

Re-reading Aesthetic Consciousness in Early Chinese Landscape Painting: Derridean Perspective and Interpretations

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Abstract: Derridean Perspective and Interpretations examines elemental forms of early Chinese landscape painting to re-read the notions and meanings that not only revive the lineage of thought but also step beyond usual concepts that align with Chinese aesthetics. The paper applies the theory of Deconstruction by Jacques Derrida to engage in a comparative stance of observing the landscapes through 'trace', 'aporia', and 'difference'. Presenting Derridean theoretical perspectives, the paper interprets them to decode various contemporary elements of viewing, analyzing, and re-understanding the traditional Chinese landscape painting armed with the leaves of reality and relooking at the Daoist and Buddhist principles. The paper argues that the elements of the Chinese landscape, through the analysis of two paintings by Fan Kuan, are semiotic of the process of experiencing cerebral aesthetic consciousness, which is not pleasurable. The research study points out that the representation of human, their occupation, and placement in the visual framework acts as a Derridean trace. The meaning of the whole is driven by the absent meanings about the presence of humans, mountains, and animals. Hence, what are the binaries of these visual elements that transgress the usual and streamlined concept of the painting and the discipline?

Keywords: Early Chinese Landscape Painting, aesthetic consciousness, Jacques Derrida, Critical theory; Fan Kuan

1. INTRODUCTION

“The 'beyond' is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past... Beginnings and endings maybe the sustaining myths of the middle years; but in the *fin de siècle*, we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion.”

Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Bhabha, 1994)

With time, trends, and political drift, among other influential factors,

social and mental conjectures have gradually directed, transformed and hybridised the cultures of the globe. The mutative modification has always been there— from one trend to the other, irrespective of a specific discipline or global alteration or evolution in the biosphere or the time-space warp concept of the Universe. While a human psyche largely remains oblivious of this change that is rooted in the very moment, what shocks or knocks on their minds fetch this realization? Or, does this mean that the moment or time of transition has been either sudden or constantly experienced and hence it is a natural process? Or were they collective decisions under the effect of objective and ideal values? And in terms of experience, were they some personal moments? In the present case of study, Chinese landscape painting has been subject to several political, collective, and personal paradigm shifts in practice and underpinning belief. The study will look into an unseen measure of consciousness relayed by then time to the contemporary age through the lens of viewers who have been subjected to several temporal vagaries. But the notion of sublimity in Chinese landscape painting remains constant! But what are the other perspectives, concerning art and aesthetics, that one realizes over the consistent study of the subject? The paper specifically looks at Derridian theoretical perspectives to unveil contemporary yet possibly real Interpretations.

1.1 Brief History of Early Chinese Landscape Painting

The Chinese Landscape painting, despite an enormous length of study, baffles us with its resourceful aesthetics, technique, and primarily the spirit resonance: one of the six rules of the painting by Hsieh Ho, the 6th-century Chinese art historian, and painter (1962). The onset of Chinese landscape painting gradually emerged from the erstwhile pattern of painting burials and objects to eventually metamorphose into a lucid format of scrolls that were contemplated in leisure. Owing to the intense research by Michael Sullivan in his book, *The Birth of Chinese Landscape Painting*, the earlier textual records of foliage motifs, the material, figures, and format of composition, especially those on the vessels of multiple mediums trace its record from the pre-Han dynasty to the Han culture, which has observed massive development in the mentioned forms due to exchange with western Asia (Sullivan, 1962). From under- to completely developed sets of landscapes are finally observed during the timeline of the Six Dynasties. Sullivan Retrospected that (Sullivan, 1962):

“If the study of landscape in the Han Dynasty had to be limited to surviving paintings it would be brief indeed. Fortunately, it is possible to

enlarge its scope by a survey of the way in which the Han Chinese

represented trees and hills, the basic elements in a landscape, in a variety of other media. These include reliefs on stone and tile, hill jars and hill censers, inlaid bronzes, mirrors, woven kinds of stuff, and embroideries. This mass of material might be classified by media, dividing the inlaid bronzes and reliefs into separate categories. Or it might be analyzed on a regional basis, which would permit a stylistic comparison between the reliefs of Szechwan and those of Shantung. Classification by subject

matter (hunting scenes in one group, mythological scenes in another) is a third possibility.”

Subsequently, with the shift in material or medium of rendition, the conceptual transition is paramount (Fong, 2003). The early painters of landscape painting included Ku K'ai-chih (b. 354 A.D.), Tsung Ping (443 A.D.), and Hsieh Ling-yiin (385-433 A.D.), who instrumented the parameters of line, form, and Colour. In addition, the contextual influence of Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism collectively reigned the application, style, thought, and methods of paintings and painters (Cahill, 1961). What hailed from the purpose of mere record and decoration, became a sheer source of knowledge, generational passage, and an isolated community engagement (Cahill, 2005). It gave rise to the literati painting, governed by the scholars who openly condemned the commercial gains. But this did not deter the bifurcated community in the pursuit of the beyond through the process of the painting (Little & Sh, 2000). The early Chinese landscape painting, in its identified representation, begins during the Sixth and Sui dynasties and concludes with the early Qing era, to revitalise the merger of cultures and eventually submit itself to modern trends. While the evidence highlights the golden age of Tang painters, the Sui collection records during the dynasty present concrete landscape making as a sole pursuit (Maeda, 1971). Prominent Tang painters, such as Li Sixun and Wang Wei, laid the foundation for later developments in landscape painting. Li Sixun, a master of blue-and-green landscapes, used vibrant mineral pigments to depict idealized, majestic scenes (McMahon, 2003). In contrast, Wang Wei pioneered monochrome ink techniques, emphasizing simplicity and mood. His works often conveyed an intimate connection to nature, aligning with Buddhist ideals (Sullivan, 2007). After the Tang Dynasty, Chinese landscape painting flourished under the Song Dynasty (960–1279), which provided institutional support for its development. The imperial court established painting academies, fostering artistic excellence and refining styles. Song painters emphasized naturalism and spiritual depth, aligning with Neo-Confucian philosophy that regarded

nature as a reflection of cosmic order. Northern Song painters like Fan Kuan and Guo Xi depicted monumental landscapes with towering mountains and vast spaces, symbolizing the grandeur of nature and humanity's place within it. We shall consider the case studies of paintings by Fan Kuan to render and realise our interpretation of the Derridian theoretical perspective of meaning.

1.2 Understanding Painterly Consciousness in Chinese Landscape Painting

It's not consciousness that determines life, but rather life determines Consciousness". Karl Marx Consciousness apart from its literal meaning has often been associated with spiritual connotations (Engels & Marx, 1859). However, consciousness being a noun to the word 'conscious' denotes an individual awareness of the phenomena, its temporality, induced changes, and a method of generating an identity of a certain tangible or intangible entity (Tharoor, 2011). In addition, it is also concerned with a collective belief of understanding, wherein several conscious individuals together, not necessarily in unison, create a consciousness of space, of a particular time, region, and context (Turner, 2009). The consciousness is a wholesome realm of your psyche that involves every nature of feeling through sensation: it might be conducive or non-, bitter or tasteful, accepting or denying, relaying a list of binary opposites that constantly engage with several connotations. The consciousness could be present in the moment with its integrity without the states or conditions of psyches. It is complete with the subconscious, conscious, and beyond that which is bound by temporal vagaries before and after the event or phenomena. The consciousness of Chinese landscape painting is that of the collective (Shaw, 1988). Several attempts have been made to understand the aesthetic conception and quotient in realizing the enigmatic essence of the style, output, and originating source. This section will look at how the scholars and theorists of various timelines probed into the aesthetics of Chinese landscape painting. In the context of Chinese painters, over the years, finding an inner balance through the act of painting was often a more challenging ordeal and hence the process of painting, tools like forms, colour, texture, including blank spaces, etc. were divine agents to experience the higher consciousness. Sullivan (Sullivan, 1980) in his book *Chinese Landscape Painting in the Sui and Tang Dynasties* reflected that:

"The belief expressed or implied in these passages that the forms the artist paints are one way in which the Tao is made manifest, just as the

Forms of visible nature are another, accounts for the special

Correspondence that exists between painted forms and forms in nature. This gives the artist a quasi-divine role, not as the creator of the forms he puts onto paper or silk they are, as Chang says, "from Heaven" but almost seeming as if he had created them. That is why the highest level of artistic production is called shen, divine, for it is indeed "god-like." This emphasis upon the divine origin of the visible forms may go far towards explaining the little value put upon originality in Chinese painting; for how can mere man originate anything? All he can do is to fulfil his role as the agent through which form is set down on silk or paper and its significance is expressed through style and brushwork. When Tang writer, wishing to praise an artist, says that his work is "deeply imbued with thought (ssu)" it is presumably this power to induce a form with philosophical meaning that they have in mind."

One of the earliest literary evidence in establishing the norms and various classifications for landscape painting was presented in the book *Introductions to Landscape Painting* by Tsung Ping (375 - 443). In the 6th century, Hsieh Ho's work on the six laws of painting became the sure ground for analysing the notion of landscape, its principles and technique. These laws continued to reign the future practice, governing the ideological norms and eventually conditioning the artists with an ideal method to express and create landscapes. Moreover, these laws reflected the history of the artistic process during the early Chinese landscape painting and its contemporary fashion (Warminski, 2002). The six laws of the painting are Spirit Resonance (Qi Yun Sheng Dong), Bone Method (Gu Fa Yong Bi), Correspondence to the Object (Ying Wu Xiang Xing), Suitability to Type (Sui Lei Fu Cai), Division and Planning (Jing Ying Wei Zhi), and Transmission by Copying (Chuan Yi Mo Xie) (Xie, 6th century/1976). These laws interweave practical methods with Daoist and Confucian ideals, reinforcing the interplay between skill and spiritual understanding. Hsieh Ho's framework remains a cornerstone of Chinese aesthetics, influencing both classical and modern interpretations of art (Arthur et al., 2023; Fong, 2003). More than the literal laws, these were the norms and standard yardstick of the practice to arrive at an accurate transfer of emotional consciousness. From probing the accuracy of the method to its simulation of reality, the first law of spirit resonance has always been an eventual measure of the success of an artwork because it directly delved into the aesthetic consciousness (Watson, 1968; Zhang, 2021). However, apart from the popular six laws of the painting by Hsieh Ho, the earlier attempts to find the aesthetic criteria that made a work of art of high calibre were done in the text *Chou-li*, the text which is noted to explain the

methods of pre-Han and Han culture. According to this text, the artwork must have balance and is operated by four forces. Sullivan explained in the book (Sullivan, 1979),

“The first is t'ien-shih (literally, "the times, or seasons, of Heaven"), of which the text gives examples in the growth and decay of vegetation, of water freezing and, according to its due season, melting and flowing once more. The second is ti-ch'i (earth spirit, earth breath), which is interpreted by the commentators as meaning that each region produces the substances, and hence the media and the skilled craftsmen, that are appropriate to it. If the crafts (Xung-i) are in accord with the times of Heaven and the ti-ch'i, then the good craftsman (the third factor in the scheme) will be able to use the material to create ts'ai (the fourth element), an excellent work of art. If the times are out of joint or the four elements in any way unbalanced, either the work will be of no merit or the craftsman himself will not be appreciated.”

Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism were the primary spiritual bases that governed the collective psyche of painters and creative practitioners. With the impact of these ideals, the paintings of the Song period also observed a relative increase in symbolism. In Daoist symbolism, the deer, crane, and fungus represent longevity, immortality, and spiritual transcendence, reflecting key philosophical ideals in Daoist cosmology and aesthetics. Together, these symbols illustrate Daoism's emphasis on living in harmony with nature, cultivating spiritual immortality, and achieving cosmic balance. The aesthetic consciousness in its symbolic aspect relatively focused on the refined presentation as well as contextual representation of the several signifiers in the Chinese landscapes (Guan, 2024). More than being a documentation of the observed scenario in the open, it was the connection between the artists and nature that made its way through the formal fundamentals of the painting (Soper, 1941).

2. AESTHETIC ENAMOUR: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper looks into the early Chinese landscape paintings with an altogether arguable view since the timelines have changed from ancient to medieval to modern to contemporary. The research observes a qualitative methodology through secondary sources of theories and their perspective. It examines through epistemological interpretations. The research methodology considers aesthetics, art criticism, history, critical theory and philosophy as their base approach (Trouveroy, 2003). Although the

Kantian aspect in looking at the early Chinese landscape is quite vivid, it places this sublimity to pivot the discussion into Derridian ideology which eventually problematises the former. In the following sub-sections, The Enigma of Space: Kantianism Perspective and Lefebvre Space will observe the effect of the vastness of space that has been the primary aspect and charm of Chinese landscape painting. More than looking at the pure theories of Immanuel Kant, it shall just use the sublime lens as a pre-critical study of the author. Undoubtedly, it looks at the sublimity through the Kantian way of looking at nature. Also, it drifts into the idea of space through the theoretical lens of Henry Lefebvre. The second section, The Human Nature Dynamic: Derridian Perspective, begins to then minutely study the elements and ingredients of painting which perform, in the Derridian Deconstruction theory, as 'trace', and 'aporia' to delve into the concept of 'difference'. The section will first explain the concepts and then attempt to apply them to paintings by Fan Kuan, avoiding generic inferences. This process will attempt to disclose some newer ways of interpreting Chinese landscape painting (Sullivan, 2008).

2.1 The Enigma of Space: Kantianism Perspective and Lefebvre Space

The Chinese painters often devoted years to wandering through the natural landscapes of hills and streams, seeking to immerse themselves in the harmony and balance of nature (Sullivan, 1962). This harmony is not merely an aesthetic arrangement but a reflection of the deeper cosmic order and connection that governs the universe and often wonders about its existence. Through these prolonged journeys, they allow this natural rhythm to reveal its essence in its purest form. However, the challenge lies in capturing and expressing the profound awareness and spiritual enlightenment that arise during such moments of deep connection, where the mysteries of existence and the infinite truths of the universe unfold. The sublimity in the experience, in the moments, in the medium, and the perception is a part of the Kantian theory, which observes several natures of sublime receptions. The Chinese landscape paintings are particularly known for their rendition of panoramic views, horizontal or vertical, encompassing a breathtaking, naturalistic scene. Being a regular trope of spirituality, Chinese aesthetics, and technical dexterity, among others, the subject has been often compared with Renaissance paintings and other deft epochs in the history of art. Eventually, in this contested comparison, frequently Chinese landscapes have triumphed because of the experiences bestowed or say rewarded upon the viewer. Constantly, the viewer experiences a flow of sensations, treading the eye from one corner of the

foliage to the highest stretches of mountains to eventually rest upon the minuscule human figure who is hitherto preoccupied with the routine. Like when you view a valley or vast space from above you cannot look at the visual in its wholesome capacity merely due to the biological limitation of our optic sight. But the Chinese artists render each part of the landscape scene with utmost clarity, clear contours and in later cases hazy demeanour of nature, like diminishing or merging or becoming one with the effervescence of the surroundings. Definitely, this tickles our metaphysical cognitive mind to correspond the scene with multiple metaphors and connotations conjectured by a conditioned psyche. Subsequently, it boils down to the persistent discussion of what art can make you feel and hence how you define art's aesthetics. Zong Bing, an early proponent of landscape painting, expressed in the 5th century the delight he found in adorning his home with such artwork. He cherished the ability to transport himself, through these depictions, to the untamed beauty of nature immersing his sublime imagination in the serene realms of mountains, flowing streams, misty vistas, verdant trees, and rugged rocks (Yu, 2008). Considering metaphysical cognition, this raises several human queries in the mind of the viewer. Some of them are: Does the Chinese landscape help a viewer to receive the state of mind to feel the higher bliss? Or does it allow us to become part of this immeasurable distance which otherwise could have been unfathomable by a human eye? Or maybe a Chinese landscape beguiles the tiny human psyche with the sense of humongous scale that the universe is? What is this enigmatic vastness of 'space' and maybe immemorial time that has boggled the minds of experts and continues to do, from a common to special (one with a greater IQ score) mankind? If the space rendered in the landscape is the primary entity that initiates this reality-based- experiential enigma in the minds of the viewer, then what is the nature of such a vast-area-depicting space on a comparatively miniature scroll? Gaston Bachelard in his book *Poetics of Space* explains, "Space that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent space subject to the measures and estimates of the surveyor (Bachelard, 1994). It has been lived in, not in its positivity, but with all the partiality of the imagination. Particularly, it nearly always exercises an attraction. For it concentrates being within limits that protect." Based on this statement, could we assess the space of the Chinese landscape as an imaginative expression of the artist or an imaginative realization of the viewer, irrespective of the reality, whose lived yet momentary experiences have become a part of their perception that registers the 'want' of that attractive moments or say the sublime

experience through the expression? Guo Xi (c. 1020–1090) was a renowned Chinese landscape painter of the Northern Song dynasty, celebrated for his mastery of monumental landscape painting. He served as a court painter and is best known for his work *Early Spring* (1072), which exemplifies his use of atmospheric perspective and intricate brushwork to create depth and emotional resonance. Guo Xi emphasized the importance of conveying the spirit of nature, not merely its appearance, and his theoretical text, *Linquan Gaozhi* (The Lofty Message of Forests and Streams), influenced the aesthetic principles of Chinese landscape art. His works reflect a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature. In his another book, *Shānshuǐ Xùn* or *Marvels of Nature*, about the method of observation, Guo Xi described: "When one regards the object from a certain distance, it is imposing; when one regards it close up, its essence is revealed" (Xi, circa. 11th century). It is this sense of closeness, which is otherwise far and imposing, that is a reward of the Chinese painting to the viewer. It is this experience of space embedded with internal liberty that triumphs the genre when compared with others. Bereft of aesthetics or bereft of artistic expression that dwells in the aesthetics, space also survives with a function that is not necessarily linear or uni-directional. Rather it operates with a certain kind of nature that is stimulated by diverse, time-changing and affective contexts. Henry Lefebvre in his book *Production of Space* explains the nature of 'spaces: "From the social standpoint, space has a dual' nature' and (in any given society) a dual general' existence'. On the one hand, one (i.e each member of the society under consideration) relates oneself to space and situates oneself in space. One confronts both an immediacy and an objectivity of one's own. One places oneself at the centre designates oneself, measures oneself and uses oneself as a measure. One is, in short, a 'subject'. A specific social status - assuming always a stable situation, and hence determination by and in a state - implies a role and a function: an individual and a public identity. It also implies a location, a place in society, and a position. On the other hand, space serves an intermediary or mediating role: beyond each plane surface, beyond each opaque form, one seeks to apprehend something else. This tends to turn social space into a transparent medium occupied solely by light, by 'presences' and influences. On the one hand, therefore, space contains opacities, bodies and objects, centres of efferent actions and effervescent energies, hidden- even impenetrable - places, areas of viscosity and black holes. On the other, it offers sequences, sets of objects concatenations of bodies - so much so, in fact, that anyone can at any time discover new ones,

forever slipping from the nonvisible realm into the visible, from opacity into transparency” (Lefebvre, 1991). What are these elements in the traditional Chinese landscape painting that perform these dual roles? How are they slipping back and forth from the non-visible realm to the visible and from opacity into transparency? Hence, the usual meaning of this nature of space can never remain constant, if the multiple subjects in the painting are subjected, in the space governed by themselves, by each other. The usual structuralist notion of a landscape being the representation that provides the spirit resonance can’t remain the same for the very reason of the dual or multiplied nature of space that proliferated multiple others within the same realm. We look at many such intermingling meanings through the Derridian poststructuralist theory of Deconstruction in the next section.

2.2 The Human Nature Dynamic: Derridian Perspective

In the previous section, from looking at the subjectivities of space and its interlinking, reconciling aspects with the human psyche, the depiction of a comparatively minutely-sized human figure in Chinese landscape painting has been the most significant notion— that appeals to a viewer with the contrasting or equivocally complimenting or insignificant character. But this paper contends that the human figures occupied in their routine connote with the identity of the Derridean ‘trace’ (see below for the definition) and thus, each element operates as a trace whose differing meanings show the presence of absence. Hence what is the binary opposite to the presence of human occupation in the Chinese landscape painting to understand the correct meaning of their place in the artwork? Subsequently, what does this analysis denote in the larger context of the discipline and philosophy of Chinese painting? Does this ‘trace’ of human presence (along with the absences) in its absolutely and comparatively much smaller size eventually suggest the notion of ‘aporia’ as the status of their meanings or not? These research questions form a specific core of the paper.

2.2.1 Derridian Theory of Deconstruction

Jacques Derrida (1930 - 2004), the French-Algerian philosopher, was a poststructuralist, whose theories defied structuralism. He is known for his theory of Deconstruction which comprises terms of trace, difference and aporia. In Deconstruction, Derrida infers that any phenomenon is an assemblage of events that are present irrespective of its assemblage or

process or the immediate need for meaning-making. The sequence that makes a phenomenon is default present and does not criticise, or justify, or allow any significance to a particular context. There is an absence of effort in assembly and dissolving or destructing per se. The deconstruction does not involve any contexts like socio-political, or ethical, or cultural or personal, it is a mere sequence that has led to a text formation or the making of an artwork. The concept of the trace refers to the idea that meaning is always dependent on something absent. In any form of representation like art or language, no word or concept stands entirely on its own; its meaning is shaped by the differences between it and other words. For Derrida, the trace highlights how meaning is never fully present it is always mediated by what is absent or deferred. He explains that "there is no presence without absence," emphasizing that language inherently lacks a final or fixed meaning (Derrida, 1976). Derrida's, *différance* is a mixture of 'differ' and 'defer' *Différance* has two key aspects: Deferral and Difference. While Deferral is that a meaning is never fully present in a single moment but is always deferred to other words or contexts. This endless deferral shows that meaning is never fully self-contained (Derrida, 1992). And, Difference is that a meaning is generated by differences between signs. A word does not mean what it means by itself but through its distinction from other words. For instance, "cat" has meaning only because it is not "bat," "rat," or "dog" Derrida writes that *différance* "produces what it defers," meaning that the process of deferring meaning is also what creates it (Derrida, 1976). Importantly, *différance* cannot itself be directly defined because it is the condition of all meaning. An *aporia* is a logical impasse or paradox, where conflicting ideas or interpretations cannot be fully resolved. Derrida used this term to describe moments in a text where its internal contradictions make it impossible to arrive at a single, unified meaning. For example, in a particular time or context, Derrida examines the paradox of the gift. A true gift must be given freely, without expectation of return. Yet, if we acknowledge a gift as a gift, we introduce reciprocity, undermining its purity (Derrida, 1992). This creates an *aporia* a conceptual deadlock. *Aporias*, for Derrida, are not simply problems to solve but opportunities to question the foundations of our assumptions. They demonstrate that texts and ideas are always incomplete, and open to multiple interpretations.

2.2.2 Fan Kuan Two Paintings: Analysis

To understand and apply the above theories, concerning early Chinese Landscape painting, the study will consider two paintings by Fan Kuan.

Fan Kuan (c. 960–c. 1030) was a prominent Chinese landscape painter during the Northern Song Dynasty. Born in Huayuan, now Yaoxian County in Shaanxi Province, his original name was Fan Zhongzheng and was endearingly known as Zhongli. He later adopted the pseudonym "Kuan," referring to his broad-minded and magnanimous personality (Sullivan, 1953). Initially, Fan Kuan studied the landscape styles of renowned artists Li Cheng and Jing Hao. Over time, he developed his distinctive approach, indicated by strong, powerful brushwork and thick ink application. His compositions are noted for their simplicity, effectively conveying the majesty and solidity of mountainous forms. Embracing Daoist and Neo-Confucian principles, Fan Kuan sought spiritual enlightenment through reclusion in the Zhongnan and Taihua Mountains. To keep the discussion specific and avoid generic inferences, two artworks are chosen. The reason is that, apart from being a popular artist in modern times, Fan Kuan belongs to the period before the Yuan dynasty, which observed a merger of styles due to the invasion by Mongols. The artist's practice also observes a mature stage of Chinese landscape painting replete with noted norms and disciplined, abiding guidelines that identify with the authentic, traditional passage. Hence, the study shall refer to two paintings by Fan Kuan viz. *Travellers among Mountains and Streams* and *Autumn Woods and Flying Cascade*. The images are sourced from the National Taipei Museum. *Travellers among Mountains and Streams* is known to have been rendered in rain-drop texture strokes and depicts towering mountains, temples, streams and a pathway where travellers with mules appear to walk on the terrain. The vertical visual is apparently divided by a layer of mist at the centre of the painting, which tells us about the three divisions of the top which is distant, middle which is closer to the bottom ie. closest to the viewer. At the same time, *Autumn Woods and Flying Cascade*, along with the usual motifs of terrain, depict a fenced pathway from the left bottom corner, where the human figure is shown walking along the way, leading to a hamlet on the right centre of the painting. This landscape by Fan Kuan is known to have been rendered in his famous axe-chopping method. Both the paintings present amature stage of the artist which outlines the characteristics of Northern Song's landscapes (Barnhart et al., 1997).

2.2.3 Semiotic or Real Interpretation? Trace, Aporia, and the Visual of Chinese Landscape Painting

When one stands on the ridge of a mountain overlooking a valley or when one looks at a mountain range from a spot within the valley, often

the enormous feeling that encapsulates is that of beyond or the immense wonderment—it is the essence of uncertainty, powerful nature, and timidity felt, realizing oneself as a speck to this vast natural terrain of the biospheric life. The Chinese landscape painters, as discussed in the previous section, attempted to express the variegated and diverse experiences of uncertainty and the unknown. But how? In the Chinese landscape, the generic representation comprises humungous mountains, foliage including trees, bushes, shrubs, plants on the route, temples on the top, gushing waterfalls that eventually recede into rivulets or rivers, and a pathway which, last but not the least, would show a human figure (supposedly a scholar or porter or a common man) treading the way, or seated on the banks, or within the porch of the home or other activity that is part of his daily routine. Moreover, the landscape representation, expressing the mighty nature, has always been looked upon as a mode of beauty and pleasure. It has seldom observed the realities of these natural structures. Did the representation express the aesthetic consciousness in its pleasurable context? Or having been successful in conveying the blithe and oneness, did it also connote something differing from this sensational feeling? The paper argues that the elements of the Chinese landscape are ‘semiotic’ of the process of experiencing cerebral aesthetic consciousness, which is not pleasurable! The ratio of the size of the human body to the mountains and the entire terrain is extreme. The study contends that the representation of human, their occupation and placement in the visual framework acts as a Derridian trace. The meaning of the whole is driven by the absent meanings about the presence of humans and animals in the landscape. Hence, what are the binaries of these visual elements which transgress the usual and streamlined concept of this painting? What realities eventually do the elements in the landscape disclose? *Travelers Among Mountains and Stream* will be looked at with respect to the significance of human occupation. The painting depicts two porters flanking, as a lead and in the end, four mules that are carrying a load, as an act of transportation in the mountains, and apparently appear to be fatigued. From being the ship of the mountains, associated with communities of mountain-land for their livelihood, mules have been an integral part of the mountain-tourism. The mule symbolizes endurance and tolerance, far stronger than horses, thriving in harsh climates, requiring less care, and resisting disease. It excels under tough and stringent conditions, endures heavy work, and remains manageable even with poor handling, making it indispensable in demanding environments. Rather than being enamoured by the difference in the proportion of sizes, the absent meaning of occupation that subtends

a non-liberating reality of life and its livelihood, mules present us with the trace of struggle within the divine vicinity. Hence, does the 'beautiful' landscape and pre-occupation of humans with mule subtend to be an aporia- a deadlock stance that does not allow us to remain with one constant meaning? Does it revoke the beautiful in the presence of mountains? "Be still like a mountain and flow like a great river" (Addiss & Lombardo, 1993). The western hills of northern China are known for their treacherous mountains and hence accessible only to the local pilgrims and not anyone who is physically weak and untrained in mountaineering. The Zhongnan Mountains and Taihua Mountains have been historically significant in Chinese culture, serving as centres of spiritual retreat, religious practice, and artistic inspiration. These mountain ranges, located in Shaanxi Province, were associated with Daoism and Buddhism, attracting monks, scholars, and hermits seeking enlightenment and solitude (Miller, 2006). The Zhongnan Mountains, also known as the "South Mountains," have been famous since ancient times as a retreat for Daoist sages and poets. During the Tang Dynasty, the mountains housed many temples and hermitages, making them a key site for Daoist and Buddhist meditation (Schipper, 2000). The Taihua Mountains, part of the larger Hua Shan range, are one of China's Five Great Mountains and a sacred Daoist site. These peaks symbolize transcendence and immortality in Daoist philosophy, reinforcing the belief that nature embodies spiritual truth (Ebrey, 1996). With a legacy of consistent and persistent penance, both spiritually and physically, the represented forms of mountains do not merely project the idea of beauty but solely simulate the treacherous road of psychological liberation. Hence, again with the traces of absent meaning the Derridian theory assists in realizing the true meanings of the Chinese landscape over the usual aspect of humongous beauty. They perform to be visual-metaphorical documents in symbolizing the realities and spirits of the moment. Autumn Woods and Flying Cascade landscape neatly represents the rhythmic movement of the fenced bridge that moves from the bottom left to the the area of hamlet. The bridge aids in crossing the stream and also forms a civilized road to lead to the destination. But one wonders what makes the painter place the human figure at such an off-the-focus spot. The golden ratio and the fundamentals of art would generally place a human being in a position where the narrative would centralize and move around the figure's essence. But in this case, it is the opposite and hence it works as an aporia to the Chinese landscape. It is this conventional binary opposite meaning to the placement that allows us to correlate with the Chinese philosophy of spirituality of shedding the much-needed sense

of importance. The doctrines of Daoism state the nine virtues which are: (1) Nonaction, (2) Softness and weakness, (3) Guarding the feminine, (4) Being nameless, (5) Clarity and stillness, (6) Being adept, (7) Being desireless, (8) Knowing how to stop and be content, and (9) Yielding and withdrawing (Yu, 2008). The meditative process is purported to be a task more treacherous than the mighty mountains of Huashan and a scholar hermit has to be isolated from worldly affairs, equally undergoing a situation of suffering while knowing the unknown. It is equivalent to a mule that carries a load more than its weight and walks against gravity. And it is like a scholar hermit walking at the corner far from the central picture to remain distant and observant of the whole enigmatic process despite the perils of the unknown. As Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu) noted, "Fasting of the mind: Make your will one! Do not listen with your ears, but listen with your mind. No, do not listen with your mind, but listen with your spirit. Listening stops with the ears, and the mind stops with recognition, but the spirit is empty and waits on all things. The Way gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind"(Zhuangzi, 2003). Ziran is a key Daoist concept meaning "naturalness" or "spontaneity." It refers to the self-so, effortless unfolding of things in accordance with their innate nature, free from artificial interference (Te Ching, 1993; Zhuangzi, 1968). While the difference in the Chinese landscape painting, in the contemporary may open up ecological concerns, revisiting the probable real meanings directly leads us back to the original philosophy of Daoism ziran projects the effortlessness in the sequences of events that directly emphasizes and underscores the theory of deconstruction by Derrida.

3. CONCLUSION

"Today we are unlikely to look for a sky-god in the heavens, though we may perhaps draw lightly on that residual imagery and symbolism, but we are fairly sure to ask ourselves sometime, What about the sky and space as we know them in our own day? Is there any sense in which we can read of our place, our significance or insignificance in the cosmos? What of the size of the cosmos, so immensely greater than supposed until even recent years? Is it a size the thought of which cannot fail to crush us, or can it conceivably exhilarate us? (Hepburn, 2010). The perception of art in its contemporaneity shifted from the mere idea of looking at a visual to the wholesome absorption, realization and understanding of the functions and mechanisms of 'Art' Hence, it no longer responds to the visual, audio, or

tactility but rather observes the stir within our psyche in its true quality. The 'true' and 'quality' here again is an idea of pre-existing degree of knowledge. Hence, to rewrite the same, it denotes the idea of understanding or perceiving the art object in its true and inherent instinctual reception. The Chinese landscape documenting the psychological stir in its truest form perpetrates a neo-contemporary revival in understanding contemporary practice. It is no longer what is painted or how is it painted, rather it is what paints into the psyche of the viewer. However, the paper eventually open us possible research to look at several such practices within Chinese painting in realizing the probable original ideation through the intervention of critical theories. Could we break away from the conditioned aspects of art and aesthetics to observe the feelings and sensations in its broken rendition and nature.

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