Signs and Class in Chinese Landscape Painting: Mu Yüan

Tim Blunk, MFA

Scholar by a Waterfall
Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279), late 12th–early 13th century
Ma Yüan (Chinese, active ca. 1190–1225)
Album leaf: ink and color on silk; 9 7/8 x 10 1/4 in. (25.1 x 26 cm)
Signed: "Servitor, Ma Yüan"
Ex coll.: C.C. Wang Family, Gift of The Dillon Fund, 1973 (1973.120.9)

A Materialist/Marxist Analysis

We begin with the object itself. It is a small painting of black and colored ink on tightly woven silk, measuring 25.1 x 26 cm. There is signature on the left-hand side that reads, "Servitor, Ma Yüan." There are two seals or "chops" in red ink on the right hand side that belong to the artist/collector Wang Chi-chi'en (or C. C. Wang). There are no poems, inscriptions or colophons, nor other seals indicating any previous collectors or owners. According to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the owner of the work since it was purchased in 1973, it was painted by the academy painter Ma Yüan toward the end of the 12th or beginning of the 13th century. The work was purchased for the Metropolitan Museum of Art as part of a lot of 25 paintings from the private collection of C. C. Wang. The sale was brokered by Wen C. Fong, the Metropolitan's consultant to the Department of Far Eastern Art and Edwards Sanford Professor of Art and Archeology at Princeton University; the funding came through a donation by Douglas Dillon, the Museum's president. Although the final sales figure was not disclosed, it was believed to have been $2.5 million for the collection of twenty-five works.

I have been unable to discover the pedigree of the painting prior to its arrival in C.C. Wang's collection, although the absence of multiple seals from previous collectors suggests that it had remained a part of the Imperial Collection until Pu Yi, the deposed Qing emperor gave away or sold many of its works between 1911 and 1924. Mr. Wang brought his collection from Hong Kong to New York in 1947 where he lived the remainder of his life. While it remained in his collection, "Scholar by a Waterfall" was paired with another Ma Yüan painting that was donated to the Cleveland Museum of Art by Mrs. A. Dean Perry.[1]

Ma Yüan was one of the most prominent court painters of the Southern Song Dynasty's Imperial Painting Academy. This surely one of the reasons that the work has been

[1] *Watching the Deer by a Pine Shaded Stream*, Ma Yuan. As downloaded from The Cleveland Museum of Art on the World Wide Web.
<http://www.clevelandart.org/Explore/artistwork.asp?creatorid=3052&recNo=0&woRecNo=0>

carefully preserved and survived to be a part of the collection of the Metropolitan Museum: the fact of its existence attests to its origins. The use of very fine quality silk suggests access to the best materials. The use of colored inks in addition to black is also a known characteristic of Imperial Painting Academy works. The small format is that of an "album leaf" that came into popularity during the Southern Song period. The painting may have originally been bound in a small book, possibly mounted next to a page with a poem or inscription. This may account for the absence of any poetry on the image itself — another prominent feature of paintings from the Southern Song.

The elements of skill and style involved in this small painting is what in a Marxist sense would have defined its use value for the Imperial Court during the period of its creation. Ma Yüan himself was the fourth generation of Imperial Academy painters; his son Ma Lin followed his footsteps to become the fifth. He and the other Academy artists were in the direct employ of the Emperor and held a rank and wore the uniform of the Imperial Court. The Academy painters were therefore deeply embedded in the rigid, segmented class structure of the Court. Their commissioned work varied but often took the form of painting scrolls, fans, or album leaves to be used by the Emperor or members of the royal family as gifts or commemorative artifacts. *Scholar by a Waterfall* is signed by "Servitor Ma Yüan," as if to make the relation of artist to patron absolutely clear.

But the skill evidenced in this small painting is undeniable: it is the crystallization of generations of training and pedagogy that was transmitted for hundreds of years, owing in large measure to the relative stability of the Chinese agricultural feudal mode of production and the country's natural wealth of resources. The social/artistic DNA of this work testifies to the existence of a social surplus that could sustain a class of court artists many generations old whose work was solely that of producing art.

The caste of Imperial Academy painters were inheritors and accumulators of a particular bank of knowledge (materials and their properties, brush techniques, rendering, etc.), similar to other guilds or trades that were put into the service of the court. However, as the objects produced were *meaningful* – that is, transmitted signs and held an ideological

function, the training of the Academy artists was also ideological. The entrance examinations for the Southern Song Academy required demonstrations beyond the skills of brushwork, calligraphy and rendering; prospective students also needed to demonstrate their proficiency in Confucian and Taoist philosophy as well as classical poetry and literature. They were to be trained as professional painters, however it was an implicit part of the Taoist worldview ('the idea precedes the brushstroke") that it was impossible for a painter to create quality work of art without philosophical and ethical training. As a function of their role in the production of ideology, they could not produce the functional ideological objects without an implicit acceptance of the existing class relations.

The Academy painters' work served to celebrate the achievements of the Emperor and the dynasty. Without any additional knowledge of Confucian symbolism, the tranquil scene of a scholar/official (possibly suggesting the recipient himself), attended by a servant, contemplating a waterfall in such cultivated environs can be read as a metaphor for the stability of the Dynasty and an affirmation of the established order. All is in its place, including the unseen artist, in accordance with the Tao, and in accordance with the existing class relations.

While we do not know the occasion for the painting of *Scholar by a Waterfall*, we can surmise that it was a probably commission and served in some fashion as a gift, possibly for the scholar/official pictured therein. The signature itself, "Servitor Ma Yüan," declares that the work was created in service to the Emperor. As a gift from the Imperial Court, it held enormous use value in this pre-capitalist gift economy. Service was rewarded and social bonds and class relations were cemented with objects such as these. The gift would have served as both a material reward, as well as an object/symbol of the relation the gift itself was affirming. The Song emperor in bestowing this gift was saying, "I am sharing with you, my servant, an object produced by artists in service to me who have perfected their skill for generations to make it possible for me to reward you in this way. As such you are sharing in our collective social and cultural wealth." The object was imbued with the imprimatur of the Emperor, a fetishized relation to the ruling class and its political power. Although the *image* within the painting portrays a scholar and his

servant residing within a cultivated landscape, the presence of the Emperor is omnipresent in the *object*. It is coded in the signature of "Servitor Ma Yüan" that is a clear declaration of the work's sponsored authorship and power relation that impelled its production.

Interestingly, out of tradition and convention the Academy highly valued realism over personal expression. The painters of the Academy were looked down upon by the class of scholar/literati painters for whom painting was part of being a cultured, educated person – a spiritual means of locating oneself in the Tao. The academic realism (including the use of colored inks) was denigrated by the *literati* (who preferred nothing but black ink mixed with water) as crass "professionalism." They were, in part, conscious and critical of the ideological nature of the academic production: their paintings were works by the paid professionals of the court who were bound to produce for the emperor, not for themselves or the Tao. Personal expression was possible only for those who maintained a more distant, ambivalent relationship to the ruling class. Arguably their class antagonism to the Emperor created a material basis for these moments of individual subjectivity.

Althusser wrote, "Ideology represents the imaginary relation of individuals to their real condition of existence."[2] With this, we get to the figures within the image. *Scholar by a Waterfall* is just that – an elderly gentleman gazing at a waterfall. That is, if you choose to ignore the other human being depicted in the painting – a person who would appear to be the scholar's servant. As such, even the *title* asserts a class position of ignoring the subjectivity of the second person present. The image of the scholar, seen in profile in fine white robes, leaning over a railing in contemplation of a waterfall, is the dominant human figure, rendered in the planar perspective in the painting's foreground. The scholar's head is bowed in contemplation and reverence to the water. His body is open only to the water. The servant holds her head is bowed in obeisance to her master, her hands clasped together before her beneath the sleeves of her robe. The servant is younger and shorter, possibly a woman, is dressed in robes that match the scholar's, perhaps as a member of

[2] Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001.

his household; (s)he carries a staff – probably used by the elderly scholar to approach the elevated vantage point above the waterfall. She is open and available only to her master. As a formal element, standing beyond the scholar in her light robe, she is nearly indistinguishable from the railing that guard visitors like the scholar from falling into the cascade below. She is simply *there* – an object – serving, protecting, endowed with the same degree of subjectivity as one of the rail posts.

The painting was doubtlessly conceived as an affirmation of Confucian values that would commend an elderly scholar who, in spite of his age, goes to lengths and pains to arrive at a place of contemplation before a waterfall. Beneath the surface, however, it describes and reifies a class relation between master and servant, one that would have held between a feudal landowner or court official and his servant. The servant exists for the noble; the noble exists for the Tao. They are not described as equals before the landscape, but within a social hierarchy. The ability of the scholar to have his moments of quiet contemplation is possible only through the creation of a social surplus derived from the exploitation of this servant and her class. This was also part of the Tao, the Way, just as the scholar/official owed his allegiance and fealty to the Emperor, the progenitor and giver of the gift. As such, this small album leaf could be seen to be as much a propaganda piece as any of the Chinese Communist Party's much reviled poster art of the Cultural Revolution.

From Gift to Commodity

Immediately upon its conferral as a gift, this painting and the album of which it may have been a part immediately acquired exchange value as an Imperial artifact. In large measure, this in and of itself accounts for its survival into the present. Our ability to view it at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is due to its fine materials and careful preservation, but more so, because its Imperial origins, demonstrable lineage, class associations and consequent commodification have given it a high price in today's art market. We know that major redistributions of art in China took place when dynasties fell. Art was often loaned by the emperor to nobles, only to be lost to the Court when the ruler was deposed

or overthrown.[3] *Scholar by a Waterfall* may have remained a part of the Imperial Collection until C. C. Wang secured it for his own. It may have been a purchase. Additional investigation is needed here, but for the purposes of this paper, we will assume that it was bought either directly or after arriving on the market after the collapse of the last Qing Dynasty in 1911. Pu Yi, as was stated earlier, was selling off the Imperial Collection to pay off the royal family's debts. Many other works of the Imperial Collection had been on loan to nobles across the country and were never recovered. As the dominant economic feudal mode of production collapsed in China at the turn of the 20th century, the capitalist art market had been developing in Europe since the Renaissance. The commodification of art objects made it possible for Pu Yi to convert paintings into foreign exchange. As a soulless commodity, *Scholar by a Waterfall* could have been a porcelain vase, a purse, or a widget as it entered the market. Its use value had been eclipsed by its exchange value, which was in turn shaped by its pedigree.

This is where the story becomes more interesting. The valuation of art objects in the art market is largely determined by the methods of connoisseurship that trace an object's verifiable pedigree – from its creation by the artist, to its subsequent purchase or accrual into a collection or collections. There is no intersection whatsoever with the object's use value. Any similarly sized, similarly constructed object can occupy a decorative space on a wall or cabinet. The exchange value depends utterly on the ability of the seller to prove the object's authenticity. For the exchange value to hold up, science must determine that the object's *aura* is intact. Whole bodies of scholarship and institutions of higher learning have been built and endowed to make these determinations and buttress the system of assigning exchange value to art objects such as our little ink album leaf. The Metropolitan Museum of Art is one of these institutions. When we view *Scholar by a Waterfall* at the Met in the context of their current exhibition, "How to Read a Chinese Painting," we assume the object's authenticity – that it was, in fact, painted by the Southern Song painter Ma Yüan (1127–1279) and by no other, and is not a copy "in the style of…" or an outright forgery. As I stood before this work, completely taken in by its

[3] Fong, Wen with Fu, Marilyn. Sung and Yuan Paintings. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1973. Pg.15.

apparent (to me) aura, there was no label or signage that declared that a number of eminent Asian art scholars do not accept its authenticity. How curious. Is it an important exemplar of Southern Song landscape painting by a known master painter of the period and therefore a valuable property of the Metropolitan Museum of Art? Or is its worth contained solely in its historical aura?

The controversy arose in 1976, three years after Professor Wen Fong arranged for the purchase of the twenty-five works from C. C. Wang's private collection. With funding from the Dillon Fund, his intention was to bring the Met's sparse Chinese collection up to world-class standards. The purchase of twenty-five major works from the Song and Yüan periods was seen as a potential coup that would achieve this goal in one shot. Many experts in the field were publicly skeptical. It is notoriously difficult to authenticate Chinese art: it is tradition that encouraged copying and one that did not punish forgery. The 6th century scholar Xie He, defined the sixth of his "Six points to consider when judging a painting" to be "*Transmission by Copying*," or the copying of models, not only from life but also the works of antiquity.[4] Prior to the advent of engraving or the printing press, the copying of ancient works was not just accepted by encouraged in the pedagogy of painting. Aside from the teaching of techniques, it was seen by the Chinese as a way of preserving the legacy of the ancestors, of giving them life in the present. Painting, along with poetry and calligraphy was one of the three artistic endeavors partaken of by cultured, learned people. The activity of painting was imbued with spiritual significance as well, connecting the painter to the Tao, particularly through the painting of landscapes and nature. Creating reproductions of beloved works for gifts and the enjoyment of the class of scholar/officials was an ongoing occupation for centuries. The Chinese art world is full of copies.

> This practice of copying helps to explain the remarkable continuity of Chinese art and culture, in which the artistic process of replication parallels the anthropological concept of genealogy. Just as one's mortal body both replaces and transforms that of one's ancestors, the life and authority of

[4] Fong, Wen C. "Why Chinese Painting Is History" The Art Bulletin, Vol. 85, No. 2, (Jun., 2003), pg. 263.

> artistic tradition, through endless replication, can remain forever ancient and forever new. The styles of the canonical masters, as transmitted through tracing copies and replicas, may thus be considered a kind of DNA imprint from which all subsequent idioms emerge. Later painters, considered heirs to the Great Tradition, who learned from ancient styles, regarded themselves as reincarnations of the early masters. By achieving shensi-the "spiritual likeness" of one of the early masters-a later master brings that artist back to life.[5]

The Met went through the trouble of hiring sixteen noted experts in an effort to authenticate its purchase. Not satisfied with the potentially embarrassing conclusions, however, the Museum spun the results in its favor. This led to a major scandal that was eventually dubbed “Chinagate” wherein many of the panel of experts publicly expressed outrage at having been misquoted, taken out of context or misinterpreted by the Met in their conclusions about the Wang collection. Only one of the twenty-five paintings was unanimously accepted by all sixteen experts, and that was attributed to an anonymous Academy painter. The experts, while not unanimous in all of their opinions, generally agreed that the museum’s attributions and dates were wrong in eight instances, and there was significant dissent over another ten works. [6]

In analyzing the Met’s attribution and dating of *Scholar by a Waterfall*, the panel was divided:

> Mr. Edwards [Richard Edwards, professor of Far Eastern Art at the University of Michigan] said, "You can't definitely accept it." Mr. Wu [Nelson I. Wu, professor of art and archeology at Washington University] and Mr. Cahill said it is a school painting rather than actually by Ma Yüan. Mr. Wu said the space around the man and the play of solid versus void was not as good as in Mrs. Dean Perry's painting in Cleveland and that this is "not so one-corner Ma." Another expert said a real Ma Yüan would

[5] Ibid., pg. 263.
[6] Horsley, Carter B. Chinagate” From the The City Review on the World Wide Web at <http//www.thecityreview.chinapro.htm>

> have more depth and there would be an integration of planes and suggested this was a Ming work. Mr. Lee [Sherman L. Lee, Director of the Cleveland Museum of Art] and Mr. Loehr [Max Loehr, the Fogg Museum and former professor of Chinese art at Harvard] accepted the painting, although Mr. Loehr suggested that the Perry painting, once in the collection of C. C. Wang, was "a rather different technique, maybe a different hand."[7]

So, the experts are equivocal on the authenticity and therefore, the exchange value of *Scholar by a Waterfall*. As a commodity, the painting has achieved a higher relative exchange value by virtue of its purchase by the Metropolitan. "Several experts said that since the acquisition prices of Chinese paintings have gone up dramatically and that the purchase had greatly inflated values."[8] The Wang purchase seems to have increased the value of Chinese art across the board – not only the collection bought by the Met. However, the value of the C.C. Wang collection has since fallen. Part of his fall from grace was the disclosure of his close relationship with the famed 20th century painter and master forger Zhang Daqian. Zhang was believed to have been the owner of some 475 Chinese seals as well as a massive collection of old silks, old ink and old brushes so as to pass muster with scientific investigation. Wang purchased from Zhang a reputed masterpiece attributed by the Metropolitan to Dong Yüan titled, "Along the Riverbank." The Met bought this painting from Wang in 1999, in what appears to be a repeat of Chinagate. Many experts, including James Cahill disbelieve its authenticity. Even the Met now concedes that there are questions concerning its attribution.

Nevertheless, *Scholar by a Waterfall* is currently on view at the Met, without disclaimer or qualification. Its use value is now partly an educational function in transmitting cultural information about Chinese painting and on a more subtle level, about US cultural hegemony. Its exchange value is unclear. It is likely valuable insofar as it maintains the Met's imprimatur of legitimacy (an invisible yet highly charged chop mark.) The Metropolitan Museum of Art is now the keeper of the Imperial(ist) Collection, and the

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[7] Ibid.

[8] Horsley, Carter B. "Chinese Art Acquisitions at Metropolitan Challenged." From the The City Review on the World Wide Web at <http//www.thecityreview.chinaor.htm>

guarantor of the treasures of the empire. There is likely another form of political value codified within this work that attaches to its expatriation from the Chinese national patrimony by C.C. Wang and subsequent sale in the United States. (Wang wanted to see his works returned to China through a purchase by the Chinese National Palace Museum, but this never materialized.) Overall, however, *Scholar's* potential value as an art commodity on the open market is likely diminished by the Chinagate controversy and concerns regarding its attribution.[9]

The Structural Analysis of *Scholar by a Waterfall*

Intersecting the Marxist analysis of this art object, particularly its role as a transmitter of ideological content or signs, is the structural analysis. The crystallization of the master/servant relation is one moment of a series of binary oppositions that serve to demarcate the structure of Taoist and neo-Confucian thought. The semiotic language of *Scholar by a Waterfall* transmits many of the most important cultural values of its time.

Within *Scholar by a Waterfall*, we can analyze the following binary pairs:

Yin/Yang
Emptiness/fullness
Human/heaven
Mountain/water
Pine: Root/branch
Brush/ink
Light/dark
Volume/line
Enclosed/open
Natural/cultivated
Master/servant

[9] One wonders how the Met's accountants calculate this for insurance purposes.

Yin/Yang

The taiji symbol familiar to most Westerners is the symbol of yin-yang, the unity of the Tao (or, “the Way”). This unity of opposing binary forces describes a circle of motion. There is yin (white with a black dot) and yang (black with a white dot) held in an eternal embrace. Together they create the third member of a triad, the whole. The dots within the two opposing figures symbolize the presence of yin in yang, and of yang within yin. The taiji symbolizes the fundamental Taoist view of the structure of reality, namely that beyond the duality of phenomenal existence, created through the interaction of yin and yang, is the unity of the Tao, which exists beyond time and space. It can be roughly understood as the gentle innate force within all things in the universe. It is impossible to overstate the depth of penetration of this worldview within the arts, and indeed within every sphere of human activity. Living a good life meant tuning into the Tao, or practicing the concept of wei wu wei (literally, “action without action” or *effortless doing*.) Nature was seen as exemplifying the balance of the Tao, so contemplation within natural settings or landscape painting was part of connecting to this current of the Way. This connection was also seen to obviate the need for external rules or laws of order.

Landscape painting, therefore, was a not a mere entertainment or dalliance by scholar/officials, nor a directed activity of gift production within the Imperial Academy. Painting itself, as an activity, was an expression of the Tao, and as such, the finished work should manifest that expression. These were the principles that guided the preparation of the ink, the composition, the brushwork of the great Chinese artists.

> Cosmology is important because a painting does not aim merely at being an aesthetic object but rather seeks to

> become a microcosm that is itself creative in the manner of the macrocosm, an open space in which real life is possible. (Wang Wei said, "By means of a slim brush, re-create the immense body of emptiness." Tsung Ping said: "Once spiritual contact is established, the essential forms will be realized; the spirit of the universe will also be captured. Will not a painting then be as real as nature itself?"[10]

Central to the Taoist philosophy is the concept of *emptiness*. Emptiness (not to be confused with a void, our scientific idea of a vacuum, or with the social/psychological descriptions of anomie) is the starting point and conclusion of existence. Emptiness surrounds us. The duality of emptiness and fullness is the reigning organizing principle in Chinese landscape painting.

> In the eyes of the Chinese painter, the execution of the brushstroke is the link between humans and the supernatural. For through its internal unity and its capacity for variation, the brushstroke is one and many. It embodies the process through which man returns in painting to the original gestures of creation. The act of executing the stroke corresponds to the very act that draws the one forth from chaos and that separates heaven and earth.
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> In the execution of a painting, emptiness comes into play at every level, from the basic strokes to the composition of the whole. It is a sign among the signs, providing the pictorial system with its effectiveness and unity."[11]

Human/Heaven

From this overdetermining principle of emptiness, a subset of nested binary relations are identifiable, and these constitute a set of signs that would have been readable by any of the literati of China.

> "Philosopher-landscapists systematically translated natural phenomena into different sets of interdependent yin-yang relationships. As motifs, there were for instance "earthen mountains" (t'u-shan) and "rocky mountains" (shih-shan),

[10] Cheng, François. Empty and Full: The Language of Chinese Painting. Boston: Shambalhala Publications, 1994. pg. 64.
[11] Ibid.

> densely foliaged trees and bare branches. In technique, there were brushed lines and inked dots or washes. The "principles" (ii), so often discussed by early-Sung theorists, referred to both the principles of nature and the principles of pictorial structure. What was observed in nature must be articulated in theoretical principles as well as pictorial forms."[12]

Ma Yüan was nicknamed "One-corner Ma" during the Ming dynasty for his compositional tendency to paint his human figures and land/water structures from either the lower left or lower right-hand corner of the painting. The majority of the painting was relatively empty, except for traces of mist-shrouded mountains or sky, or in the case of *Scholar*, the mists of a waterfall. The square plane of *Scholar* is bisected almost exactly in half along the diagonal by the branch of a pine, separating the densely occupied lower left half from the misty ink-wash of the upper right. It was this symmetrical bisection of the picture plane that Nelson I. Wu noted in his rejection of the work as a true Ma Yüan. Other examples of Ma Yüan's landscapes develop very similar scenes of contemplative scholars, attended by a servant, but they are much more spacious – truly "one-corner."

Watching the Deer by a Pine Shaded Stream, Ma Yüan (Chinese) 1127-1279 Cleveland Museum of Art.

[12] Fong, Wen C. "Toward a Structural Analysis of Chinese Landscape Painting."Art Journal, Vol. 28, No. 4, (Summer, 1969), pp. 388-397.

The one-corner compositions highlight interplay between human-heaven within the totality of emptiness. The gentle ink wash of mist that shrouds the waterfall complicates our perception of the distance. It is hard to know what lies beyond the waterfall to the upper right quadrant. Yet even in the near distance, there is the suggestion of the infinite beyond the cascade. While the scholar's gaze is directed into the bubbling water below, him the emptiness is just beyond, intimately within reach.

Mountain/Water

Another common landscape binary is the unity of mountain and water. So fundamental is this pair to painting, the literal translation of "landscape" in the Chinese ideogram is "mountain-water." The "mountain" in this instance is close-up – a cliff or precipice that is the bed of the cascade. Its structure is not defined as it is shrouded in vapor. The yin-yang unity of mountain and water would have been familiar to the Chinese viewer in its connotation of the interpenetration of opposites:

> "Mountain and water constitute, in the eyes of the Chinese, the two poles of nature, and they are charged with rich meaning. In a celebrated passage, Confucius writes, "The man of heart is charmed by the mountain; the man of spirit delights in water." The two poles of the universe correspond to the two poles of human sensibility. …Mountain and water should not be taken for mere terms of comparison or pure metaphors; they embody the fundamental laws of the macrocosmic universe, which are organic links with the microcosm that is man.
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> The profound significance of mountain-water arises from this vitalistic conception. Through the richness of their content and through their relationship of contrast and complementarity, mountain and water become the principal figures in the universal process of transformation. This idea of transformation is based on the conviction that, in spite of the apparent contradiction between the two entities, they have relationship of reciprocal becoming. Each one of them is perceived as a state that is constantly attached and complemented by the other. Just like yang, which contains yin, and yin which contains yang, mountain, which is

> characterized by yang, is virtually water, and water, characterized by yin, is virtually mountain." [13]

Our scholar by the waterfall is the man of spirit, delighting in the water, although the suggestion of the mountain is there as well. The Confucian meaning behind this sign is clear. The waterfall bubbles at the scholar's feet, yet its origins extend out of the picture and into the infinite. The white froth of the cascade is echoed by the white robe flowing around the scholar, as is the shape of the scholar's figure that forms a nested curve alongside the cascade. The act of contemplation is shown here to be an act of *identification* – the yin force of the water flows within the man himself. The act of the contemplation of the motion of nature confronts the vicissitudes of human society.

> [T]he Chinese love to establish correspondences between the virtues of the things of nature and human virtues. For example, the status of chün-tzu (superior man) is accorded to orchids, bamboo, pines, and plum trees because of their respective virtues of grace, rigor, youth and noble beauty. This is not a mere matter of naturalistic symbolism, for these correspondences aim at the communion through which man inverts the perspective of naturalistic symbolism by interiorizing the external world. The external world in not only "out there"; it is seen from the inside and becomes the expression of man himself – hence the importance placed on gestures and mutual relations in painting groups of mountains, trees, or rocks. In this context, to paint mountain and water is to paint the portrait of man – not so much his physical portrait (although this aspect is not absent) but more that of his mind and spirit.[14]

The Pine: Root/branch

Another compositional element that carried significance for the Song was the pine tree. In the Taoist worldview, the pine symbolized perseverance, steadfastness, endurance, for the evergreen is able to withstand the most extreme winters.

[13] Cheng, pg. 84.
[14] Cheng, pg. 85.

> "The twisted, gnarled pine tree growing out of the rocky earth was an expression of one of the major Taoist notions, that of uselessness as the key to survival and longevity. ...The evergreen pine tree appears to be fresh and bright, even when very old. Because it survives even the coldest winter and never sheds its needles, it is a perfect symbol of eternal friendship, durability and long life. Confucius wrote about the pine tree: "Its stillness is what lengthens its life."[15]

The concept of "uselessness" corresponds with *wei wu wei* ("action without action"). The pine "just *is*" but as such is also infused with the life force of the Tao. In *Scholar* we find a particular kind of pine referred to by landscape painters as the "turtleback pine branch." The pine grows out of the rocks by the waterfall. Its gnarled roots exposed to the wind and water. The main trunk extends in tilted planar perspective away from the human figure and off of the left edge of the painting, but a single foliated branch forms a protective ach over the scholar and servant, the tips of its needles reaching towards the dense rock formation in the nearest foreground. The bowed head of the scholar imitates the curve of the branch, creating the suggestion of a parallel between the virtues of both the scholar and pine. In a reversal of the plane of the trunk, the branch's perspective plane has it reaching towards the viewer, as if to extend its arc of comfort to us as well. The well-defined needles of the pine remind us of the life force within.

The pine and its signification of sustained endurance and survival would have been read differently depending on the artist and the context of the bestowing of the gift. The Southern Song dynasty was a dynasty in exile, with many of the scholar/officials in service to the emperor relocating to the south, while those who stayed in the north withdrew to more spiritual, private lives of contemplation. The signs of endurance and patience in this historical context would therefore have a very particular and nuanced meaning. As a gift from the Emperor, executed by an Academy painter, *Scholar by a Waterfall* would likely have been received as a compliment to the recipient's patient service under adverse conditions while looking to peace and sustenance in the Tao.

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[15] "The Subtleties of the Chinese In Art of 'Loyalty and Dissent' New York Times, Richard Bernstein, April 17, 1990. Pg. 25.

The very same image painted by a scholar/official and gifted to another could be read in as a subversive message of encouraging survival of a corrupt dynasty or poorly ruled country while looking forward to better days ahead. Many had achieved formidable skills in painting and calligraphy. They practiced their art as part of the way of life of a cultured, literate person. Art for them was in part spiritual, based in contemplation and participating in the Tao, but also was embraced as an act of self-expression. They relished and asserted their freedom from the requirements of the Academy and their paintings often reflected their ambivalent class relationship to the Imperial ruling class. While they were usually landed gentry or had passed examinations to work in the service of the Court, their role was also one of advising the Court according to the interests of their class and the country as a whole. Conflicts often arose, just as in England where the gentry presented their king with the Magna Carta.

> "Confucian scholar-officials who served the state…were also the country's most renowned and skilled poets, painters and calligraphers. These poets and painters were not pro-democracy rebels; they accepted the deeply conservative Chinese state and the absolute rule of the emperor. As members of the governing elite, they also believed, at least in theory, that they had an obligation to remonstrate with the emperor when he failed in his duty to rule by virtuous example. But remonstrating, as the thousands of Confucian scholars buried alive or otherwise slain indicate, was hazardous." [16]

Making use of the rich semiotic vocabulary of Confucianism, they often painted coded political commentaries on the state of affairs in the country: bridled horses were officials held back from doing their duties; gnarled pines survived the long, cold winters of despotism through steadfastness and "uselessness;" a bed of narcissus flowers depicted without earth to sustain them was a commentary on exile. These were shared with each other, forging bonds of class solidarity.

[16] Liscomb, Kathlyn Maurean. "Social Status and Art Collecting: The Collections of Shen Zhou and Wang Zhen" The Art Bulletin, Vol. 78, No. 1, (Mar., 1996), pg. 135.

Brush/ink

The *language* of Chinese landscape painting issues from its origins in calligraphy. The semiology of painting in this context is a direct consequence in its origins as a written language *per se*.

> The art of the brushstroke was aided in China by the existence of calligraphy and by the fact that, in painting, the creation of a picture is instantaneous and rhythmic. The very formation of ideograms got the Chinese in the habit of grasping concrete things in terms of the essential strokes that characterize them….Calligraphy exercised a profound influence on the discipline of painting. As early as the T'ang period, particularly beginning with Wu Tao-Tzu, paintings were executed in a spontaneous fashion without any retouching. Artists maintained a steady rhythm of their gestures, which they tried not to break.[17]

> There is a critical difference between the Chinese and the Western approaches to painting. Ever since Aristotle characterized dramatic poetry as mimesis, or the imitation of nature, Western aesthetic theory has considered art more from the point of view of the spectator, the viewer, than from that of the artist.…For the Chinese, both the ideographic script and pictorial representation functioned as graphic signs (tuzai) that expressed meaning. As the ancient legends quoted above by Zhang YanYüan attest, both script and image are considered transmissions of heavenly patterns and therefore undifferentiated art forms. Because the signifying practice of an image as a sign originates in the body and mind of the image maker, the Chinese perceived both calligraphy and painting as having at once a representational and presentational function.[18]

Within the Taoist conception, the sign or brushstroke has its existence first as an idea, a quality connected to the Tao, obtaining its new material form as the brush transfers ink to the emptiness of the paper. This is therefore a creative act that mimics the very first creative act that brought the world into being. These acts of creation are one in the same.

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[17] Cheng, pg. 67

[18] Fong, "Why Chinese Painting Is History," pg. 259.

The artist is participating in the same creation event that brought the world into being, bringing vital breath in the emptiness and infusing it with a life force. The brushstrokes of the ideogram or that define a pine tree are calling the idea into its earthly microcosmic existence within the macrocosm of the universe.

> The flicking and turning brushwork, in wrapping its thickening and thinning movements left and right around a central axis, transforms a two-dimensional calligraphic image into a three-dimensionally articulated organic form, whose power lies not only in its own structure but also in its movement and use of the space around it. Thus, calligraphic brushwork sets up the basic issues of pictorial signification-that the space around the painted figure is perceived as belonging to the body of the figure, which, in turn, exists as a physical extension of that of the calligrapher.29 The term biji or moji, the "trace of brush" or "trace of ink," expresses the concept that both calligraphy and painting represent the physical presence of the maker. The "trace" of a great artist was thought to embody material proof of genius, even immortality.[19]

As the Tao is a non-deistic philosophy, the practice of painting is not to be confused with assuming “god-like” powers; there is no hierarchy of being. It is rather an act of tuning into and/or expressing the power and *vital breath* that has always suffused all of existence.

> In the eyes of the Chinese painter, the execution of the brushstroke is the link between humans and the supernatural. For through its internal unity and its capacity for variation, the brushstroke is one and many. It embodies the process through which man returns in painting to the original gestures of creation. The act of executing the stroke corresponds to the very act that draws the one forth from chaos and that separates heaven and earth.[20]

[19] Fong, “Why Chinese Painting Is History” (pg. 261)
[20] Cheng, (pg. 64)

Light/Dark: The yin-yang play of natural forms

In the high contrast image of *Scholar* on the left, I have superimposed the Taiji diagram of yin-yang to highlight the implicit interplay of light and dark. The curvature of the waterfall, the scholar is almost precisely inverted in the curve of the trunk of the pine and course of the stream around the rock in the foreground. The dark solid form of the brooding rock in helps to define a sheltered protected vantage point for the scholar's meditation upon the cascade below. It also defines a reversed upward sweep of the rocks on the other side of the stream that moves off into the infinite distance. These interlocking curvatures trace what could be several overlaid taiji. Another is defined by the curvature of the descending pine bow with its "iron line" craggy angularity directly contrasting the gentle wash of the cascade. The light colored cascade itself is defined as much by the dark shadow behind. We have seen already how the parallel use of light colors in the cascade as well as the robes of the scholar and servant has been invoked to suggest a spiritual parallel between the scholar and water/yin. The dark form of the rock in the central foreground is itself bordered by the emptiness of the mist above and beyond, the lightness of the rushing water, as well as the lightness and refinement of the scholar's robes. Even the boulders, anchored to the earth are surrounded by emptiness.

Line/Volume

One of the most striking formal characteristics of Scholar is the central, dominant position of the rock or boulder directly in the center of the foreground. It anchors the image in a formally disconcerting way. This may have been one of the elements that

raised eyebrows among the experts who were called in to vet the attribution. While I would argue that other examples of Ma Yüan's work can be found in the Cleveland Museum's collection and elsewhere that are also not truly "one-corner Ma," this weighted volume in the central foreground is a curious formal choice for one so dedicated to portraying emptiness and distance. The rock almost appears as the central character, the defining form, eclipsing the space in the distance as well as the human figures. This is unusual. As a sign, it can be read as symbol of protection, anchoring the man-made wall that protects the scholar from slipping over the precipice – or perhaps as a part of the landscape that must be accommodated and made use of while all the while, the water crashes against it, wearing it down in time. Even in its mass, defined by the black ink, there is still light and emptiness in the most immediate foreground.

The mass of the rock and constructed wall/fence along the cascade is contrasted with the "iron lines" of the descending pine branch and the detailed articulation of its needles. These are carefully rendered with the minutest brushstrokes, and they help to create another binary unity-in-opposition when paired with the volumetric techniques of ink wash. The lines of the branches refer back to painting's origins in calligraphy, and accord the work with Ma Yüan's own particular mark.

> According to the fifth-century scholar Yan Yanzhi (384-456), there were three kinds of signs: the magical hexagrams of the Yijing (The Book of Changes), which represented nature's principles (tuli); the written ideographs, which represented concepts (tushi); and pictorial representation, which depicted nature's forms (tuxing). Rather than color or light, the key to Chinese painting lies in its calligraphic line, which bears the presence, or physical "trace" (ii), of its maker.[21]

Enclosed/Open

The scholar and servant are visiting a park, quite likely West Lake in Hangzhou, the capital city of the Southern Song dynasty and renowned for its verdant parks, gardens, and walks. The fencing, built into the foreground boulder along the cascade, defines the

[21] Fong, "Why Chinese Painting Is History" (pg. 259)

area as cultivated and tended to by humans. This same fencing creates a line of demarcation between the human world and the misted, wildness beyond the cascade. It is this wildness – Nature – that the scholar looks upon. It may be my own limited, Western point of view, but the structure of the fence in the immediate foreground reminds me of the Great Wall. The signification of fencing of any kind is that of borders, limits that can protect but ones that also contain, define, and hold back. This may have been a statement about the condition of exile of the Southern Song. An elderly scholar may have been old enough to remember the North and the Jurchen invasion that brought the Imperial Court to Hangzhou. As beautiful as the well-tended gardens were, they may have created a nostalgic longing for the wildness and power of the high mountains of the North. Yet the emptiness is there, nonetheless, as present in a garden as in the most remote mountainous regions.

Natural/Cultivated

This binary unit is similar to Enclosed/Open, however it includes the presence and labor of human beings paired with the wildness of the natural world. The fencing and cascade wall, as well as the presence of the servant holding the staff are signs of the constancy and attention of human beings within the landscape. Yet even within the garden, the force of nature (water, rock, ferns, pine, roots) as any gardener knows, is pervasive, constant. The yin of earth contains the yang of heaven. Humans and what we do in the world are just a part of it.

Master/Servant

We come full circle to the Marxist critique of the painting. The difference here is that Marxism sees an irresolvable contradiction between Master/Servant that can only be resolved through conflict. Marxist theory locates this relation within a feudal mode of production that was to be eclipsed later in the Chinese Revolution through class struggle. Servants, peasants, and workers realized their own subjectivity in overthrowing this system and its ancient, oppressive bonds of caste, class and gender subjugation.

The neo-Confucians of the Southern Song era understood a much different sign in the

relation between the scholar and servant/attendant. They understood the yin/yang relation of the attendant, who exists for the scholar/official, and as such is participating in the flow of the Tao. The question of the servant's own realized subjectivity is irrelevant. The scholar/official, in turn may not have been able to reach this place of contemplation without the attendant, as suggested by the apparent age of the scholar and the staff held in the servant's hands. They are part of binary that leads to participation in the Tao – as individuals, but also as a unit. Each required the presence of the other. This ideological framework obviously reifies the existing class relation, freezing them and justifying them as immutable manifestations of "the Way."

As we have seen, hidden within the semiology of the painting are at least two other Master/Servant binaries that would have been implicitly read by viewers in the Southern Song: Emperor/official, Emperor/painter. If this had been product of one of students of Ma Yüan at the Imperial Painting Academy as some contemporary experts suspect, the binary of Master-teacher/servant-student would also have been extant.

Conclusion: The yin-yang of analytical frameworks?

Making use of both Marxist and Structuralist paradigms has been fruitful and illuminating in examining this small landscape painting from the Southern Song era of China. Through these approaches we have been able to approach the work from both the perspective of the painter and viewer within the late 12th and early 13th century in China (as best as current scholarship permits us) as well as from the macro-historical perspective afforded by contemporary Marxist analyses. Making use of a materialist critique to examine a fundamentally metaphysical worldview such as Taoism would seem to be fraught with contradiction. It could be claimed (and has been quite specifically in some quarters) that Marxism is in no way suited to the task. It is like using scientific methods to analyze the miracle of Christ walking on water. You are either operating within the ideological framework, and accept its premises, or you are outside of it, describing its apparent structure from the point of view of another paradigm. For the purposes of grasping the complexity of this art object and all of its embedded signs and assumptions, I do agree that a purely Marxist analysis is insufficient. Understanding the

complex sociological language of the work is not possible, I believe, without an immersion in the language itself to approximate the perception of the intended reader. Perhaps this is similar to the theater's construct of "the willing suspension of disbelief." Thinking and reading like a Taoist Chinese for a short time can actually deliver a more thorough and profound comprehension of the ideological framework that any self-respecting 21st century Marxist would want to criticize.

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