

Rising Clouds at Water's Edge:  
Clouds and Mist in the Chinese Imagination

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Bachelor of Arts, University of Virginia, 2019

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

Department of East Asian Studies

University of Virginia

May 2021

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## Introduction

The amorphous forms of clouds and mist have long been mainstays within the human imagination. On the most basic level, clouds, as formations of condensed water vapor, precede the coming of rain. With rainfall, crops are nurtured and the foundations of agricultural societies are formed. Such a fundamental connection to the early beginnings of human civilization makes the depiction of clouds within art history suitable for multiple interpretations. In China, the various associations are just as evident, with cloud designs found on artworks from as early as the Eastern Zhou 東周 dynasty (770-256 BCE). The scope of this thesis will primarily be centered around the association of clouds from early Chinese art, the culmination of their depiction within the Chinese landscape painting tradition during the Northern Song 北宋 dynasty (960-1127), and the expansion into new subjects and mediums in the dynasties thereafter.

Early Chinese conceptions of clouds were often viewed under a ritual or liturgical lens. Auspicious clouds were often associated with the presence of deities and the coming of good fortune. On the other hand, the physical characteristics of clouds—their wispy, vaporous nature—drew parallels with the Daoist concept of *qi* 氣 and the cosmological forces at work. This grander vision of clouds and their relation to sky and cosmos above appears to shrink in scope when examining landscape paintings that, while initially displaying similar associations, begin to take on more humanistic, agency-oriented elements. One particular explanation for such a change can be found within the emergence of literati art theory and its emphasis on the particular personal qualities of its scholar-official practitioners.

## Chapter 1: Clouds and *Qi* in Chinese Cosmology

Wang Wei 王維 (701-761), the Tang 唐 dynasty (618-907) musician, poet, and painter, was well known for his poetry that oftentimes demonstrated an impartial, all-encompassing view of rural life and proximity to nature—a stylistic choice that may have been inspired by his Buddhist background. When considering his outlook, it is worth examining an excerpt from one of his poems where clouds are an explicit focus.

Middle age—I grow somewhat fond of the Way,  
my evening home at the foot of the southern hills.  
  
When moods come I follow them alone,  
to no purpose learning fine things for myself,  
  
going till I come to where the river ends,  
sitting and watching when clouds rise up.<sup>1</sup>

Writing on time spent at his Zhongnan 終南 mountain retreat in Shaanxi, Wang Wei cites his fondness for Buddhism as the motivating factor behind his stay. His rustic lifestyle is punctuated by a yearning for solitude and isolation from worldly affairs—something that he fulfills by idly sitting to watch the clouds rise. Apart from Wang Wei's motivations,

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<sup>1</sup> 中歲頗好道，晚家南山陲。興來每獨往，勝事空自知。行到水窮處，坐看雲起時。Wang Wei 王維 (701-761), *An Album of Wang Wei*, 14. Translation from Burton Watson, *The Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry: From Early Times to the Thirteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 202.

the final two lines of the excerpt paint a relevant image. Taken at face value, one may surmise that Wang was simply describing his act of strolling along the river until he reached its end. Once he no longer had a river to follow, he instead cast his eyes skyward to watch the rising clouds. Another interpretation might be that, in positioning the two lines together, Wang is implying a conjoining of the heavens above and the earth below. Once he reached the water's edge, he found the rising clouds, an intermediary element that separated the river below and the skies above. Regardless of which interpretation one chooses, there is nevertheless a connection made between the waters of the river and the vapors of the clouds.

Clouds and their relationship to the earth and sky have somewhat of an established place within the Chinese imagination. In particular, the concept that the sky and cosmos were connected to the terrestrial rivers could be found in a variety of historical literary sources. One of the earliest instances can be found in the *Shijing* 詩經 or *Book of Songs* where the sky or Milky Way is described as the “Han River in the clouds.”<sup>2</sup> The major Chinese rivers of the Yellow and the Han, a tributary of the Yangzi River, were often mentioned alongside a set of specific adjectives—“heavenly”, “cloudy”, “starry”, “silver”—in order to refer to the river in the sky. The sole mention of the Han River in the *Shijing* may have been due to its clear and sparkling qualities—a contrast to the oftentimes muddy Yellow River.<sup>3</sup> However, the Yellow River as a sky river has also been a source of reference within Chinese poems—as notably stated in Tang poet Li Bai's 李白 (701-762) “Bring the Wine.”

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<sup>2</sup> *Book of Songs*, trans. Arthur Waley (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 270.

<sup>3</sup> Edward H. Schafer, “The Sky River,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 94, no. 4 (1974): 403.

Have you never seen  
the Yellow River waters descending from the sky,  
racing restless toward the ocean, never to return?<sup>4</sup>

In referencing the ceaseless, unidirectional flow of the Yellow River, Li Bai aimed to create a parallel with the passage of time and evoke the experience of helplessly growing old; however, his mention of the water's descent from the sky seems to imply that the origin of the Yellow River itself was from the sky. In other words, the river existed in both the terrestrial and heavenly realms, serving as a source of connection between the two. Since the time of the Han 漢 dynasty (202 BCE-220), a general understanding of the sky river was that it was aqueous in nature and created by a mysterious emanation from China's earthly rivers. The virtues of the rivers were said to spread their quintessence in the form of a primordial breath—a nebulous vapor drifting upwards from the terrestrial rivers to form the celestial bodies within the river in the sky.<sup>5</sup> The movement of an upward drifting vapor is very reminiscent of the physical formation of clouds from water. From the earlier mention of how the sky river could be described as “cloudy,” it is certainly tenable to place clouds at the nexus of the celestial formation. To further reinforce this, however, it is important to further examine the wider cosmological associations found in the nature of clouds.

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<sup>4</sup> 君不見黃河之水天上來，奔流到海不復回。Li Bai 李白(701-762), *Li Bai Shi* 李白詩. (Taipei: Taiwan shang wu yin shu guan, 1964), 15. Translation adapted from Watson, *Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry*, 207.

<sup>5</sup> Schafer, “The Sky River,” 403.

When imagining the shape of clouds, the first image to come to mind might be the stereotypical cumulus cloud. Large and dense, the cloud is often recognizable from its well-defined contours. However, under its seemingly solid surface is a multitude of dynamic and cyclical processes. Hot, moist air rises upward in columns before reaching the cool surface and rounding off, forming the nodules of contoured clumps seen on a cloud. These are not the only form clouds can take, however, as jet stream clouds—clouds that appear as thin streaks across the sky—take on distinctly different shapes and motions.

In his study on the Chinese implementation of cloud motifs during the Han dynasty, Martin Powers broke down the flow of jet stream clouds into two distinct motions—laminar and turbulent.<sup>6</sup> The difference between the two motions can be best demonstrated by using the stream of water from a faucet as a model. Laminarity is observed when the faucet handle is partially turned, allowing for a steady, even stream of water to flow out. In contrast, turbulence is when the handle is turned entirely, releasing a more sinuous, uncontrolled stream. A cloud being carried by an air stream acts in very much the same manner. Long narrow streamers are carried across the sky in a smooth, laminar manner while the bulk of the cloud, in response to air resistance, forms turbulent eddies.

While there is no concrete evidence as to whether the Han Chinese understood the physical behaviors of clouds to such a detailed extent, it is undeniable that contemporary cloud designs from the period adopted a convention that exhibits an understanding of the

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<sup>6</sup> Martin J. Powers, *Pattern and Person: Ornament, Society, and Self in Classical China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006), 235.

laminar-turbulent relationship previously described. One notable example can be found in the black ground lacquer coffin (Fig. 1) of Xin Zhui 辛追 (ca. 170 BCE), also known as the Marquise of Dai 軫, discovered in Mawangdui 馬王堆. The Marquise had been an aristocrat of the Changsha 長沙 kingdom, and her casket had been discovered remarkably well-preserved within her pit-style tomb. The style of burial is reminiscent of burial sites dating to the Eastern Zhou dynasty, particularly of the Chu 楚 culture from whom the Changsha kingdom had descended, and was stored with a variety of items ranging from Chu-styled lacquerware, wooden figurines, and even the remnants of food and utensils. Perhaps one of the most important finds—aside from the coffin and its well-preserved inhabitant—was a painted T-shaped silk banner (Fig. 2) depicting a cosmological map of the afterlife, which gave insight into the Chu-influenced conception of death at the time.<sup>7</sup>

The casket in question is one of four that protected the body of Marquise Dai, and a closer examination of its left-side veneer (Fig. 3) reveals that it is covered extensively by a network of meandering cloud designs. The swirling clouds appear to flow freely, splitting into different streams and at times oscillating while also being divided into two main registers by an invisible horizontal line. With knowledge of their physical properties, a convincing argument can be made that these cloud patterns specifically depict jet stream clouds. Long streams of twisting vapor are periodically broken up by clusters of air clumps—a dynamic very much similar to the turbulent and laminar

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<sup>7</sup> Michèle Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens, *The Han Dynasty* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications: 1982), 57.



qualities previously described where vortices may periodically form due to the interactions of mass and air resistance.

If the casket's cloud designs were indeed a reflection of the actual observation of clouds by the artisans who designed them, the question still remains: why clouds? To propose an answer, some background discussion on Chinese cosmological perceptions of the afterlife is required. An important death ritual in Han China during Marquise Dai's time was known as *fu* 復 or "the summons of the soul." Performed on the newly deceased by a summoner who faced the north, calling out the name of the deceased and inviting them to come back, the ritual was predicated on the Chinese concepts of two souls—the *hun* 魂 soul and the *po* 魄 soul.<sup>8</sup> It was believed that when a person had died, their *hun* soul would leave their body while the *po* soul would remain. Any potential revival of the deceased would require a reunification of the two separated souls.

The *fu* ritual's attempt at reuniting the *hun* and *po* souls in order to revive the recently deceased is important when taking into consideration a wider concern at the time regarding the search for immortality. The concept of immortality and the belief in immortals were particularly popular in southern cultures like the Chu culture, with texts from the south like the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (4<sup>th</sup> century BCE) making references to divine men living atop mountains and sustaining themselves with only dew and wind.<sup>9</sup> Belief in the existence of such men and the possibility of joining them in their unending longevity at their heavenly abodes was no doubt of particular interest to the aristocratic and imperial

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<sup>8</sup> Yü Ying-Shih, "'O Soul, Come Back!' A Study in the Changing Conceptions of the Soul and Afterlife in Pre-Buddhist China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 47, no. 2 (1987): 365.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 386.

figures of the time. The silk banner in the tomb of Marquise Dai is indicative of this, as it depicts not only the concept of the two souls, but also the *hun* soul's skyward ascent to the realm of the immortals.

From a general overview, the bottom portion of the banner depicts a rising platform with a central figure—likely Marquise Dai and, by extension, her rising *hun* soul. While a visual indicator of the previously mentioned *po* soul is not present, it is worth mentioning that in some beliefs around the behavior of the souls, the *po* soul was seen as the soul that would remain in the body before descending into the watery underworld of the Chinese afterlife known as the Yellow Springs 黄泉. A look at the bottom portion of the banner reveals two intertwined fish that could very well suggest the Yellow Springs. As a result, the overall purpose of the banner can be viewed as depicting the journey of Marquise Dai's *hun* soul skywards to join the realm of immortals and deities, while her *po* soul potentially descends into the waters of the Yellow Springs.

In considering the concept of immortals and their heavenly abode, it might be best to take another look at the black lacquer casket which reveals tiny figures scattered among the drifting clouds. Numerous in number, they can take the form of humans, goats, birds, and more. Almost all of them are positioned atop the swirling patterns, as if they are riding the cloud streams. This effect is not only created spatially, but also by the specific posture of the figures. For instance, a humanoid—likely an immortal—dancing atop a cloud (Fig. 4) is depicted with long sashes hanging from each lifted arm and one leg raised. If each limb had been created with the stroke of a brush, each stroke could be seen as swerving in different directions. The immortal's arms slope upward, connected to

his downward-arching torso which in turn flows into his bidirectional legs. Even the sashes hanging off his arms appear to have their own flow, drifting outward and away from the immortal's body. Powers noted that "so perfect is the structural conformity of the spirits that, from any distance, they change identity entirely, appearing as nothing more than a puff of cloud in the turbulent flow."<sup>10</sup> In other words, the basic structure of the figures was so similar to the motion of the clouds that they could often be mistaken from afar for wisps of clouds themselves.

The notion of figures blending in with the clouds is notable as it might suggest that the two essentially are derived from the same essence. When considering the ties to a cosmological context, the essence in question could certainly be *qi*—the life force that populates the universe. Literally translated as "breath," "gas," or "vapor," *qi* is often defined in Chinese cosmology as a vital energy—an essential matter of the universe. The overarching view of Chinese cosmology, rather than focusing on the binary Western scientific view of matter and spirit, concerns itself primarily with the interaction and interrelation of processes and patterns. The opposing signs of *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 were seen as the fundamental forces that, through their dynamic alternation and union, brought about all things in the universe. The cyclic categories of the Five Elements (water, wood, fire, earth, metal) were also agents within this process, and, as a result, all phenomena under Chinese cosmology could be defined as expressing one of the Five Elements under

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<sup>10</sup> Powers, *Pattern and Person*, 241.

the categories of *yin* 陰 or *yang* 陽. Underlying all of these interconnected processes is the flow of *qi*.<sup>11</sup>

Taking into account *qi*'s literal translation as “gas” or “vapor,” one immediate conclusion drawn could be that the clouds themselves are manifestations of *qi*. This argument certainly isn't without precedent, but the connection is made even more explicit in the Chinese view toward an associated element: wind. Drawing from the earlier discussion of jet stream clouds, it is already evident that clouds owe much of their qualities to the winds. It is the gusts of wind that propel the vaporous masses—bringing about the laminar streamers and turbulent vortices so inherently understood and depicted on the lacquer casket. Shigehisa Kuriyama, in his study on the imagination of winds in China, notes that wind had often been perceived as a conceptual ancestor of *qi*. Winds were broadly separated into two categories: the timely winds that blew in the right direction at the right time with the changing of the seasons and the irregular, “evil” winds that disrupted regularity. While the latter was incorporated into classical medicinal practice as a cause for illnesses, the former was subsumed into the notion of *qi*.<sup>12</sup> With all this in mind, it can be stated with relative certainty that the visual depiction of clouds themselves were representations of *qi*. The physical manipulation of cloud mass by wind is one of the primary ways in which wind can be depicted in forms perceivable to the human eye.

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<sup>11</sup> Palmer, “The Body: Health, Nation, and Transcendence,” in *Chinese Religious Life*, eds. David A. Palmer, Glenn Shive, and Philip L. Wickeri (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2011), 99.

<sup>12</sup> Shigehisa Kuriyama, “The Imagination of Winds and the Development of the Chinese Conception of the Body,” in *Body, Subject, and Power in China*, eds. Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 35.

With the connection between clouds and *qi* established, attention can be directed to the humanoid immortals within the casket designs that appear to take on cloud-like qualities. *Qi* is the essential matter that flows through everything within the universe, including living organisms. The human body in particular was conceived as a microcosm of the universe, interconnected with the various forces constantly at work.<sup>13</sup> As the primary characteristic of *qi* is to flow and circulate, disruption to that process is often seen as the cause of illness and misfortune. As a result, Chinese practices around wellbeing often involved the manipulation of *qi* for one's own benefit—something that can even be observed today with the practice of *qigong* 氣功 or breath exercises.

The manipulation of *qi* in early China had been seen as the means by which one could become an immortal. It was also intrinsically linked with other general beliefs of immortality cults. The concept of immortality had been viewed as being tantamount to a spiritual freedom that was closely related to the flow of *qi*. This spiritual freedom is analogous with the freeing of the *hun* soul from its mortal body and its ascent to the heavens, which theoretically can be seen as a physical transformation into a heavenly, upward-flowing ethereal *qi*.<sup>14</sup> Under this framework, the notion of *qi* as the essence that constitutes immortals can be seen as informing the visual motivations of the lacquer cloud designs—the deceased, by invoking the essence shared with the immortals, had hoped that she too would be able to join them.

The human body's interconnection to *qi* is something that is also reinforced by a preceding relationship between humans and wind. Kuriyama argues that the Chinese

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<sup>13</sup> Palmer, "The Body," 99.

<sup>14</sup> Ying-Shih, "'O Soul, Come Back!'," 386-387.

perception of self was in fact deeply rooted in the environment from which humans came. When examining wind under such a framework, “the self is itself wind-like.”<sup>15</sup> The philosopher Zhuangzi illustrates this concept well when, after vividly describing wind from the earth rustling through the trees as a chorus of sounds, he provides the following response:

Pleasure and anger, sorrow and joy, anxiety and regret, fickleness and fear, impulsiveness and extravagance, indulgence and lewdness, come to us like music from the hollows or like mushrooms from damp. Day and night they alternate within us but we don’t know where they come from...

Without [the feelings mentioned above] there would not be I. And without me who will experience them? They are right nearby. But we don’t know who causes them.<sup>16</sup>

Zhuangzi compares the nature of his numerous emotions to “the music from the hollows”—the sound of wind as it blows through the orifices of trees. To him, the unfathomable origins of human emotions and impulses are as mysterious as the origin of winds. In turn, the multitude of human personalities could be akin to the winds of varying regions and seasons—providing one avenue from which notions of humans being composed of *qi* could have arisen and subsequently put into visual practice.

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<sup>15</sup> Kuriyama, “The Imagination of Winds,” 33.

<sup>16</sup> 喜怒哀樂，慮嘆變熱，姚佚啟態；樂出虛，蒸成菌。日夜相代乎前，而莫知其所萌。已乎已乎！旦暮得此，其所由以生乎！ *Zhuangzi Yinde* (A Concordance to Chuang Tzu), Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, Supplement no. 20 (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1956), 4. Translation from Burt Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 36-37.

Zhuangzi's views on nature and humans stemmed largely from his background in Daoism—a philosophy that was also very much related to *qi*. In Daoism, the *dao* 道 or “the Way” was the cosmic principle that served as the makeup of the universe and the central pillar around which all Daoist thought on practice and governance revolved. Its makeup within the Chinese cosmological view of the universe is as a “matter-energy” that manifested itself as *qi*.<sup>17</sup> In other words, if *dao* is the “whole,” *qi* is the partial extension of that whole.

When specifying and describing the nature of *dao*, opinions can often be greatly divided. Instead, the optimal approach is likely through noting particular elements attributed to *dao*. By examining early Chinese texts on cosmology, Powers argued that the properties of *dao* detailed within the texts could have been derived from close observations of the behavior of water.<sup>18</sup> Citing a passage from the first chapter of the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, a Han collection of writings on Daoist and Confucianist concepts, he directs attention to how the *dao* had been compared to the dynamic flow of water from springs and fountainheads. When observing the physical behavior of water, a significant characteristic is water's ability to seamlessly change between calm and agitated states. This reiterates the previously mentioned quality of transitioning between laminarity and turbulence—a characteristic not only attached to water and clouds but also to *dao*'s formless state of inconstance within a repeated, closed system. In being perceived as a visual representation of *qi*, clouds, by extension, were also representations of *dao*.

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<sup>17</sup> Wei-Ming Tu, “The Continuity of Being: Chinese Visions of Nature,” in *Natures in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, eds. J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 68.

<sup>18</sup> Powers, *Pattern and Person*, 254.

If it appears unconvincing that the black casket of Marquise Dai can hold such overarching cosmological and philosophical significance, one need only to examine other similar depictions of clouds during the period—also likely influenced by the lacquers of the earlier Chu culture—such as the thin cloud designs of a first century BCE lacquer tray from Huchang 胡場 (Fig. 5), to discover a similar schema. Once again, the depicted clouds take on a fluid shape, transforming between thin streaks and cumulous masses. At the same time, a significant commonality can be found in how the cloud designs on both the casket and the tray display a rhythmic motion that appears both at once random and patterned. When viewing only a portion of the space, some pattern of movement may be perceived; but when viewed in their entirety, the designs are whimsical and centerless.

The centerless nature of the designs resembles Zhuangzi's earlier ruminations on the mysterious origin of wind and, by extension, human emotions. The absence of any external cause for the motion of clouds and the addition of figures within who emerge from and resonate with the flow may be in reference to the Daoist concept of *ziran* 自然.<sup>19</sup> Roughly translated as “self-generated,” *ziran* referred to how creatures were naturally produced by the *dao* and informed thought and behavior that emphasized detachment and a closer relationship with nature. While such an interpretation may welcome skepticism around just how artisans of the period could be fully cognizant of and apply Daoist theories to their works, Powers instead offers a suggestion that the connection between the theory and art of clouds was not a one-way street where the former informed the latter. What the philosophers noticed within the clouds could very

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<sup>19</sup> Powers, *Pattern and Person*, 266.



well have been molded by the schema of culturally constructed “clouds” created by artisans.<sup>20</sup>

Regardless of how the previously examined excerpt from Wang Wei’s poem is interpreted, it serves as a vivid, fitting image of just how clouds were viewed in the early Chinese imagination from a cosmological standpoint. Wang’s vision of life at a mountain retreat is described in earnest, simple terms and the very same can be said for his view of the rising clouds. On a fundamental level, clouds were an intermediary element, connecting the heavens with the earth. Physically, this can entail the water cycle and the movement of water skywards in the form of vapor. This movement, however, also informed their spiritual and philosophical functions as clouds could be depicted as a visual manifestation of the universe’s fundamental makeup—*qi* and *dao*. The “primordial breath” mentioned in conjunction with the formation of the river in the sky could very well have been in reference to *qi* and clouds themselves—cementing the notion that in a grand universal order, clouds are an ever-shifting, ever-present component.

## **Chapter 2: Auspicious Clouds: The Presence of the Divine**

When examining the traditional Chinese character for “clouds,” *yun* 雲, it is notable to point out that the character is a composite of rain (*yu* 雨) on top and a recoiling shape of clouds on the bottom that serves as the simplified writing of *yun* today. This graphical relation in the Chinese language between rain and clouds reflects the particular high

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 268.

regard in which clouds were held. As noted in the beginning, clouds are often associated with the rain cycle, an essential building block of human civilization. Because rainfall is what sustains crops and precedes a bountiful harvest, it would not come as a surprise for clouds to be viewed as a sign of good fortune to come. In China, the felicitous nature of clouds even led to concerted practices of raising or assembling clouds—an action achieved through the likes of meditation, ritual dances, presentation of talismans, and banner waving.<sup>21</sup> The positive associations around clouds extended beyond their functional qualities and entered the religious, ritualistic and literary domains—a quality that was factored into the artistic productions of censures, wall murals, and more. At the same time, references to clouds also found associations with the political sphere, serving as signs of legitimization for an emperor’s reign.

Foremost among the positive associations was the concept of the *xiangyun* 祥雲 or “auspicious cloud”—a cloud or group of clouds that not only signaled good fortune, but also found close association with Chinese immortals and their isles of residence. One early historical account of the sighting of an “auspicious cloud” can be found within the *Shi ji* 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian), completed by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145-86 BCE) around the first century BCE, that provides context for the auspicious cloud’s significance.

“A man of Zhao named Xinyuan Ping, appearing before the emperor to report an unusual cloud formation he had seen, asserted that in the sky

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<sup>21</sup> Florian C. Reiter, “‘Auspicious Clouds,’ an inspiring phenomenon of common interest in traditional China,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 141, no. 1 (1991): 117.

northeast of Chang'an a supernatural emanation had appeared, made of five colors and shaped like a man's hat."

"The northeast is the dwelling place of the spirits," suggested someone else, "and the western region is where they have their graves. Now, since Heaven has sent down this auspicious sign, it is right that places of worship should be set up to offer sacrifices to the Lord on High in answer to his omen."<sup>22</sup>

The sighting of the five-colored cloud finds its context in a wider discussion on auspicious signs or *xiangrui* 祥瑞. As phenomena that the Chinese people of the Han dynasty interpreted as expressions of the will of Heaven, the concept of *xiangrui* can be traced back to Eastern Zhou beliefs in how eclipses and big gusts of wind could be considered a sign of Heaven's dissatisfaction.<sup>23</sup> *Xiangrui* were especially popular during the reign of the Han emperors as their existence served as an indicator of the Mandate of Heaven or *tianming* 天命—a will from the Heavens that granted emperors their sovereign roles. To have the Mandate of Heaven provided political legitimacy and also created a specific court rhetoric around *xiangrui*. When an emperor wanted to communicate to his subjects that the realm was prosperous and in order, he would issue an edict announcing

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<sup>22</sup> 其明年，趙人新垣平以望氣見上，言「長安東北有神氣，成五采，若人冠纓焉。或曰東北神明之舍。西方神明之墓也。天瑞下，宜立祠上帝，以合符應」。Sima, Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145-86 BCE). *Shi ji* 史記 (reprinted as *Xinjiao ben Shiji sanjia zhu bing fubian erzhong* 新校本史記三家注並附編二種), annotated by Pei Yin 裴駟 (act. mid fifth century), fasc. 28. (Taipei: Dingwen shuju, 1981), 1365.

Translation adapted from Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian*, trans. Burt Watson, 22.

<sup>23</sup> Wu Hung, "A Sanpan Shan Chariot Ornament and the Xiangrui Design in Western Han Art," *Archives of Asian Art* 37 (1984): 39.

the sighting of a specific *xiangrui*. Conversely, if the emperor was not fulfilling his proper duties, references to earthquakes and other phenomena would serve as criticism.<sup>24</sup>

As cumulous bodies in the sky that displayed a clear proximity to Heaven, clouds served an important role as *xiangrui*. Their sighting within the *Shi ji* excerpt elicits an immediate response of sacrifices to not only please the will of Heaven but also likely further legitimize the emperor's reign. So important were these signs that a practice of "vapor watching" became popular and played a great part in influencing the actions of the emperors.<sup>25</sup> The excerpt serves as one example among numerous other Chinese literary sources that included a similar mention of "auspicious" or "radiant" clouds. A comprehensive look at the usage of such clouds within literary sources up to the Han dynasty are compiled and translated by Florian C. Reiter. One of his particular translations from the treatise on astronomy within the *Shi ji* is also worth inclusion here as it refers to the exact nature of an "auspicious cloud."

They resemble smoke and yet are not smoke. They resemble clouds and yet are not clouds, elegant and numerous, chilly and lonely, drifting and twisting. This is called 'auspicious clouds.' When auspicious clouds become visible, these are excellent breaths."<sup>26</sup>

The excerpt from the *Shi ji*'s treatise on astronomy makes the explicit distinction between the clouds one normally sees in the sky and "auspicious clouds." By noting that they

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 44-45.

<sup>25</sup> Reiter, "Auspicious Clouds," 116.

<sup>26</sup> 若煙非煙，若雲非雲，郁郁紛紛，蕭索輪囷，是謂卿雲。卿雲 [見]，喜氣也。Sima, Qian. *Shi ji* 史記, annotated by Pei Yin 裴駟 (act. mid fifth century), fasc. 27. (Taipei: Dingwen shuju, 1981), 1339. Translation adapted from Reiter, "Auspicious Clouds," 124.

resembled clouds yet were not clouds, the description displays a certain ambiguity; however, the closing mention of a “drifting” quality and “excellent breaths” certainly recalls notions of *qi* and their flow throughout the universe.

Reiter’s conclusive thoughts from his literary survey place emphasis on the general associations of auspicious clouds. While he makes the point of mentioning that clouds were noticeably absent from certain monographies that categorized various phenomena, the likelihood was that auspicious clouds were simply too rare of a phenomenon to be placed definitively within an interpretive system.<sup>27</sup> However, it was precisely their rarity and cosmological associations that likely informed their ties with divine forces—a relationship that would spark the imagination and cause auspicious clouds to become a staple to be found within Chinese cultural products.

Apart from their role in the governmental and ritualistic affairs of the imperial court, clouds also found their place within Buddhist and Daoist practice, accompanying depictions of mystical islands or mountains. Such religious depictions often find close association with the later practice of landscape painting; however, early depictions took the form of three-dimensional art. In his essay on the topic, Lothar Ledderose traces the early examples of landscape depictions through three-dimensional media such as imperial paradise gardens to shine light on their religious significance. The most relevant of his examples involved discussions around Chinese incense burners or *boshanlu* 博山爐—mountain-shaped censers that made use of incense smoke to depict clouds and mist.

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<sup>27</sup> Reiter, “Auspicious Clouds,” 128.

To preface discussion around the *boshanlu*, it is first important to examine the history and imperial motivations for three-dimensional landscapes—particularly in a garden setting. As early as the Han dynasty in the early first century BCE, an imperial park had been expanded under the rule of Emperor Wu 武 (157 BCE-87 BCE) who populated it with a range of plants and animals from the corners of the world. The intended effect was to create a microcosm of the universe—a political demonstration of the emperor’s sovereignty based on a magical belief that creating an artificial replica of something would grant someone power over the real object.<sup>28</sup> Emperor Wu’s microcosmic park also finds a precedent in descriptions of Qin Shi Huang’s 秦始皇 (259 BCE-210 BCE) tomb, which is said to contain models of his palaces in a space occupied by flowing rivers of mercury and constellations on ceiling—a microcosm of the universe to emphasize his rule over all.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to his imperial park, Emperor Wu was also well-known for ordering the construction of a garden featuring the islands of the immortals at his Jianzhang palace. Generally given names such as Penglai 蓬萊, Fangzhang 方丈, and Yingzhou 瀛州; the islands were believed to be landmasses that arose out of the eastern sea, appearing as mountains that looked like clouds from afar. The mythical islands, sometimes described as being carried on the back of a turtle, were said to be populated by immortals—the same as those previously mentioned within the immortality cults that

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<sup>28</sup> Lothar Ledderose, “The Earthly Paradise: Religious Elements in Chinese Landscape Art,” in *Theories of the Arts in China*, eds. Susan Bush and Christian F. Murck (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983): 166.

<sup>29</sup> Wu Hung, *The Art of the Yellow Springs: Understanding Chinese Tombs* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2010), 18-20.

found their roots in the Eastern Zhou dynasty. Emperor Wu's park would become the earliest example of the archetypal paradise garden. Gardens that followed Emperor Wu's paradise garden often followed the same basic structure. A hole is dug and filled with water while a mound is created to represent a mountain. Much like how the earlier mentioned imperial park granted a magical sovereignty over the universe to the emperor by extension of its microcosmic aspects, the replicas of islands like Penglai served as a substitute for ritual practice. Whereas the emperor once had to travel to the coast in order to perform ritual sacrifices to the immortals, he could now perform the sacrifices within his gardens in hopes of welcoming them to his "islands."<sup>30</sup>

The cloud-like appearances of islands such as Penglai highlight their liminal qualities. One might easily imagine a sailor out at sea gazing into the misty horizon only to catch a glance of low, distant cloud formations that, in their occupation of the boundary between sea and sky, appear as cloud-like islands rising out of the ocean. It is because of the obscuring, hazy nature of clouds and mist that the islands of the immortals, barely perceptible to the human eye, took on liminal qualities. This cloudy aspect of the islands of the immortals becomes a primary concern in the production of *boshanlu* incense burners—the earliest examples of entirely artificial three-dimensional landscape depictions—and is perhaps best represented by a Han *boshanlu* from the second century BCE (Fig. 6) excavated from the tomb of Prince Liu Sheng 劉勝 at Mancheng 滿城.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ledderose, "The Earthly Paradise," 169.

<sup>31</sup> Susan N. Erickson, "Boshanlu: Mountain Censers of the Western Han Period: A Typological and Iconological Census," *Archives of Asian Art* 45 (1992): 7.

An initial look at the gilt-bronze censer reveals that it can essentially be separated into two primary parts—the bottom chalice-like vessel that is supported by a hollow stem and the upper lid or island portion that contains the bulk of the *boshanlu*'s shape and iconography. The spherical chalice is covered with inlaid gold and silver designs that seem to simulate the waves from which islands like Penglai emerged. The lid represented the island itself, with sharp hills and ravines that give the island a flame-like appearance. A closer look (Fig. 6.a) at the topography also reveals the presence of tiny humanoid and zoomorphic figures that likely referenced the island's immortal inhabitants.

While the finger-like, mountainous protrusions at the top of the lid are perhaps the most visually striking element to the censer, they hide numerous perforations that allow for smoke to escape once incense is lit within the vessel. It is also worth mentioning that the wave designs on the curvature of the chalice hold some structural similarities to the conventional *qi* cloud depictions discussed in the previous section. The inlay displays the same transitions between laminarity and turbulence with alternation between sinewy and clumpy forms; however, it can be argued that the similarity is simply a result of the laminar-turbulent relationship being a physical characteristic of streams of water before it was translated to the behavior of clouds. Nevertheless, the resulting effect of the incense being burned is a miniature floating island that appears to be engulfed in clouds and mist. While censers like this were deemed indispensable to religious ceremonies and clearly displayed associations with immortality rituals, their exact function is unknown. One conclusion is that the *boshanlu* censers may have aided in prayer and meditation. When seated in front of a burning *boshanlu*, a believer whose mind and vision are absorbed by the cloud-like smoke might be able to transport



themselves to the island of the immortals.<sup>32</sup> Another conclusion focuses on the mountainous peaks of the island. Tall mountains were often considered sacred, with their height emphasizing a connection to Heaven. The high peaks of the island may then serve as a miniature portal to Heaven, presenting a pathway for the spirit of the buried deceased to ascend.<sup>33</sup>

As with the earlier recorded accounts of auspicious clouds, the presence of clouds in paradise gardens and the microcosmic islands of immortals provide insight into how the clouds' associations could be formed based on their physical behavior. Their altitude up in the sky instantly suggests a close proximity to Heaven above and a presence of the immortal or divine, while their status as a drifting intermediary force—occupying both Heaven and earthly plane when viewed from afar—is likely one of the reasons islands of immortals were discovered in the first place. Even their misty, obscuring nature points to a hidden, magical quality that the *boshanlu* censors attempt to emulate.

So far, the discussion around clouds representing divine or otherworldly presence has been one that explores the associations with wider phenomenon such as *xiangrui* and the Daoist concept of immortals; however, associations with clouds also exist in a Buddhist context, with evidence of clouds and cloud imagery often found preceding important personages to indicate a profoundly spiritual occurrence.

The earliest evidence for the usage of clouds in association with Buddhist figures and deities can be found in cave murals at the Mogao 莫高 cave grottoes of Dunhuang 敦

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<sup>32</sup> Ledderose, “The Earthly Paradise,” 178.

<sup>33</sup> Erickson, “Boshanlu,” 20.

煌 in modern-day Gansu province. Dunhuang's location at the northwestern border of Chinese influence meant that it had been a major point of contact with the west via the Silk Road. Located at the intersection of a long history of trade and cultural exchange, a visual syncretism of traditional Chinese and Buddhist elements from the west can be found in the murals.

The paintings of one cave in particular are especially worth noting. Belonging to a group of Buddhist caves created during the Western Wei 西魏 period (535-557), Mogao cave 249 contains floor-to-ceiling painted depictions of bodhisattvas and other deities. Of particular interest is the pyramidal ceiling of the square-shaped cave that is covered in depictions of apsaras, Hindu and Buddhist cloud spirits (Figs. 7a and 7b). The depictions of apsaras in the cave are distinctive as they are generally divided into two types: flying figures wearing long robes with large sleeves and flying figures wearing silk scarves while bare-chested. The former serves as Chinese-styled depictions of apsaras while the latter are more Western-styled.<sup>34</sup> When taking into account the also-present depiction of the Buddhist cosmic mountain, Sumeru, and the addition of surrounding Chinese architecture and deities, one can see that the cave images represent a merging of Chinese indigenous religion and cosmology with foreign cultural imports.<sup>35</sup>

With the visual syncretism in mind, attention can also be paid to the motion of the apsaras. Their clothing and accoutrements are depicted as fluttering to convey a constant sense of their movement in flight, but there is nothing to suggest their place in

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<sup>34</sup> Wenbin Zhang, ed., *Dunhuang: A Centennial Commemoration of the Discovery of the Cave Library* (Beijing: Morning Glory publishers, 2000), 25.

<sup>35</sup> Satomi Hiyama, "Transmission of the "World": Sumeru Cosmology as seen in Central Asian Buddhist Paintings around 500 AD," *NTM Journal of the History of Science, Technology and Medicine* 28 (2020): 424.

the sky except for what appears to be small dots of color—usually blue, brown, or light gray. These dots of color can be found all over the murals and seem to emphasize a sense of motion; however, when some dots combine together, they form the distinctive shape of clouds that recall the *qi* cloud designs often seen in Chinese art. The apsaras are so intertwined with these *qi* cloud designs that they appear to be of the same essence, just like the figures depicted on the cloud designs of the lacquer casket.<sup>36</sup>

The association of clouds with spiritual occurrences under a Buddhist context would continue into later dynasties. One example is the “Songs of Mount Wutai,” manuscripts containing six poems likely performed as songs at the monasteries of Mount Wutai 五台山 in modern day Shanxi province. The collection of poems, theorized to have been composed sometime between the High Tang and Late Tang period (seventh to ninth centuries), consists of an introductory poem and poems detailing the experience of climbing atop each of the five terraces, glimpsing the divine phenomenon at each location.<sup>37</sup>

Most relevant to the topic of clouds is a line from the poem that refers to the central terrace. Climbing up to the terrace, the poet speaks of seeing “five-colored auspicious clouds [that] appear three times in one day.”<sup>38</sup> The “five-colored auspicious clouds” or *wuse xiangyun* 五色祥雲 were specifically symbolic of the five colors in Buddhism that signified a direction and ideal; however, they served as only one example

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<sup>36</sup> Phillip Emmanuel Bloom, “Descent of the Deities: The Water-Land Retreat and the Transformation of the Visual Culture of Song-Dynasty (960-1279) Buddhism” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2013), 286.

<sup>37</sup> *Wutai* 五台 translates into “five terraces” and refers to the five terraces of the monasteries.

<sup>38</sup> Mary Anne Cartelli, *The Five-colored Clouds of Mount Wutai: Poems from Dunhuang* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 75.

of sacred cloud associations at Mount Wutai. Other records provide evidence for spotting “nimbi” or *yuanguang* 圓光, radiant clouds that were often closely associated with the presence of the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī 文殊, one of the central Buddhist figures that appeared to monks who made the climb atop the terraces.<sup>39</sup> The sacred experiences regarding five-colored or radiant clouds atop Mount Wutai demonstrate once more the special connotative qualities of clouds in representing the presence of higher powers. It is a convention that would continue on into even Song 宋 dynasty (960-1279) China—as observed within a woodcut illustration (Fig. 8) for *Tripitaka* scriptures that appeared during the period. Clouds maintain a strong presence within the illustration, flowing through the mountains and trees—as if suggesting a spiritual occurrence or presence of a Buddhist figure.

Apart from the *Tripitaka* illustration, clouds relating to a Buddhist context were also central to art around the ritual practice of the Water-land Retreat or Shuilu zhai 水陸齋 in later Song dynasty China. Involving the summoning of deities through performance, various temples where the rituals were held had been adorned with murals of deities surrounded by numerous clouds. In his dissertation on the topic, Phillip Bloom argues that the inclusion of cloud depictions served a particular specialized purpose. Rather than just representing the presence of the divine or magical like at Mount Wutai or within the *boshanlu* censer, the liturgical cloud “simultaneously separates and sutures

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<sup>39</sup> Cartelli, *The Five-colored Clouds of Mount Wutai*, 80.

different realms, bringing the mundane and the supramundane into contact with one another, while ensuring that they remain provisionally separate.”<sup>40</sup>

The visual implementation of these clouds that serve as both bridge and barrier to assemblies of deities is consistent in Water-Land-related images even when including the span of subsequent dynastic periods from the Yuan 元 (1279-1368) through to the Qing 清 (1644-1912). The frontispiece print (Fig. 9) within a manual dating to the Ming dynasty 明 (1368-1644) that likely guided the creation of murals in Qinglong 青龍 temple in Xi'an 西安 serves as a fitting example of the ubiquity of clouds in such murals.

Depicting an assemblage of deities that stand atop the floating clouds, the print, when realized on the walls of a temple, would have resonated with aspects of the Water-Land ritual practice such as the burning of incense. Not unlike the magical undertones of the *boshanlu* censer's incense-clouds, the mural would signal a spiritual occurrence and served as a visual cue for viewers to strip themselves of their mundane minds in order to better receive the fantastical images to come.<sup>41</sup>

Shifting away from overtly religious contexts and back to the presence of auspicious clouds and their political undertones, the final example of this section—a painting—exhibits an understanding of the connotative usage of cloud imagery observed in the examples prior; however, it also slightly deviates in its intentions, likely due to the personal agency of its attributed artist, the Emperor Huizong 徽宗 (1082-1135) from the Northern Song dynasty.

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<sup>40</sup> Bloom, “Descent of the Deities,” 241.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 260.

Emperor Huizong is perhaps most infamously remembered as one of the last Northern Song emperors to rule before the Jurchen incursions that put an end to Song sovereignty in the northern regions of China. However, despite his perceived incompetence as ruler, Huizong was an avid patron of the arts who can certainly be seen as one reason for the flourishing of art during the latter stages of the Northern Song dynasty. Being a painter himself, Huizong had a vested interest in the Imperial Painting Academy and, in 1104, systematized painting by placing the academy under the Directorate of Education. The systematization led to a revamp of the admissions process, with examinations that focused on not just technical ability but originality in depicting subjects.<sup>42</sup>

The work in question attributed to Huizong's hand is *Auspicious Cranes* (Fig. 10), a painting currently in the collection of the Liaoning Provincial Museum. Depicting a flock of cranes in flight over an azure sky while the imperial city below is enveloped in clouds; *Auspicious Cranes*, according to its inscription, depicted an actual event that had occurred and been witnessed by thousands in the year 1112.<sup>43</sup> The clouds within the painting, quite overtly categorized as “auspicious clouds,” were noted as having quite literally descended down from the sky to the palace gate, surrounding and illuminating it.

When examined under the contextual framework established by the auspicious clouds from earlier in Chinese history, it would appear that *Auspicious Cranes* uses the same visual language of cloud imagery to record the sighting of a felicitous sign to legitimize his reign. Peter Sturman, however, throws uncertainty over the painting's role

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<sup>42</sup> Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Emperor Huizong* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 201-203.

<sup>43</sup> Peter C. Sturman, “Cranes above Kaifeng: The Auspicious Image at the Court of Huizong,” *Ars Orientalis* 20 (1990), 33.

as historical reality. Citing Huizong's affinity for auspicious symbols and his decree ordering all auspicious discoveries to be presented to the court, Sturman provides evidence for an influx of auspicious discoveries that followed Huizong's demand. If the auspicious discovery was not something that could physically be preserved, it was instead presented as a painting. If Sturman's conclusions prove to be correct, *Auspicious Cranes* could have been a painting completed in response to a "discovery," thus contributing to "an elaborately structured program of self-indoctrination" that led to the birth of a new reality.<sup>44</sup>

*Auspicious Cranes* serves as a suitable end to this section as it displays an understanding of the history of cloud imagery conventions. Whether it be through associations with Buddhist deities or immortals, clouds came to symbolize the presence of the sacred and the divine. At the same time, *Auspicious Cranes* makes overt references back to the political dimensions of auspicious clouds and their association with the Mandate of Heaven in order to create a new reality during a time of impending turmoil. The association is convincing on the most basic levels, as these sacred and divine presences were often associated with the heavens. Clouds, as the only real perceivable element in the heavens, became the intermediating force between the presences above and the devoted below. *Auspicious Cranes*, however, also deviates from its visual lineage slightly when considering its context. The possibility of the painting depicting a new reality under the decree of Emperor Huizong emphasizes a human agency in adapting and

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<sup>44</sup> Sturman, "Cranes above Kaifeng," 45.

changing conventional ideas around clouds and is explored further in the final section of this thesis.

### **Chapter 3: Clouds, Mist, and the Landscape Tradition**

While the previous two sections have largely covered clouds in the Chinese imagination around the early period of the Han dynasty, the focus of the current and next section will cover the presence and usage of clouds in and around the Song dynasty—particularly regarding the painting theory of Guo Xi 郭熙 (after 1000-ca. 1090). While the treatment of clouds in the previous sections dealt primarily with wider ontological and religious concerns, the examples within this section display a hint of secularization in their earthlier references; however, the connection to past ideas is by no means discarded and a lineage of thematic similarities can be found.

Spanning a period of nearly two centuries, the Northern Song dynasty in China is most typically perceived as a period of administrative and cultural advancement—one in which military strength was secondary and eventually resulted in the dynasty's demise at the hands of the invading Jurchens. Despite this perception, the achievements of the period are not to be understated. Imperial patronage during the period had led to the flourishing of various arts. Among them, painting was held in particular regard, with emperors and officials alike partaking in its practice and patronage. Emperor Huizong as mentioned earlier, was particularly well-known for his personal works and support of the imperial painting academy.



While landscape painting had already been in practice before the beginning of the Song dynasty, the period is particularly associated with a growing consciousness towards evaluating and cataloguing art. Texts by various scholars and artists would delineate their views on how exactly natural landscapes should be depicted. At the same time, an imperial catalogue, the *Xuanhe huapu* 宣和畫譜 or Xuanhe catalogue of paintings, was created to keep a record of the 6,396 painting scrolls within the imperial collection.<sup>45</sup> The paintings were divided into categories such as “landscape,” “flowers and birds,” and “vegetables and fruit.” Entries of artist biographies were also included, showing that nuances of an artist’s repertoire had also been noted and appreciated. While “clouds” did not have a category within the catalogue, their presence and emphasis can be noted in various works and textual sources from the period.

As covered briefly in the second section, early landscape art first developed in the form of three-dimensional art, with the paradise garden of emperors and small tray landscapes offering a microcosm of the larger universe within a set space. The practice would eventually transition to two-dimensional artworks in the form of landscape ink painting as indicated by Ledderose. Given the connection to the earlier artistic practices, usage of clouds within early landscape painting was also associated with similar motivations and themes.

Early texts on landscape painting are numerous in number, and many make specific references toward the depiction of clouds and mist. Among the notable earlier instances was the *Bifa ji* 筆法記 or “Notes on the Method for the Brush,” a text by Jing

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<sup>45</sup> For a full translation of the *Xuanhe* catalogue, see McNair, *Xuanhe Catalogue of Paintings*.

Hao 荆浩 (act. early tenth century) who was recognized as a master of the landscape genre. Jing Hao's text is most well-known for its explanation of what he perceived as the six essentials of painting: spirit (*qi* 氣), resonance (*yun* 韻), thought (*si* 思), scene (*jing* 景), brush (*bi* 筆), and ink (*mo* 墨).<sup>46</sup> While the scope of this thesis does not require a full explanation of each of these essentials, it is worth briefly touching upon the matter of “spirit” and “resonance.”

Jing Hao's inclusion of *qi* and *yun*, is likely a reference back to an even earlier text—the *Huihua liufa* 繪畫六法 or “Six Laws of Painting” by Xie He 謝赫 (act. fifth century). The first law of Xie He's treatise states that a painting must have “spirit consonance”—a concept that is formed by the characters for *qi* and *yun*.<sup>47</sup> The law implicates that by having “spirit consonance,” the subject depicted will have the movement of life; however, the exact nature of Xie He's rather vague wording has been the subject of much interpretation to Chinese art theorists. In his essay on the first two laws of Xie He's text, Alexander Soper postulates that Xie He's usage of “spirit resonance” is analogous to the search for the proper defining elements of beauty in Western art theories. *Qi*, which recalls earlier discussions on the structure of Chinese cosmology, might serve a similar function to Xie He; while *yun*, primarily translated as “rhyme,” could refer to a resonance between the act of painting and the vaster universes' primary processes. Therefore, the first law's usage of *qi* and *yun* could be seen as requiring a painter to be distinctly aware of the *qi* imbedded within the subjects of their

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<sup>46</sup> Jing Hao, *A Note on Brushwork*. Annotated translation by Kiyohiko Munakata and Yoko H. Munakata, “Ching Hao's ‘Pi-fa-chi’: A Note on the Art of Brush.” *Artibus Asiae* 31 (1974): 11.

<sup>47</sup> 氣韻生動. With translated annotations in Alexander C. Soper, “The First Two Laws of Hsieh Ho,” *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (1949): 414.

painting and its connection that extends not only to the other elements within the painting but to the universe itself.<sup>48</sup>

Jing Hao's text appears to follow Xie He's theories, but it also goes further in detailing how exactly concepts like *qi* and *yun* could be manifested in actual paintings. Conveyed as a conversation occurring between a farmer living in the Taihang mountains and an old man, the *Bifa ji* asserts that "spirit [*qi*] is obtained when [the painter's] mind moves along with the movements of the brush and does not hesitate in delineating images. Resonance [*yun*] is obtained when [painters] establish forms while hiding [obvious] traces of the brush, and perfect them by observing the proprieties and avoiding vulgarity."<sup>49</sup> To Jing Hao, rendering *qi* in paintings emphasized a particularly attuned state within the mind of the artist rather than the specifics of the brushwork itself. Fully rendered paintings could visually depict a natural scene, but if the prerequisite of an artist's attuned state is not achieved, the painting would be lacking in *qi*. The rhythmic nature of *yun*, on the other hand, seems to have been interpreted as a particular manner of brushwork—one that emphasizes naturalistic depiction and an erasure of its presence.

Jing Hao's reason for emphasizing a painting's need for *qi* is explained in a later passage where the old man comments on the varying formations of mountains and streams.

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<sup>48</sup> Alexander C. Soper, "The First Two Laws of Hsieh Ho," *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (1949): 422.

<sup>49</sup> 氣者，心隨筆運，取象不惑。韻者，隱跡立形，備儀不俗。 Jing Hao 荊浩, *Bifa ji* 筆法記. In *Zhongguo gudai hualun leibian*, edited by Yu Jianhua (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1986), 605. Translation adapted from Munakata, "Ching Hao's 'Pi-fa-chi'," 12.

“The different formations of mountains and streams are formulated by the combinations of life force [*qi*] and formal force [*shi* 勢]. Thus, there are a ‘peak’ which has a pointed top, a ‘head’ which has a flat top, a ‘hump’ which has a round top, ‘ranges’ which have connected peaks, a ‘cavern’ which has a hole on the side, a ‘cliff’ which has a steep wall, a ‘grotto’ which is space between two cliffs or below a cliff, a ‘gorge’ which is a pass going through mountains, a ‘gully’ which is a pass blocked at one end, a ‘ravine’ which is a gully with running water, and a ‘torrent’ which is a stream running through a gorge.”<sup>50</sup>

The old man’s explanation for natural landforms qualifies *qi* as a fundamental essence that affects even the way elements within the landscape look and are formed.

Furthermore, it is the inclusion of the various landforms and their separation that creates a proper landscape scene.

Clouds are mentioned explicitly in Jing Hao’s text right after his explanation of the categorization of landscape formations. Comparing it with the distinguishing features of mountains and streams, the old man asserts that “Fog, clouds and mist are heavy or light depending upon the time. Their states are sometimes changed by wind and they have no constant form.”<sup>51</sup> As the single notable reference to clouds and mist within the entire text, the passage is significant in identifying clouds as an important component

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<sup>50</sup> 山水之象，氣勢相生。故尖曰峰，平曰頂，圓曰巒，相連曰嶺，有穴曰岫，峻壁曰崖，崖間崖下曰岩，路通山中曰谷，不通曰峪，峪中有水曰溪，山夾水曰澗。Jing Hao 荆浩, *Bifa ji* 筆法記。In *Zhongguo gudai hualun leibian*, edited by Yu Jianhua (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1986), 607. Translation adapted from Munakata, “Ching Hao’s ‘Pi-fa-chi’,” 14.

<sup>51</sup> 夫霧雲煙靄，輕重有時，勢或因風，象皆不定。Ibid., 607. Translation adapted from Munakata, “Ching Hao’s ‘Pi-fa-chi’,” 14.

within the landscape. Just as the mountains and streams may change or be divided into distinguishing shapes, so do the inconstant forms of clouds and mist. The ambiguous shapes of clouds and their behaviors in response to wind appear to also be in line with the earlier emphasis on observing cloud behavior and incorporating it into design schema; however, with the medium of painted landscape and its fundamental mountain and water components, depictions of clouds and mist would find new forms and usages through their interaction with other elements.

A later text on landscape painting that also offers insight into the perception and application of clouds and mist is written by Northern Song painter Guo Xi and entitled *Linquan Gaozhi* 林泉高致 or “Lofty Message of Forests and Streams.” Based on Guo Xi’s notes and later compiled by his son, Guo Si 郭思 (ca. 1050-after 1130), the text has a greater focus on technical details and sets out immediately to establish an affinity for natural settings—something that is punctuated especially by the presence of clouds and mist. Speaking on nature, Guo Xi immediately gives the impression that his preference is for the remote abodes of mountains and streams. His appreciation for a closeness to nature as opposed to the urban centers of the Song dynasty are put into practice as Guo Xi emphasized regular practice of physically viewing landscape subjects in order to understand their exact contours and component parts. This also applied to the depictions of clouds and mist as Guo Xi appears to sympathize with Jing Hao’s stance:

The clouds and atmosphere of the real landscape are not the same throughout the four seasons. In spring they are bright and harmonious; in summer dense and brooding; in autumn thin and scattered; in winter dark and gloomy. When an artist succeeds in reproducing this general tone and

not a group of disjointed forms, then clouds and atmosphere seem to come to life.<sup>52</sup>

However, to Guo Xi, it appears that clouds and mist are also able to carry a certain emotional value that corresponds with seasonal associations. With the winter season often seeing allusions to old age and expiration, atmospheric clouds would have to visually follow suit with a similarly heavy mood.

The spring season—often associated with birth and revival—possesses felicitous qualities and elicits the same within its clouds. This association, along with Guo Xi's other painting theories are likely nowhere more present than within his most well-known work, *Early Spring* (Fig. 11) dated 1072 and currently in the collection of the National Palace Museum in Taipei. When viewed in its entirety, *Early Spring* depicts mountains covered in an obscuring mist that forms a strong diagonal line of negative space across the center of the composition. The mountains themselves are covered in a variety of rich foliage and trees while their specific arrangement roughly reveals four quadrants of space. The upper left quadrant reveals a river receding into the distant mountains—almost entirely hidden by mist—while the lower left quadrant opens up into a lake with what appears to be fisherman going about their daily lives. On the other side, the lower right quadrant depicts a cascading waterfall that also leads into a body of water populated by fishing boats. On the upper right quadrant, one is able to catch a partial glimpse of

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<sup>52</sup>真山水之雲氣，四時不同：春融怡，夏蓊鬱，秋疎薄，冬黯淡。畫見其大  
象，而不為斬刻之形，則雲氣之態度活矣。Guo Xi 郭熙. *Linquan gaozhi* 林泉高致 (Lofty attraction of  
forests and streams). Compiled by Guo Si 郭思. In *Zhongguo gudai hualun leibian*, ed. Yu Jianhua, 635.  
Translation adapted from Shio Sakanishi (London: J. Murray, 1935), 36.

urban architecture—suggesting human habitation hidden behind the clustered rock formations.

The entire painting is marked by a variety of brush techniques and understanding of ink tonality that produces a scene full of atmospheric depth. Recalling the earlier discussion about how clouds and mist were ostensibly the third unspoken component essential to a landscape painting, *Early Spring* demonstrates how its mist element collaborates with the mountains and water to complete the landscape depiction. Without the presence of mist, the atmospheric depth and illusion of the landscape as a three-dimensional space would be missing, as Chinese paintings at the time did not employ usage of point-perspective and horizon lines. Additionally, the harmonious quality of what Guo Xi associated with clouds in spring might be gleaned from his specific arrangement of the mists that bring an element of balance to the scene. Whether intentionally or not, the negative space created by the presence of mist resonates with the negative space of the bodies of water below—allowing for the viewer’s attention to be drawn to the four quadrants and their respective spaces.

When looking at *Early Spring*’s overall composition, one may find a certain similarity to the immortal island characteristics of *boshanlu* censors central to discussions around three-dimensional landscape art. Like with the *boshanlu*, a viewer could certainly imagine hidden caverns and other natural perforations as the origination of the swathes of mist that flow throughout *Early Spring*’s mountains. Ledderose is particularly convinced by the connection, claiming that “from the middle of the water below rise some boulders supporting, as if it were a world landscape. Thus, there is a striking relation between the composition of this painting and the shape of a [*boshanlu*], especially if one envisions the

clouds of incense enveloping its upper part.”<sup>53</sup> The argument certainly can be said to hold even more weight if, as Ledderose notes, the shape of the supporting boulders can be seen as the stem connecting to the chalice-like shape of the censer. In his article on the structure and aesthetics of Chinese rocks, John Hay agrees with Ledderose’s suggestion and posits the inclusion of a third object: a hollow, porous rock owned by the prominent Northern Song scholar-official and theorist Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101). Having named the rock “Cave Paradise of Miniature Being,” Su Shi used it as an incense burner, letting smoke seep into its hollow interior before it emerged through the rock’s many holes.<sup>54</sup> When placing the three visual objects side by side, it is convincing to argue that all three shared a similar function due to their overlapping contextual clues.

Guo Xi’s cognizance of and reference to immortal islands like Penglai does not come as a surprise when considering firstly, the established popularity of the immortal isles in the Chinese imagination, and secondly, his intellectual background. In his artist biography within the Xuanhe catalogue, Guo Xi was described as being employed as a Scholar of Arts at the Imperial Painting Academy; however, despite being a painter “he was still able to give his son Si a classical education in order to raise the family’s status.”<sup>55</sup> While a classical education meant familiarity with the Confucian classics in the previous dynasties, during the Song dynasty, the incorporation of neo-Confucian ideals into governmental practice meant that Buddhist and Daoist elements were also borrowed. As a result, Guo Xi’s concerns around family status and employment by the imperial

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<sup>53</sup> Ledderose, “The Earthly Paradise,” 179.

<sup>54</sup> John Hay, “Structure and Aesthetic Criteria in Chinese Rocks and Art,” *Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 13 (1987): 12.

<sup>55</sup> Amy McNair, ed., *Xuanhe Catalogue of Paintings* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 255.



court suggests a degree of familiarity with concepts—such as the Daoist island of immortals—that were of concern to intellectuals at the time. In fact, he refers to philosophical discourse as the guiding principle within his artwork—leading to perusing of classical poetry and texts that could certainly have relevant references.<sup>56</sup>

A shared commonality that is more notable than even the connection between the visual aspects of *Early Spring* and the *boshanlu* is the intent behind their creation. Both were created in the service of imperial interests that added a political dimension to their presentation and the associative visuals of clouds and mist. As previously mentioned, the island of the immortals depicted by the censers and installed within paradise gardens in miniature form were of paramount concern to the imperial patrons that ordered their creation—a result of the ongoing influence of the immortality cults from the Eastern Zhou to Han dynasties. Rulers strived to find the secrets to attaining immortality and performed rituals and sacrifices as a means of furthering their goal. On the other hand, Guo Xi's *Early Spring*, while not an explicit depiction of Penglai or the other islands of immortals, served as an exaltation of imperial power. In order to see just how exactly praise for the emperor was achieved, one might refer to one of Guo Xi's more famous quotes from his treatise on painting:

[the mountain's] appearance is that of an emperor sitting majestically in all his glory, accepting the service of and giving audience to his subjects, without sign of arrogance or haughtiness.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Guo Xi, *An Essay on Landscape Painting*, 49.

<sup>57</sup> 大山堂堂為眾山之主，其象若大君赫然當陽，而百辟奔走朝會，無偃蹇背卻之勢也。 Guo Xi 郭熙. *Linquan gaozhi* 林泉高致 (Lofty attraction of forests and streams). Compiled by Guo Si 郭思. In

Guo Xi's words are metaphorical in nature but establish a popular convention, the comparison of human qualities to aspects found within nature. The comparative relationships take place at all levels, whether it be a towering mountain over smaller hills or a tall pine over lesser trees and foliage—a hierarchical relationship that mirrored the social hierarchies observed in society.<sup>58</sup>

The concept of a towering mountain as emperor can be found in *Early Spring*; however, an even more striking example is visually well-represented in the earlier painting, *Travelers among Mountains and Streams* (Fig. 12), by Fan Kuan 范寬 (c. 960-1030). Depicting a remote scene, the painting is immediately dominated by its central pillar-like mountain that towers above all other lesser hills and occupies more than half of the entire composition. An astute eye, when scanning the entirety of the painting, may find that the landscape actually includes human presence—a man leading a line of livestock at the bottom-right corner. Underneath the grandeur of the “emperor,” however, the man is barely visible to the naked eye.

Clouds and mist fulfill a technical role in the hierarchical analogies of both *Early Spring* and *Travelers among Mountains and Streams*, as they play the visual mediator between the grand mountains and lesser landforms. In *Early Spring*, the flowing mist—through its application as negative space—draws attention to the smaller elements within the painting such as the city and the fishermen. In *Travelers among Mountains and Streams*, the mist serves as the middle-ground between the central mountain in the

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*Zhongguo gudai hualun leibian*, ed. Yu Jianhua, 635. Translation adapted from Shio Sakanishi, *An Essay on Landscape Painting* (London: J. Murray, 1935), 37.

<sup>58</sup> Ping Foong, *The Efficacious Landscape: On the Authorities of Painting at the Northern Song Court* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015), 6-7.

background and the rock formations and foliage in the foreground. On the two-dimensional plane, the mist creates a band of white that visibly separates the foreground and background. On the three-dimensional plane, the mist creates a depth to the painting that further emphasizes the size of the mountain—even when it is so far back in the distance, it still dominates the painting.

Guo Xi's most famous painting exhibits a general shift of emphasis towards more naturalistic depictions of landscape. His treatise emphasized the seasonal changes of elements like clouds and their importance in painting a proper landscape—the nature was something to first be experienced before rendering with ink. The painting also establishes a connection to earlier landscape art that may, in part, be representative of developments in landscape painting as a whole. While both *Early Spring* and the Han *boshanlu* employ the visual effects of mist, the mysterious and magical qualities so associated with the censer, the island of the immortals, and the presence of the divine appear to be lost. Instead, the clouds and mist exhibit more overt references to political power and societal affairs. It is important to note, however, that the examples examined are only an infinitesimal fraction of the number of artworks produced during the period and should not be considered an overarching representation of the whole of landscape painting. Instead, the painting theory of the likes of Guo Xi represents a small glimpse into the humanistic developments regarding cloud depictions and bridges the early conceptions with the newer associations to come.

## Chapter 4: Clouds in the Personal Imagination

The final section of this thesis focuses entirely on clouds within the personal imagination of artists and theorists in a period that roughly spans from the late Northern Song dynasty to the Southern Song 南宋 (1127-1279) and subsequent dynasties. Like the examples discussed within the previous section, the practices and artworks of various mediums included in this section contain a connection to and understanding of earlier associations with clouds and mist; however, new directions are forged, with a central reason being the rise in popularity of what has been coined “literati” art.

To qualify discussions on the extent of the influence of literati art, it is important to include a comprehensive look at its history and characteristics. Generally seen as first being explicitly discussed during the Northern Song dynasty, literati art is a loose genre of art that is heavily associated with the scholar-official class—civil servants who studied the classics and passed their civil service examinations to serve the administrative body of the imperial court. As Confucian texts comprised an important portion of the body of texts scholar-officials had to commit to memory, it would serve as one of the central theoretical foundations to literati art.

One of the first pieces of scholarship to stress the importance of Confucianism to Song painting theory is a 1960 essay by James Cahill.<sup>59</sup> Tracing a history of how painting evolved through the earlier dynasties, Cahill eventually presents translated excerpts from the writings of Su Shi, the prominent scholar-official of the period often credited with the

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<sup>59</sup> James F. Cahill, “Confucian Elements in the Theory of Painting,” in *The Confucian Persuasion*, edited by Arthur F. Wright (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1960), 115-140.

founding of literati art, to demonstrate how Su interpreted the act of painting as the “lodging” of a painter’s affinity and feelings toward a depicted object. Thus, when an artist paints an object, they are dispelling their emotions toward that object in order to maintain an internal equilibrium that served to separate the virtuous Confucian literati from the common classes.

In cementing their status as virtuous Confucian scholars, scholar-officials revealed a social class-based motivation behind their art theories through extant writings that they had left behind. Central to the scholar-officials’ distinction from the common classes was their learned nature—a quality that was proven by a familiarity with poems and other literary sources. A collection of the translated writings of literati has been compiled by Susan Bush. While the extensive details of her study do not need to be specifically elaborated in this thesis, it may be useful to include an example—once again from Su Shi. Within her chapter on the formative period of the Song literati, Bush translates a poem written by Su Shi for his friend Wen Tong 文同 (1019-1079), a figure well known for his bamboo paintings, that compared Wen’s character to the bamboo within one of his paintings:

The ink gentlemen [bamboo] on the wall cannot speak,

But just seeing them can dissipate one’s myriad griefs;

And further, as for my friend’s resembling these gentlemen,

The severity of his simple virtue defies the frosty autumn.<sup>60</sup>

By presenting the poem to Wen, Su Shi senses the character of his friend through both the pictorial forms and the traditional literary association of bamboo and gentlemen—one where the gentleman would bend in the face of arduous circumstances but not break.<sup>61</sup> This elucidation serves a two-fold purpose as it firstly indicates Su Shi's pronounced belief that a painter's character and identity should be present and noticeable within their work. Secondly, it indicates an assumption of the learnedness of the viewer within Su Shi's theory of art. Only someone familiar with literary associations would be able to discern the choice of subject matter—effectively cutting off true access to the painting for the uneducated classes and reinforcing that the theory may have been in part developed for the purpose of social stratification.

While the cases examined so far have all been in the form of private exchanges among colleagues, scholar-officials also subtly communicated with each other under the watchful eye of the imperial court. Being the intellectuals they were, officials were often quick to express their opinions on the decisions of the emperor and his governmental policies; however, the punishment for speaking out of line was often exile. In order to mitigate this, a more secretive form of communication was required which revolved around the medium of paintings—something that Alfreda Murck has studied in detail.

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<sup>60</sup> 壁上墨君不解語，見之尚可消百憂。而況我友似君者，素節凜凜欺霜秋。Su Shi, *Collected writings of Su Shi*, IX.20.17b-18a.

<sup>61</sup> Susan Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting: Su Shi (1037-1101) to Dong Qichang (1555-1636)* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 34-35.

In order to establish Chinese paintings as grounds for potential discourse, Murck presents two primary examples. The first centers around Guo Xi's masterpiece, *Early Spring*, and how its inscribed date of 1072 coincides with the implementation of the New Policies—an indication that the painting's subject of spring is likely a positive metaphor praising the reforms. The second revolves around the account of an official, Zheng Xia 鄭俠 (1041-1119), and his presentation of a painting depicting the masses suffering under the reforms to Emperor Shenzong 神宗 (1048-1085). While Zheng's painting is no longer extant, Shenzong's reaction can be discerned from the *Song Shi* 宋史 (History of Song) that recorded how the emperor kept the painting close to his person before eventually ordering reductions to the reform policies and their harsh effects on the common people.<sup>62</sup> In effect, Zheng's painting served as a core foundation of how paintings could serve to admonish the emperor; however, it is also a rare case in which the criticism was more or less directly communicated and accepted without repercussions.

As mentioned earlier, a foundation to literati art theory is the body of classical texts all Confucian scholars were required to commit to memory. The private discourse among literati that used painting as a medium for discourse needed a visual 'alphabet' for their language. The answer eventually came in the form of poetic allusions and themes. Within her spotlight on the more subtle forms of criticism in Chinese paintings, Murck had chosen to particularly focus on the usage of poetry as a precedent for painting's social functions. As a form of traditional art practiced by the Chinese elite that predated

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<sup>62</sup> Murck, *Poetry and Painting in Song China: The Subtle Art of Dissent* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), 39.

painting, poetry and its thematic elements were a central part of the scholarly consciousness. Tang poets such as Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770), known for his melancholic poems written in exile, served as rich sources for painters to allude to in order to express their indirect complaints.<sup>63</sup> As understanding the allusions and meanings of poems required knowledge accessible to the learned literati, painting's subsequent elevation to the status of poetry meant that a similar exclusive audience could be created through connections to poetic themes.

A primary example of the interplay between painting and poetry can be found within a poetic exchange between Su Shi and his friend Wang Shen 王詵 (ca. 1036-ca.1093) on Wang's painting *Misty River, Layered Peaks* (Fig. 13). From a glance, Wang Shen's painting might be deemed rather unassuming. Mist is heavily incorporated in the composition, leading to wide swathes of negative space and a sense of isolation around the mountainous forms visible to the viewer. The partial obscuration of the mountain is similar in structure to Guo Xi's *Early Spring*, with mist cutting through the mountain's crevices from the upper right corner.

Closely examining Su Shi and Wang Shen's recorded exchange in great detail, Murck found that the pair were deftly referencing a poem by Du Fu and thus also applying the melancholic themes of political dissatisfaction and exile to their own situations. With this context in mind, the isolated and remote nature of Wang Shen's landscape begins to carry new meaning. In order to further hide their intentions, Murck believes that Su and Wang employed poetic structures differing from Du Fu's regularly

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<sup>63</sup> Murck, *Poetry and Painting*, 24.



structured style—thus creating a secret discourse among confidants that was elicited by the landscape within a painting.<sup>64</sup>

While the examples and research examined so far from the likes of Cahill, Bush, and Murck offer concrete characteristics of what literati art definitively should be, slightly different views on literati art have been held that emphasize a transitory aspect to literati art theory. In his article on the subject, Shi Shouqian emphasizes that “literati” art theory existed as an ideal concept in history that changed according to the needs of various time periods. While the theories may have arisen due to historical realities such as the fall of dynasties, they were not necessarily reflective of historical fact.<sup>65</sup> In other words, writings on a theory of art from the likes of Su Shi may exist as evidence, but they were by no means definitive indication of how the writers actually felt and acted in their time.

As an ideal concept, Shi believed that literati art theory evolved in different directions over time. As a result, what may have once been seen as a definitive trait of literati art in one period could be precisely what literati art in a different period attempted to push back against. An example of this transition provided by Shi involved the blending of literati and commercial art styles during the Ming dynasty that prompted art theorist Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555-1636) to explicate in writing his own conception of what literati art should be—including separating the history of Chinese painters into two schools.<sup>66</sup> Dong Qichang’s theories would later come to constitute much of what scholars

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<sup>64</sup> Murck, *Poetry and Painting*, 130-156.

<sup>65</sup> Shi, Shouqian 石守谦, “Zhongguo wenren hua jiuqing shi shenme” 中国文人画究竟是什么? [What is Chinese Literati Art?], *Da Guan (Shuhua jia)* 5 (2017): 124.

<sup>66</sup> Shi, “Zhongguo wenren hua,” 128.

like Bush associated with literati art theory, but to Shi, Dong had simply used his ideas to combat an issue only relevant to his own time. While the comparison may be rather crude, one might compare Shi's view of literati art to Clement Greenberg's discourse on the duty of "avant-garde" to continuously push back against the tide of "kitsch."

While not originally grouped intentionally, Shi Shouqian's conception of literati art resonates rather well with the subject of clouds and mist. Just like literati art, clouds are formless and transient. While the connection between the features of literati art and clouds may not be the exact reason for why the artworks and examples within this section vary in genre and medium as much as they do, it is nevertheless a fitting indicator of the changeable association of clouds and their ability to fit into a variety of contexts and motivations.

Despite Shi Shouqian's argument against the applicability of literati texts, it may still be informative to examine and contextualize just how some of the major figures viewed clouds. As referenced previously, Su Shi was well-known for owning a porous rock with a hollow bottom that allowed for incense to be lit. His reasons for owning and appreciating such an object is best summed up by an essay written in correspondence with Wen Tong.

Once when I discussed painting, I said that men and animals, buildings and utensils, all have constant forms; as for mountains, trees, water and clouds, although they lack constant forms, they have constant principles. If constant form is lost, everyone knows it; when constant principle is inappropriate, even connoisseurs may not realize it. Therefore, all those

who are able to deceive the world for the sake of a reputation are sure to make use of what is without constant form. Though the loss of constant form stops with what is lost and does not spoil the whole, if constant principle is not correct, then all is lost. When the form is inconstant, then one must take care about its principle. The artisans of the world may be able to create the forms perfectly, but when it comes to the principles, unless one is a superior man of outstanding talent, one cannot achieve them.<sup>67</sup>

It is immediately apparent that Su Shi's ideas center once again around the separation of learned, virtuous scholars and the common people. To Su, the most important aspect in depicting an object or landscape was not to perfectly render its constant, outer form but to capture its essential principle. As a result, the artists who painted gaudy, colorful religious paintings were seen by Su Shi as practically philistines while the learned scholar would be able to discern and replicate constant principle by virtue of their distinction.

Under a framework of emphasizing principle, Su Shi's porous rock holds new significance that differs from the earlier comparisons to a "magical" mist. Instead, there is something almost paradoxical at work as the cloud-smoke from the incense becomes representative of the hidden principle. When he spoke about painting, Su Shi subordinated the visuality of constant form with the non-visuality of constant principle;

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<sup>67</sup> 余嘗論畫，以為人禽宮室器用皆有常形。至於山石竹木，水波煙雲，雖無常形，而有常理。常形之失，人皆知之。常理之不當，雖曉畫者有不知。故凡可以欺世而取名者，必託於無常形者也。雖然，常形之失，止於所失，而不能病其全，若常理之不當，則舉廢之矣。以其形之無常，是以其理不可不謹也。世之工人，或能曲盡其形，而至於其理，非高人逸才不能辨。Su Shi (1037-1101), "Jingyin yuan hua ji," in *Jingjin Dongpo Wenji Shilue* 经进东坡文集事略, fasc. 11, vol. 2, 367. Translation adapted from *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, 220.

however, this non-visuality still ultimately needed to be given form through ink and brush.<sup>68</sup> As a medium other than painting, the porous rock may be seen as subverting painting's visual conundrum. Its openings represent a look into its interior that suggested the presence of principle but did not depict constant form.

The focus on the role of clouds and mist in revealing and emphasizing interiority was of great interest to another scholar-official during the Northern Song dynasty. Mi Fu 米芾 (1052-1107) had been a foremost art critic and connoisseur who was famed for writing his influential *Hua shi* 畫史 or "History of Painting." He was known for advocating a very "plain and natural" style of painting that he attributed to the tenth-century painter Dong Yuan 董源 (ca.934-ca.962).<sup>69</sup> Insight into his preference can be gleaned from an excerpt of his *Hua shi*, wherein he critiques Li Cheng 李成 (919-967), a painting master from around the time of the beginning of the Northern Song dynasty.

Li Cheng's pale ink [landscapes] are like a dream; wrapped in mist, his rocks are like clouds in motion. There is much skill, but little sense of truth.<sup>70</sup>

The little sense of truth that Mi Fu refers to is likely similar to the angle of Su Shi. Both of their motivations behind their theories still share the similarity of distinguishing the art of the more learned individuals from that of popular artisans or court painters.

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<sup>68</sup> Bloom, "Descent of the Deities," 344-345.

<sup>69</sup> Wen C. Fong, *Beyond Representation: Chinese Paintings and Calligraphy, 8th–14th Centuries* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992), 162.

<sup>70</sup> 李成淡墨如夢霧中，石如雲動，多巧少真意。Mi, Fu 米芾 (1052-1107). *Hua Shi* 畫史 (History of Painting), in *Zhongguo shuhua quanshu* 中國書畫全書, 988. Translation adapted from *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, 226.

Even more notable from this excerpt is Mi Fu's affinity for clouds. To Mi, proper depiction of clouds and mist were of much more importance than a focus on the smaller details of landscape. In his equal-parts praise and criticism of Li Cheng, he even goes so far as to mention that the mountains look like clouds themselves. So strong was his connection to clouds that Mi Fu's signature ink-dot painting style was often connected to images of cloudy mountains.<sup>71</sup>

While there are no existing paintings that are convincingly considered to be the work of Mi Fu's hand, his son, Mi Youren 米友仁 (1086-1165) continued his father's legacy of cloudy mountain paintings and offers insight into how his father's paintings may have looked. One painting attributed to Mi Youren is of particular interest as it inverts traditionally negative associations between clouds and humans. The painting entitled *Distant Peaks and Clearing Clouds* (Fig. 14) depicts a serene natural landscape with distant, jagged mountains in the background separated from the trees in the foreground by a flowing river that runs from the upper-left corner. What is most notable about this painting, however, is the way in which the cloud element of the painting takes form. Starting out from mountains in the upper-left, the clouds are depicted as cumulous clumps. If the viewer moves their eye diagonally downward and tracks the path of cloud movement, however, the clouds noticeably change form. They become thinner and wispier before changing once more into a hazy mist that envelopes the leaves of the trees on the opposite bank of the river.

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<sup>71</sup> Fong, *Beyond Representation*, 163.

Mi Youren's reason for depicting the transformation and dynamic movement of clouds in such a novel way is not exactly clear, but Peter Sturman surmises that the painter had meant for the drifting cloud to symbolize himself. The comparison is emphasized visually by the central wisp of cloud. When observed at an angle, details of a broad forehead, eyebrows, nose and chin delineate the vague image of a face observing the trees. While discussion around cloud associations in previous sections had been mostly positive, explicit cloud-human comparisons have a history of being a negative association. Under a Confucian context, the floating cloud represented "that which does not merit attention" while its concealment of the sun was often seen as a metaphor for a petty man who obscures a path to righteousness.<sup>72</sup> Even without reference to philosophical material, the image of a solitary floating cloud conveys a sense of isolation and endless travel without a home to return to.

Sturman argues that Mi Youren subverts all the conventional negative cloud associations to reveal a positive message. Citing an inscription by Mi extolling the positive aspects of being a hermit, Sturman posits that Mi had in fact incorporated a positive desire into his clouds. To be a cloud was to be free to roam, free from the involvement of governmental affairs, and free from misery.<sup>73</sup> When viewing the painting once more under the notion of freedom, Sturman's argument can be quite convincing. The cloud has a freedom of movement, flowing across the landscape away from any hints of civilization. It also has the freedom to change, transforming three times as the viewer's eyes travel across the composition. Mi Youren's *Distant Peaks and Clearing Clouds* is

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<sup>72</sup> Peter C. Sturman, "Mi Youren and the inherited literati tradition: Dimensions of ink-play" (PhD diss., Yale University, 1989), 242.

<sup>73</sup> Sturman, "Mi Youren," 246.

unabashed in its communication of scholarly desires. It was common for a scholar to seek the solace offered by remote, natural locales when put under the duress of everyday governmental affairs. At the same time, Mi's agency in going against the flow of popular conventions of cloud imagery may be seen as a very *literatus*-like trait.

Along with distinct changes in painting like Mi Youren's subversion of conventional cloud themes, the treatment of the cloud element in three-dimensional form, previously explored in discussions on Su Shi's porous rock, also took a distinct turn in interpretation that saw a marked visual impact on Chinese aesthetics, particularly the construction of gardens. Mi Youren's father Mi Fu was famed for being a lover of distinctly-shaped rocks characterized by their contours and numerous holes. In a famous story, the eccentric Mi Fu had just arrived at an administrative court in order to take up a new office when he noticed a distinctly-shaped rock (Fig. 15) standing in the courtyard. Forgetting everything, he immediately bowed down to the rock, addressing it as "Elder Brother Rock."<sup>74</sup>

Whether true or not, the story of Mi Fu's deference for rocks is important when considering their relationship to clouds and mist. As discussed previously, the conventional associations often paired with images or models of clouds and rocks were two-fold. Porous rocks or censers could be in reference to the magical mist often found enveloping the islands of the immortals. On the other hand, they could also be references to the larger macrocosmic order of the universe.

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<sup>74</sup> Hay, "Structure and Aesthetic Criteria," 5.

Mi Fu's appreciation for porous rocks appear to partially overlap with the associations developed in earlier times; however, his appreciation was also derived from the distinct rocks resonating with values that had become prominent among his contemporaries. Instead of the visual image of mists and clouds enveloping and penetrating mountain ranges, it was the very suggestion of mist and clouds floating through cavities that characterized distinctly-shaped rock sculptures. The rock, serving as a miniature model for a mountain, is able to draw attention to its interior through its structural makeup without being "visually activated by the function of mists."<sup>75</sup> In carrying the suggestion of mist and clouds in their form alone, the rocks became powerful representations of interiority.

As observed in Su Shi's writing on the distinction between representing constant form and constant principle, the hidden, interior essence of something was of utmost importance to learned individuals—something that echoes back to Xie He's first law of painting and Jing Hao's first and second essentials. Mi Fu shared a similar sentiment, believing that the origins of any structural development and the truth of any matter were to be found within. An effective analogy for this idea can be found in the makeup of a kingdom with its imperial palace at its center. Those on the outskirts of the kingdom are furthest away from the palace and therefore the least cultured; however, there is still an understanding among them that they needed to acknowledge the center—a message that, in addition to the realm of Chinese rock aesthetics, was also present in the Chinese epistemological and political spheres.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Hay, "Structure and Aesthetic Criteria," 12.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 13.



The new aesthetic concept introduced by rock sculpture—one that suggested the presence of absent mists and clouds—was eventually incorporated into wider garden construction on a larger scale. An essay by Kiyohiko Munakata on the visual experience of walking through classical Chinese gardens in Suzhou (constructed roughly between the span of the tenth and eighteenth centuries), illustrated that while the distinctly-shaped rock sculptures were a consistent presence within the gardens. The structural implications of cavities were also considered when looking at the plans of the gardens themselves.

Central to the connections mentioned above is the Daoist concept of *dongtian* 洞天 or “cave-heavens.” *Dongtian*, like the immortal islands of Penglai, were conceived of as Daoist paradises; however, as stated in its name, rather than being found out at sea, *dongtian* paradises were found within caverns. The image created by *dongtian* paradises serves as a religious foil to the search for interiority that was emphasized by the likes of Mi Fu, replacing the end goal of truth with the abode of immortals.

When looking at the structures of the classical Chinese gardens in Suzhou, a commonality was the tendency to divide space within the garden into divisions of large and small sizes—with large divisions sometimes being divided into subdivisions. The resulting effect is a compartmentalized space (Fig. 16) that was also porous due to the installment of windows and doorways of varying shapes and sizes. To Munakata, the clearly marked boundaries and porous gate entrances of the classical Chinese garden were visual evidence for the gardens, as a whole, representing the *dongtian* paradises.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Kiyohiko Munakata, “Mysterious Heavens and Chinese Classical Gardens,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 15 (1998): 69.

The implications of Munakata's conclusions are fascinating to contemplate as the *dongtian* paradise gardens clearly share connections to the tradition of paradise garden construction. Like the earlier tradition, microcosmic aspects can certainly be found in the comparison of rock sculptures to mountains; however, the Suzhou gardens offer a significant difference in that they were meant to be walked through. Owners of the garden would be able to stroll through the various doorways, peer through the various openings into other compartments and explore the various corners of their personal paradise. Rather than praying to a paradise for a visit from the immortals, the visitors were already in a paradise. It is almost as if the visitors themselves had become the clouds and mist that were so often depicted as flowing through the crevices of the mountains.

A fitting final object to observe for clouds within the personal imagination is *Nine Dragons* (Fig. 17), a painting by Chen Rong 陳容 (ca. 1210-after 1262) from the Southern Song dynasty. While quite different from the previously explored relationship between clouds and landforms, the zoomorphic element of a dragon nevertheless has its own connections to cloud imagery—particularly with rainfall. A close look at a portion of the scroll provided shows two distinctly different dragons flying in the clouds. Much of the composition is dominated by the negative space of the clouds while wet ink had been applied in washes in order to give the cumulous masses a distinctly hazy contour. Near the upper-right corner, a dry brush with minimal ink seems to have been applied in a sweeping motion in order to convey a sense of movement within the swirling cloud.

In Jennifer Purtle's examination of Chen Rong's *Nine Dragons* handscroll, the painting is situated within a documented Chinese practice of invoking rain during the Northern Song dynasty. The practice, recorded in the *Song shi* was known as "Painted Dragon Method of Praying for Rain" and involved a painting of a dragon as its ritual implement.<sup>78</sup> The actual paintings used in the ritual were likely not to the level of detail in Chen Rong's painting due to their disposable nature; however, Chen Rong himself had the intention of equating his painting to the status of a ritual implement, stating explicitly in his accompanying inscription that he intended for his images to summon dragons and bring about rain.<sup>79</sup> Chen Rong, who considered himself a literatus, essentially saw his act of painting as a ritual action. At the same time, the images of dragons recall previous discussions of *xiangrui*. During the Han dynasty, a yellow dragon had been spotted and classified as an auspicious symbol before eventually becoming the symbol of the Han imperial court.<sup>80</sup> Thus, a dragon came to symbolize a ruler with power over the realm—something that Chen Rong himself may have been attempting to tap into.

Chen Rong's motivation for his paintings is a good representation of the themes observed in this section. In the absence of a ritual that was no longer practiced, Chen took it upon himself as a scholar and painter to become a ritual agent in the practice of evoking dragons and rain. His emphasis on agency finds commonality with the theories and personalities of other notable literati figures who were quick to distinguish

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<sup>78</sup> Jennifer Purtle, "The Pictorial Form of a Zoomorphic Ecology: Dragons and their Painters in Song and Southern Song China," in *The Zoomorphic Imagination in Chinese Art and Culture*, eds. J. Silbergeld and E.Y. Wang (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016), 257.

<sup>79</sup> Purtle, "The Pictorial Form of a Zoomorphic Ecology," 263.

<sup>80</sup> Wu, "A Sanpan Shan Chariot Ornament," 43.

themselves and their standings—a mindset that eventually found its way into Chinese art across various mediums and genres.

## Conclusion

In the closing portions of his treatise on landscape painting, Guo Xi details an overarching search for balance that all painters needed to heed:

When you are planning to paint, you must create a harmonious relationship between heaven and earth. What do we mean by heaven and earth? Take for example a piece of silk a foot and a half long. The upper part must necessarily be the position of heaven, while the lower must be that of earth. The artist must arrange his ideas and design his scenery and fit them into the space between them.<sup>81</sup>

While not necessarily the subject of Guo Xi's thoughts in the excerpt above, clouds and mist can certainly be considered elements that play a significant role within the balancing of the space between. They are negotiators of the relationship between heaven and earth and it is their behavior—either in the sky or with the mountains below—that elicit a variety of traditional associations that extend all the way back to the Eastern Zhou dynasty where conceptions around *qi* and immortality cults had begun to take shape.

The continuity of cloud imagery and its connotations did not mean that the intent behind their depiction had not changed, however, as changing dynasties, new artistic

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<sup>81</sup> 凡經營下筆，必合天地。何謂天地？謂如一尺半幅之上，上留天之位，下留地之位，中間方立意定景。 Translation adapted from Sakanishi, *An Essay on Landscape Painting*, 53.

consciousnesses, and new art theories all brought about a humanistic shift to the development of cloud imagery from their grander, ontological roots. A fitting visual representation for such a shift may be found in a painting (Fig. 18) by the Southern Song painter Ma Lin 馬麟 (ca. 1185-after 1260) that depicts a scene from Wang Wei's poem discussed in the very first section. While the verse had previously been used to demonstrate the vastness of nature and the connections to a cosmological sky river, Ma Lin's painting is much more focused on the poet engaging in his act of viewing where the rivers end and the clouds rise.

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## Images



Fig. 1. Black ground lacquer casket from Mawangdui tomb 1. Second century BCE.  
Hunan Provincial Museum.



Fig. 2. Sketch of painted T-shaped silk banner from Mawangdui tomb no. 1. From Pirazzoli 1982, fig. 23.

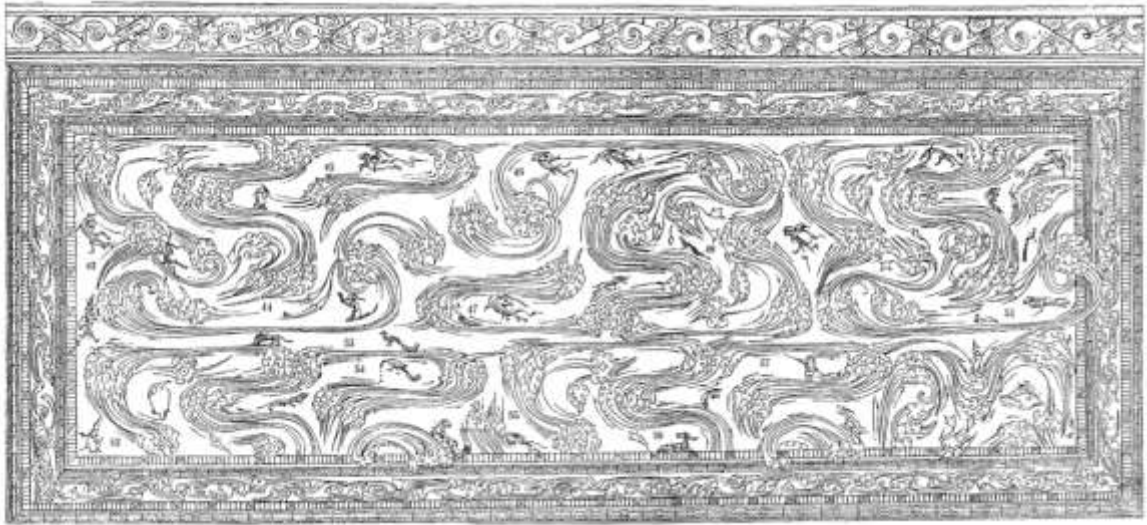


Fig. 3. Drawing of the left side of the lacquer casket from Mawangdui tomb 1. Second century BCE. Hunan Provincial Museum. From Powers 2006, fig. 37.

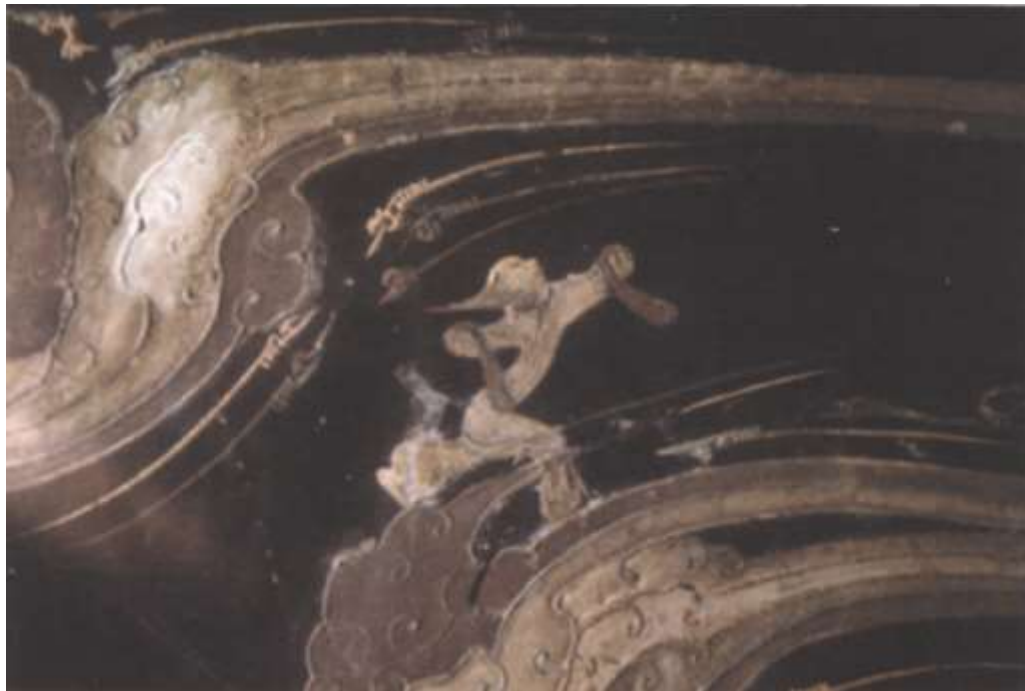


Fig. 4. Immortal spirit dancing. Detail of the head of black-ground lacquer casket. Hunan Provincial Museum. From Powers 2006, fig. 44.



Fig. 5. Detail of a lacquer tray from Huchang, near Yangzhou, Jiangsu. Yangzhou Provincial Museum. From Powers 2006, fig. 48.



Fig. 6. Boshanlu. Bronze with inlaid gold and silver. Late second century BCE. From Rawson 1989, Fig. 2.



Fig. 6.a. Detail of *boshanlu*. Bronze with inlaid gold and silver. Late second century BCE. From Fong 1980, Fig. 115.



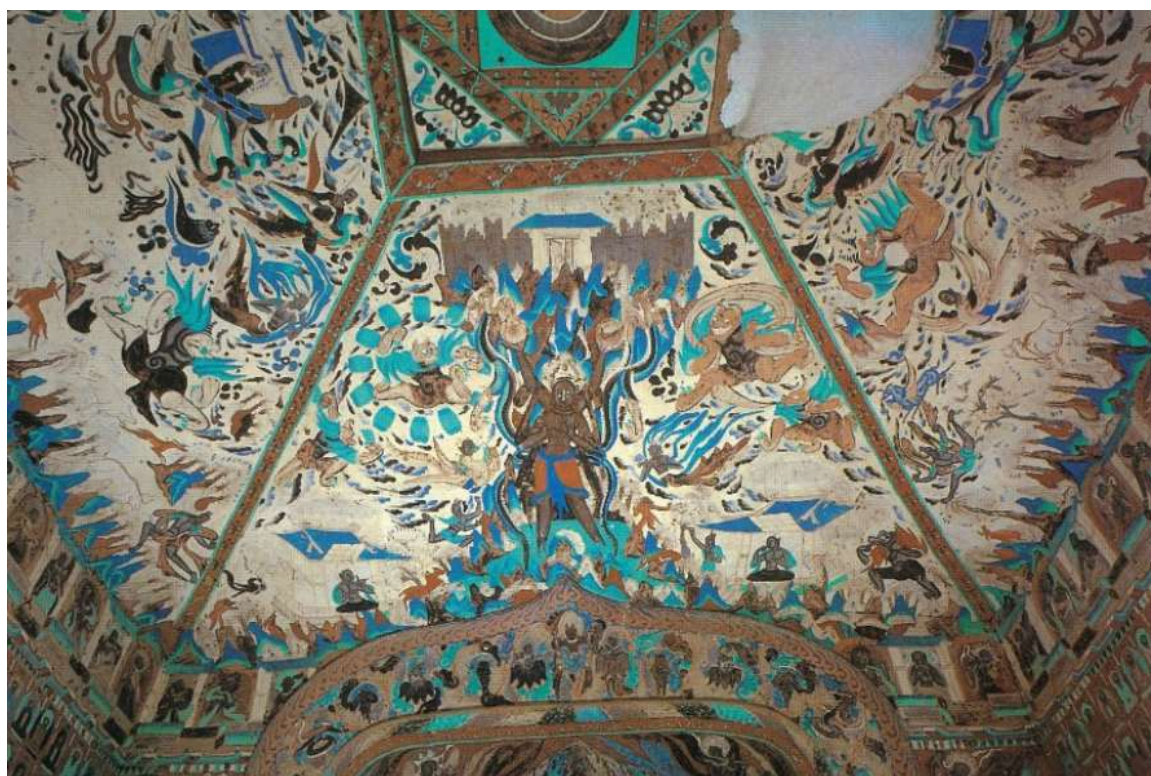


Fig. 7a. Ceiling of Dunhuang cave 249. From Hiyama 2020, fig. 6a.



Fig. 7b. Ceiling of Dunhuang cave 249 (detail). From Hiyama 2020, fig. 6b.





Fig. 8. Detail of a wood-cut illustration to the *Bizanquan* commentary on the Buddhist *Tripitaka*. Printed in 1108. Northern Song dynasty. Harvard Art Museum, Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Louise H Daly, Anonymous and Alpheus Hyatt Funds. From Sullivan 2008, Fig. 7.2.



Fig. 9. *Tiandi mingyang shuilu yiwen*; woodblock-printed ink on paper; Ming dynasty (1368-1644), ca. 1520-1620.

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Fig. 10. Attributed to Huizong. *Auspicious Cranes*, ca. 1112-1126. Handscroll, ink and colors on silk. Liaoning Provincial Museum.



Fig. 11. Guo Xi. *Early Spring*, signed and dated 1027. Hanging scroll, ink and light color on silk. National Palace Museum, Taipei.





Fig. 12. Fan Kuan (circa 960-1030). Travelers among Mountains and Streams. Song dynasty, ink and slight color on silk. National Palace Museum, Taipei



Fig. 13. Attributed to Wang Shen (ca. 1048-1103), *Misty River, Layered Peaks*, ca. 1085. Handscroll, ink and colors on silk, 45.2 x 166 cm, The Shanghai Museum.



Fig. 14. Mi Youren. *Distant Peaks and Clearing Clouds*, 1134. Hanging scroll, ink on paper. Osaka Municipal Museum.



Fig. 15. Yu Ming (1884-1935), "Mi Fu Bowing to Elder Brother Rock," hanging scroll.  
Mr. Robert H. Ellsworth. From Hay 1987, 5.



Fig. 16. Liu Yuan; a corner of the “Stone Forest Court-garden.” From Munakata 1988, 77.





Fig. 17. Chen Rong. Portion of *Nine Dragons*, dated 1244. Handscroll, ink and color on paper. Museum of Fine Arts Boston.



Fig. 18. Ma Lin (ca. 1185-after 1260). *Scholar Reclining and Watching Rising Clouds*; Poem by Wang Wei, 1225-75. Album leaf, ink on silk. The Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund 1961.421.