoramic composition, established the majestic and imposing style characteristic of Northern Song landscape painting. This paper employs an interdisciplinary approach, combining image analysis to interpret visual elements, literature research to explore philosophical and artistic theories, and historical inquiry to contextualize these works within broader intellectual traditions. Through a comparative analysis of two classic landscape paintings, it examines the natural philosophies of man-nature relationships and cosmic order. The findings enrich the discourse on Northern Song landscape painting and deepen our understanding of the intricate interplay between art and ideological culture.

2. Social and cultural background

The political and economic development of the Northern Song Dynasty laid the foundation for the prosperity of culture. Politically, the Northern Song Dynasty ended the chaotic period of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms by strengthening centralization, thereby gradually stabilizing the social environment. Economically, the progress of agricultural technology has greatly increased grain output, providing the society with ample material support. Meanwhile, the handicraft industry and the commodity economy thrived. Commercial activities broke through the restrictions of the Fangshi system (the separation of residential and commercial areas), and trade flourished, further enhancing the economic strength. Moreover, the Song Dynasty carried out the policy of “prioritizing literature over military power.” By expanding the scale of the imperial examinations, a large number of literati entered the political stage. As a result, the social status of civil officials improved, and they were highly esteemed. This policy contributed to the rise of the literati class and created a lively cultural atmosphere.

Against this social backdrop, the ideological field of the Northern Song Dynasty was active, and various ideological trends continued to emerge. Confucianism and Taoism developed separately and integrated. Confucianism takes “benevolence” and “courtesy” as its core concepts and is committed to cultivating people to be humble gentlemen. Landscape painting reflected this ideological influence, often conveying a profound reverence for nature. Taoism, by contrast, upheld the principle of “Wuwei,” that is, doing nothing and letting nature take its course. It's thought to be an authentic spirit that transcends the mundane world and pursues freedom [3]. Furthermore, the rise of Neo-Confucianism brought a new trend of “investigate things to acquire knowledge” (Gewu Zhizhi) to painting creation. When depicting natural landscapes, painters no longer simply strive for realistic representation. Instead, they focus on uncovering the principles and deeper meanings of nature, aiming to show the universal “heavenly principle” (Tianli) that governs all things. Influenced by these philosophies, painters began to pay attention to the harmony between humans and nature, as well as broader societal concerns and people’s livelihood [4].

3. Overview and background of the paintings

3.1. Early Spring

3.1.1. Artist's experience and background

Guo Xi was born in a commoner family and later entered the Imperial Art Academy, where he refined his skills. Influenced by Li Cheng, he excelled in painting landscapes, particularly wintry forests, developing a unique and expressive style. His painting practice was deeply affected by Taoist philosophy. “Tao” can be regarded as an aesthetic form, which is the ethical belief of the subject and its objectification, namely the way of heaven [5]. In the creative process, Guo Xi also gave “Tao”

new aesthetic significance, integrating the way of nature and life, which corresponded to the generally accepted opinion that landscapes contain places to travel, sightsee, wander, and live [6].

3.1.2. Visual and technical analysis

The painting depicts the scenery of the passing of winter, the beginning of spring snow melting, and the recovery of the earth. Guo Xi employs dynamic and varied brushwork to render trees and vegetation with a strong sense of vitality. This is particularly evident in his depiction of "crab-claw branches," which vividly capture the twisted and rugged forms of tree limbs, enhancing the organic realism of the scene.

In terms of composition, Guo Xi, in his book *Linquan Gaozhi* (also translated as *The Lofty Truth of Forests and Stream*), elaborates on the concept of "Three Distance" (*San yuan*) for describing a mountain: height (*gao*), depth (*shen*), and level (*ping*) [7]. This approach creates a unique variety of spatial experiences. As shown in Figure 1, Guo Xi arranged a gentle slope at the foot of the mountain in the foreground. This slope extends backward to the towering mountain base that soars into the clouds, giving people the feeling of standing at the foot of the mountain and looking up, which is known as "high distance". In the middle scene on the right side of the picture, the winding and shadowy valley, the clouds and mist surrounding mountains illustrate "deep distance" and "level distance" respectively. This technique can be referred to in modern terms as "scattered perspective," which is distinct from the Western "focal perspective." It makes the viewer go beyond the fixed point of view, line of sight and plane of sight, so as to produce the transcendental experience of the landscape of the picture [8].



Figure 1: Early Spring [9]



Figure 2: Travelers among Mountains and Streams [9]

3.2. Travelers among Mountains and Streams

3.2.1. Artist's experience and background

Fan Kuan was known for his open-minded and generous personality, and he had a particular fondness for wine and a deep passion for nature. He lived in places like Huashan Mountain in Shaanxi Province all year round [9]. As the Tang Dynasty landscape master Zhang Zao summarized, "A reaching outward to imitate Creation, and a turning inwards to master the mind." This point of view emphasizes that artistic creation should not only learn from the outside world, but also pay attention to internal cultivation. So, the majestic Qinling Mountains are the true portrayal of his hometown scenery, or the embodiment of his character and spirit. Inspired by Neo-Confucianism, he began to seek the laws of natural mountains and rivers in his painting creation and integrated his thinking and insights of nature and life.

3.2.2. Visual and technical analysis

Focusing on the central part of Figure 2, two vertical lines can be observed on either side of the central peak. There is a horizontal line at the top, and the horizontal line below is cleverly rendered with white space. These four lines frame a rectangle, forming a “central peak standing tall” style composition [10]. The massive mountain peak in the picture stands tall like a monument, conveying a strong sense of stability and solemnness. Additionally, Fan Kuan uses the “raindrop texture” and “accumulated ink” methods to express the structure of rocks and trees in the mountains. The brushwork is vigorous and powerful, with dense foliage on the trees and a strong sense of volume and realism in the rocks.

4. Comparison of natural philosophy between the two paintings

4.1. Similarities and differences of the thought of “unity of heaven and man”

In traditional Chinese landscape painting, spiritual resonance is the key element in artistic creation and appreciation. This resonance is found in the natural world itself, but also within painted works, reflecting an important aesthetic goal of Chinese painters: to reproduce the essence of nature. However, this reproduction is not a simple description, but to capture the essence of nature by being as much like nature itself [11]. This goal achieves the philosophical idea of “unity of nature and man” (tian ren he yi), allowing the painters to draw a wonderful picture of the interweaving between humans and nature.

In Guo Xi's *Early Spring*, the figures of human activities are skillfully interwoven into the towering mountains and flowing waters. The ancient trees are scattered, the rocks are grotesque, and the hillside pavilions are faintly visible in the mist. Along the riverbank, a fisherman's family enjoys a harmonious and joyful moment; on the mountain paths, woodcutters and travelers come and go. The figures in the painting are closely connected with nature, and the abundant vitality of nature gives life rich interest.

In Fan Kuan's *Travelers among Streams and Mountains*, the central mountain peak is like a giant monument, recording the solemnity and grandeur of the universe, as well as the vitality within it. In this grand natural background, a closer examination reveals a small caravan in the lower right corner, making its way along a rugged mountain path. The strong contrast between passengers and the mountain not only highlights the smallness of human beings in the facet of nature, but also shows a sense of awe and reverence. Despite their humble size, these figures still manage to carve out a path through the landscape, embodying the idea that “where there is no path, one can be created by those who walk it.” This scene is a unique manifestation of the concept of “unity of heaven and humanity”, emphasizing both human perseverance and nature's overwhelming presence.

Therefore, while both paintings incorporate the concept of “the unity of heaven and humanity,” they also exhibit differences. The former focuses on the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, highlighting the deep integration of natural vitality and human life. By contrast, *Travelers among Streams and Mountains* conveys a sense of unity accompanied by awe, emphasizing the contrast between the grandeur of nature and the smallness of humans.

4.2. Natural order and worldview

4.2.1. Natural order

Early Spring depicts a dynamic scene of the transition from the cold winter to the early spring. As illustrated in Figure 3, two conspicuous pine trees stand side by side on a huge rock. The two trees, rendered with moist brushstrokes and a rich ink color, symbolize the vitality and renewal of spring.

A closer examination reveals a third pine tree behind them, painted with dry brushstrokes and lighter ink, representing the withered branches of autumn and winter[12]. On the left and right sides of the pine trees are evergreen broad-leaved trees and bare mixed trees. This combination presents a contrast between withering and thriving, forming a time cycle, which can be as small as the life cycle of specific organisms or as large as the cycle of the heavenly principles. Similarly, the snow that once covered the rocks gradually melted and formed a gurgling stream. The water meandered down the terrain between the rocks. Through these natural elements, Guo Xi demonstrates his deep understanding of the natural life cycle and his firm belief in the endless growth of all things in the universe, inviting viewers to perceive the vitality contained in the natural order.



Figure 3: Details of Figure1

As for *Travelers among Mountains and Streams*, the natural order it presents is mainly reflected in the composition of the painting. The towering mountain peak serves as the main body of the painting. The majestic and upright mountain peak transcends the limitations of time and space, standing there and gazing [10]. Surrounding the main peak are relatively shorter mountains, waterfalls, and rivers. Such a structure with a clear distinction between the primary and secondary elements reveals the unshakable order of the laws of nature.

4.2.2. Worldview

Chinese philosophy accepts the uncertainties of nature and human life, and literati painters even regard them as the divinity and the meaning of existence [13]. All things in nature exhibit the vitality of life in constant change. *Early Spring* embodies such a dynamic and changing view of the universe. On the other hand, *Travelers among Mountains and Streams* conveys a grand and eternal view of the world. For example, through the depiction of the travelers, Fan Kuan expresses his thoughts on the meaning of life and his pursuit of an ideal state. The image of the travelers not only symbolizes the exploration of nature but also represents the hardships and pursuits in the journey of life. Meanwhile, the houses in the painting are all hidden in the woods, with only their corners visible. This subtle composition suggests that human beings are merely transient passers-by in this eternal universe.

Despite their differences in portraying the universe, both paintings ultimately share a common philosophical essence. Solemn is not to blindly pursue heavy and solemn, but to show the vitality of the image. Under the stable universe, the souls of countless lives also surge. It is precisely these tiny individual lives that constitute the vast universe, and the existence and change of all life is the solemn core of the universe.

5. The natural philosophy of landscape paintings in the Northern Song Dynasty

The two paintings discussed above serve as important windows to understand the natural philosophy of Northern Song Dynasty landscape painting. In the Northern Song Dynasty, the thoughts of Confucianism, Taoism and principle prevailed, which deeply influenced the creation of landscape painting. Nature is endowed with rich emotional connotation in landscape painting. Through the observation and depiction of nature, the painters expressed their love for life, pursuit of ideals and aspirations for an ideal way of life [14]. The paintings contain the Taoist idea of “unity of heaven and

man,” showing the Confucian respect for order and law, respect for nature, and the spirit of Neo-Confucianism “investigate things to acquire knowledge.” Although these two paintings have different forms of expression, they are rooted in the cultural soil of the Northern Song Dynasty. Through the analysis of these two paintings, the connotation of the natural philosophy of Northern Song Dynasty landscape painting is revealed, as well as the infiltration and fusion of different philosophical thoughts in it.

6. Conclusion

This paper focuses on the natural philosophy of landscape paintings in the Northern Song Dynasty and finds that the two paintings are deeply influenced by Confucianism, Taoism and Neo-Confucianism. Guo Xi's *Early Spring*, with its careful composition and rich layers of brushwork, portrays the spring scenery of mountains and rivers. Fan Kuan's *Travelers among Mountains and Streams* exhibits the great power of nature with majestic mountains and heavy ink. Both paintings illustrate the unique natural order and cosmology, reflecting the close and harmonious relationship between man and nature. However, this research has certain limitations. The scope of analysis was confined to only two representative works, which may not fully capture the broader philosophical and artistic landscape of the Northern Song Dynasty. For future research, the scope could be broadened to include more landscape paintings. In addition, the study of the cultural background could be deepened to explore the inherent logic between ideological concepts and painting creation.

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