

Marcello Ghilardi

Chinese landscape painting and the art of living

Abstract

This article deals with the Chinese ink painting tradition, as a paradigm in which art and life are coupled and intertwined. In fact, in Chinese classical aesthetics, art and life do not produce a dramatic tension, but are inscribed in a common process of naturalness or spontaneity (ziran). The painter has to learn how the breath, or vital energy (qì), that flows in every single image-phenomenon (xiang), can be enlivened by the brush strokes. Moreover, the paper builds a dialogue between the European and the Chinese main patterns. Showing alternately the continuity or the discontinuity between art and life, both traditions of thought display the possibility to learn a sort of “art of living”, through – and not despite – the dynamic de-coincidence that appears in the folds of human experience.

Keywords

Ink painting, Image-phenomenon, Existence

Received: 21/08/2020

Approved: 19/10/2020

Editing by: Agostino Bertolotti

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marcello.ghilardi@unipd.it (Università degli Studi di Padova)

1. *Between art and life*

Since the myth of Pygmalion, that was narrated in its most poetic and complete version by Ovid (*Metamorphosis*, X, 243-297), the relationship between art and life has studded aesthetic reflections in the Western tradition. Generally speaking, this relationship could be framed into two main lines or perspectives, which have appeared and disappeared like karst rivers over the centuries: on the one hand, the older line of *mimesis*, according to which art is imitation, recovery, or a representation of life and nature (see Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1460 b 9-31, or also Cicero, *De re publica*, IV, 11: “*Comoedia est imitatio vitae, speculum consuetudinis, imago veritatis*”); on the other hand, a more typically modern line, that we could define as “existential”: according to Nietzsche, “we may very well assume we are already images and artistic projections for the true creator of art, and that our highest dignity lies in our significance as works of art – for only as an aesthetic phenomenon is existence and the world eternally justified” (Nietzsche 2007: 32-3).

So, art is absorbed and “energized” by life, on one side; or life is ordered and figured in art, on the other. Or again: life is elevated to art itself, a sort of *ars vivendi* that allows human beings to navigate safely even in the sometimes stormy seas of existence; or art exhibits the inescapable dissension that every life brings within itself, without any possibility of reconciliation. The metaphysical imprint of European thought has often tried to aim, even through art, at overcoming all contradictions and disagreements. It is with the so-called “negative thought”, between the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries, that an unavoidable tension has been felt between art and life without a possible conciliation. Nietzsche’s perspective aims at the possibility of integrating the tragic nature of life through the construction of forms and the position of ever-renewed values. However, this integration does not imply a final synthesis, a positive affirmation, but rather the ever new reappearance of the same tension, that is, of the crisis that human life is going through while attempting to resolve and justify itself in aesthetic forms. Sometimes the (Apollonian) form of art seems to prevail, sometimes the magmatic (Dionysian) experience of life is dominant. In any case, the human being has to find in that dramatic tension the possibility to avoid a final shipwreck in the waves of existence.

Some decades later, an alternative view was offered by the Italian scholar Carlo Diano, who in 1952 published a short, but very dense text entitled *Forma ed evento*. While drawing inspiration from the theory of

syllogism in Aristotle and the Stoics, Diano's discourse leads to an overall vision of the relationship between the Greek notions of *eidos* and *tyche*, eternal form on one side and imponderable event, i.e. fate or chance (these two meanings are paradoxically convergent in the term *tyche*) on the other side. The "One" alone is *beyond* form and event (see Diano 1967: 68). In the multiplicity of sensory experience, everything is placed between form and event – between Parmenides and Heraclitus, we can add, as exemplary models understanding of reality: between the vision of form, which reduces the event to accident, and the understanding of the event, understood as a changing reality. The extreme, clear dimension of human acting, in which form and event display themselves together, in their pure contradiction as much as in their mutual belonging, is precisely art, a *concordia discors* of mobile life and pure formal structure. Art is form and event in concrete unity: "Not in a new form or synthesis, which in itself would be contradictory [...]. But in the concreteness of figures. Art expresses itself through particular, historically determined figures [...]. The artist sees form, but expresses it in figures, represents it as an epiphany of figures - that is, events. It makes the form happen" (Cacciari 2007: 24). The relationship between art and life brings out the movement of *logos* in its broad ontological sense, that "affirms the truth of difference, whose unity results from harmonizing opposites, [...] which form a unit by their opposition" (Cacciari 2007: 16). Art is not the mere continuation or fulfillment of life, just as life is not simply a field in which the experience of art can assert itself, in order to finally coincide with it. Their connection is tensional and aporetic, torn and tearing – yet it does exist.

Since the 1960s, in the developments of what has variously been defined as body-art, a further perspective has been opened with respect to the relation "form-and-event", or "art-and-life" (see Vergine 2000: 13 ff.). The body, which hypothetically should exhibit life in its nakedness, is presented to the spectator's gaze as a field of action, as a place for an artistic "putting into shape", a plexus in which art and life again – in an unprecedented way – meet, intertwine, and yet differ. One of the threads of this kind of artistic experience leads back to tension and to a poietic dissent. On this basis, one can never give an identity, an affirmation, or a definition of a notion (whether it is life, or art, or truth...) without passing through an intrinsic opposition, a struggle, a dramatic gap, or a rupture.

It would be possible to write a complete history of Western aesthetics, centered on the various ways of proximity and distance between art and life, scrutinizing the choices devised to keep them bound together or to make them separate. But if we focused on the tensional aspect of the

“aesthetic-dramatic” or the (*ante litteram*) existential line of this relationship – even in its more general aspects – we could shed a light on another perspective, in which art and life continuously meet and merge into each other, giving birth to a continuity within the discontinuity with no dramatic tension. This is the Chinese aesthetic tradition: it has in fact elaborated artistic practices that have not tried to imitate the figures or movements of life, nor have they exhibited a tensional distance with respect to it, but have rather tried to modulate and relaunch its internal dynamism, activating an all-encompassing energy flow.

2. *Practicing Chinese painting: a “vital nourishment”*

Ink painting practice, typical of the Chinese tradition that is close to Taoism (*Daojia* 道), is related to the ability of the “sage” (*shengren* 聖人) to follow the vital flow of the *Dao* 道 (or *Tao*), i.e. “way, method, natural process, course of the world”, and also “word, speech”. The meaning of the term expresses the immanent process of reality and the ability to be at ease with it by relaunching its vital animation. In Chinese treatises, “art” and “life” represented two integrated poles, encompassing “ethics” and “aesthetics” which were imagined as merging into each other – despite never being labeled in this way until their encounter with Western thought.

Chinese treatises on painting and writing (see Yu 1977, Escande 2003) have often underlined, in a more or less explicit way, a sort of elective affinity between the painter-writer and the sage. Both know how to flow in the *Dao* to give life to lively works; only the living, vital paintings (*huo* 活) are fully successful, made “as if they are produced by nature” (*tian ru cheng* 天如成). These paintings are excellent precisely because they are vital: formal beauty is not the canon to be followed, what really counts is the ability of the picture to arouse energetic animation in the painting and in the viewer.

Traditionally, in China, writing and painting represent the culmination of culture and civilization. The brush stroke, in an ink painting, is the ideal continuation of a single itinerary, which originates in the engravings on oracle bones and develops in divinatory hexagrams and ideographic and pictographic characters. In the paintings by Chinese *literati*, the value of images is not directly mimetic. It is rather allusive: the gesture of the brush must allow the passage from the determination of the sign to the

indefinite vital breath that is conveyed by the sign itself – that is, it conveys the whole process, the transformation (*hua* 化) in progress. The brush strokes express the dynamism of the world, of everything that is “between heaven and earth” (*tiandi zhi jian* 天地之間). The natural pattern is that of breath, or blood circulation; in the universe, it is a general movement of correspondences between the perceptible and the imperceptible. When the action comes out in a pure and unobstructed way, the internal and the invisible, represented by *xin* 心 (“heart-mind”, the intimate dimension) are in accord with the external and the visible, metonymized by *shou* 手 (the “hand”, the concrete and practical dimension). The painter must place himself at the intersection of the visible and the invisible, in their intersection, knowing that they do not belong to two different ontological domains: they continuously complete each other. The visible, when it rarefies, flows into the invisible, which in turn re-emerges in the visible by condensation, thickening, or concretion.

The dynamic harmony between the two polar dimensions (*yin* and *yang*, empty and full, black and white...) that generate each phenomenon takes place allowing the animation of the vital breath (*qi* 氣) to circulate and expand between the ink strokes on paper. Leaving white spaces, permeating the image with emptiness, the representation expands and develops. Each polarity must welcome the other while preserving it in its specificity – without aiming to a rigid, complete synthesis. The external physical form is the vehicle of *qi* as long as the painter does not stop there, so as to draw on the “intention” (*yi* 意), the impersonal vibration, latent but active in every phenomenon. While Western classical art tends to get in touch with Being through form – from the sensory forms, one reaches the Eternal Forms – Chinese ink painting does not aim at capturing any hypostasis or eternal essence. It indicates and encourages continuous exchange between form and non-form, and vice versa. What a painter illustrates through the brush strokes is the transition through which visible and invisible meet, and the myriad forms that emerge and immerse themselves in the immanent background of the *Dao*, which is always implicated in the forms it unfolds. Chinese painting *depicts the variation of the vital*. Chinese thought and art have not thematized Being – due to the absence of an analogous verb that can be substantiated (as in Greek, *einai* becoming *to on*) – and therefore they have not produced an ontology, but they have codified multiple ways of “nourishing life” (*yang sheng* 養生), as a classic expression goes. *Sheng* does not indicate either a biological life, or a spiritual life – whose nourishment should be understood in a metaphorical sense, just as we usually think of a “nourishment of the soul”. The

Chinese tradition of thought, in its plural schools – which all exploited the various resources of Chinese language – has been able to distinguish, *but did not want to separate*, the animal, organic, biological life, and the spiritual, invisible, or everlasting life. Nourishing (*yang*) implies a continuous relaunch of all energies, visible and invisible forces, in order to ensure a capacity for renewal that allows the individual to remain evolutionary (see Wang 1999: 83-4). On this side of every “sense” (as in direction or meaning), since it is only a place within which a sense can possibly be produced, life is united to art by the logic of the respiratory alternation that animates it. Once *yin*, once *yang* (*yi yin, yi yang*), this is the underlying mechanism that guarantees a continuous renewal of forms. Life and art are analogous, indeed they are fundamentally united by their sustained evolution precisely by virtue of the fact that they do not have a purpose, that is, they are not means in view of further ends (Jullien 2007: 36).

A famous passage within the third chapter of *Zhuangzi*, programmatically entitled *The principle of life nourishment* (*Yangshengzhu* 養生主) stages a dialogue between Prince Wenhui and the butcher Ding, intent on slashing the carcass of an ox without apparent effort. When asked by the prince to explain how technical skill (*ji* 技) can reach a similar level of mastery, the butcher replies:

I love the *Dao* and so I progress in my skill. At first, I saw only the ox. After three years, I did not see him anymore. Now I take it in a spiritual way (*shen* 神) instead of looking at it with my eyes: the knowledge of the senses stops, while the spiritual dimension continues to advance (*guan zhi zhi er shen yu xing* 官知止而神欲行); I take the natural structure (*tianli* 天理) of the ox, attack the large interstices and thrust the blade through large internal spaces. I do not touch veins, arteries, muscles; I do not touch the big bones. A good butcher uses a [new] knife every year, because it cuts the meat. An ordinary butcher uses a [new] knife every month, because it breaks bones. I have been using the same knife for nineteen years, I have quartered thousands of oxen and the edge of the blade is as if it had just been sharpened. (Wang 1999: 85-6, modified translation)

This anecdote has been used for centuries as an example of the maximum expression of understanding the *Dao* of artistry, as the correct “method” and as the “Way” to follow. At first you observe with your eyes, then you learn to avoid the eyes’ sight, because the lines of force (*shi* 勢) to follow, the interstices between the muscles where you must slide the edge of the blade are caught in a different way. The spiritual dimension of which the butcher becomes the bearer and interpreter is the vital animation in its

impalpable sense, the spirit (*shen* 神) as the excellent capacity for perception and interior activity. It is a particularly refined sensitivity, by which an artist, a craftsman – or a butcher – can perform the gestures of their own discipline in an optimal way. Every artist should know how to conform to the style and behavior of that butcher, that is, how to develop a refined “feeling” that captures the lines of force – of a body, a face, a landscape, a situation – in order to flow through them. So, art can reach its highest level, because it moves according to the potential of life force, or according to the folds and dynamisms taking place in existence. Art at its purest, free, and most effective level consists in embracing the course of things, the global process of reality, flowing through it and enlivening it through figures, sounds, or words.

3. *Modulating vital energy*

Unlike the classical Western tradition, the canons of a successful work do not depend on harmonic and geometric proportions, or on mathematical relationships; nor is it the human body, as the archetype of beauty, that constitutes a privileged object to represent. At the center of the pictorial figuration is the natural landscape (*shanshui* 山水, literally “mountains-waters”) in its infinite variety of configurations and relationships between high and low, solid and liquid, stable and changeable. The resonating spirit (*shen*) that blows between the mountains and the waves is made vibrant by brush and ink. So, a painting becomes an environment, a living place in which you can dive and breath, rather than an inert object to contemplate.

The skilled painter (but this applies equally well to the poet or the musician) is able to grasp and return for the viewer of his art the multiple expressions of the *qi* that animates the ever-unfolding processes of reality. In this way, he connects and communicates the different aspects of life, the individual and the cosmic, the ethical and aesthetic, the natural and the social, while maintaining his attention on the landscape and its vital animation. Above all, it is important to reproduce the process of nature: the imitation is not of forms, but of a *modus operandi* – that of the spontaneous dehiscence of nature, in perennial transition. As a painter and writer of the Song era, Qian Wenshi, writes: “The mountain in a rainy day or the mountain in a sunny day are easy for the painter to paint. But when sunshine turns into rain, or when rain turns to sunshine [...], between ‘being there’ and ‘non-being there’ (*you wu zhi jian* 有無之間) –

this is what is difficult to paint” (see Yu 1977: 84, see also Sirén 2005: 190-8). The preposition “between” (*jian* 間) effectively alludes to the transitivity of living, and shows the distance from every thought of Being. The vital happens “between” states or conditions, in the alternation and non-coincidence, as it is implied in a repetitive systole and diastole cycle. The mountain is subtly perceived in its immensity, not in the fullness of sunlight or when it is hidden by clouds, but *between* rain and clear sky, *between* fog and clear air.

A clear and distinct Cartesian vision would rather fix a situation, or a landscape, by grasping and crystallizing being, or essence. But the goal of classical Chinese art is precisely to grasp the positive value of dynamism and ambiguity, showing the connections of different moments and allowing the flow of energy. For this reason, the “fixation” or the passion for beauty (*mei* 美) has not aroused great interest. It would risk leading to a form of stasis, with an ecstatic suspension of breath. The conception that has prevailed in the Chinese aesthetic world is a different one: what is fixed detaches itself from the flow of life, deviates from the *Dao* and becomes sterile, thus it cannot be able to make the *qi* flow. If we wanted to talk about “beauty” anyway, then it would lie in the ability to convey the vital breath that animates nature. Among the aesthetic connotations of a work of art, higher than Beauty, higher than the Divine/Spiritual (*shen*), we find above all the “natural” (*ziran* 自然, literally “so by itself”, or “spontaneity”) and the “vital” (*shengla* 生辣). In particular, the latter compound expresses the most refined level of artistry, which from a still raw and primitive vitality (*sheng*) passes through the maturation of a style and a technique, then finally flows into a vitality or naturalness that has assimilated the technique and made it a “second nature” (see Coleman 1978: 89-91; on the “discontinuous continuity” between art and nature in the Japanese tradition, see Ōhashi 2014).

The “operational” continuity that connects art and the manifestation of nature and life is also found between the landscape and the painter who portrays it. There is no break between the figured object and the subject that figures, but correspondence and circulation of the same energy. Painting does not seek to imitate external phenomena – in fact, a separation has never been produced between image and phenomenon, between the self and the world, or between the sensory and the intelligible. Painting implies a broader and more global feeling than that which affects only the eyes and sight. A painter’s mastery consists in knowing how to come back to a condition of original spontaneity, without following heteronomous rules. If you bind yourself to rigid rules, you will end up

as a mere mannerist or technical executor, and true vitality and liveliness will be lost. A master is not even a “genius” in the romantic sense: he cannot be said to give the rule to himself, since there is not even a subjective “self” that can create or receive a rule. In fact, in his *Treatise on painting* the monk and painter Shitao wrote: “No method is the perfect method. [...] Therefore, to have method, one must have transformations. [...] Transformations, then, yield the method of no-method. Painting is the great way of the transformation of the world” (Coleman 1978: 48). The masterful work happens spontaneously, and the artist's exercise is to favor such a happening by purifying themselves, reducing any ambition for egoic intervention, and agreeing to the impersonal movement of the *Dao*. The codified norms are enforced when the original contact with the natural spontaneity of the process has been lost, but a good artist learns to return to a condition of original spontaneity, renewing and enhancing the vital breath. Since he is in harmony with the world, the sage does not need to conform to heteronomous rules, or adapt to a defined style. Reaching extreme naturalness, he has learned to be authentically spontaneous. He is like water, which does not assume any stable form – in this sense, it has no rigid rules – and conforms to every surface or container, slides downstream and overcomes any resistance. A rule with no transformation kills the living process; a transformation that does not follow rules is pure chance or hazard. The painter must be able to recognize this mutual implication, in order to be able to operate in accordance with life, and not in antagonism to it.

In this context, artistic practice is not understood in the manner of a “creation”, according to the demiurgic model that was established in Europe after the end of the ancient era (see Tatarkiewicz 1980: 244-65). The pattern is that of a modification-transformation (*bianhua* 变化), that is, a re-elaboration or translation, as an expression of the spontaneous process of things. Life continuously transforms itself in the multiplicity of forms. The act of painting brings out this truth and arranges it in a visible form. The will to make reality stable, immutable, is the fatal mistake, which renders a painting inanimate, and reduces phenomena to fossilized concretions. Thinking about stability, stopping the flow of forms, means annihilating life and dissociating oneself from the circulation of breath.

Painting and writing, far from being forms of “artifice” that detach the human from spontaneity, are rather ways for the correct unfolding of its natural potential. A painter “puts into image” what is unceasingly moving and transforming. Each painting is a nucleus of active, mutually correlated tensions, it displays different phases in one figure. Each particular form is

an actualization of the natural process, and participates in its harmony (*he* 和, a fundamental value for all the currents of classical Chinese thought). Fullness and emptiness, presence and absence mutually implicate each other both in nature and in the picture, according to a logic of respiratory alternation. On paper, the picture is apparently unfinished, but it is precisely through that incompleteness that the "spiritual" unfolds in its subtlest and refined expression. Life is a never-ending circulation, a dynamism in which the whole movement and the transmission of energy matter more than the physical permanence of the individual figures.

4. *Beyond aesthetics: art as a form of life*

The artistic technique and method go beyond the purely aesthetic sphere: they include ethical aspects. Only when the gesture – such as a brush stroke – starts from the interior domain of *xin* ("mind-heart") an artist can reach excellence. *Xin*, bringing together the meanings of mind-intellect and heart-emotion-feeling, is the "place" of a receptivity (*shou* 受) that purifies the artist's ego. This receptivity does not aim to get the presence of a "thing", or a substance (the landscape, a bamboo, a rock, or even a feeling) but the *event* of the landscape, or the bamboo, or the rock, as they are a sensitive manifestation in an articulated system of relationships (see Jullien 2009: 91-140). Therefore, a pictorial representation is not at stake: the notion of representation is based on that of a presence (in Latin, *praesentia*, from the verb *prae-esse*) that makes itself present again to the onlooker's gaze. The Chinese tradition encodes a different relationship between phenomenon and image, both expressed by the character *xiang* 象: they are not separate, there is a continuity between a phenomenon and its image, no ontological heterogeneity between a "thing" and its figure (therefore not even an ontological loss like in Plato's philosophy). Image and phenomenon are coupled and expressed by the same Chinese character, because the same breath inspires and envelops them. The same breath inspires and animates the figure of the painted landscape just as the singular body of the artist.

The role of "body" (*xing* 形, the shape, or *ti* 体, the structure: see Jullien 2007: 65-74) is essential to give birth to an image. The pictorial gesture is the explication of a body, whose vital energy is actualized by modifying-transforming forms (and also sounds, or words) in a morphogenetic and cosmogonic enterprise. The artist's body is not focused only on a playful exercise, it rather cooperates in the making of the world and in

the circulation of life. The living body is realized in the continuity of expressive gestures.

This is how the artistic practice produces a particular “posture” of the subject, paradoxically favoring the emergence of a “de-subjectivated” gesture, therefore the destitution of the artist’s imaginary (i.e. psychological, subjective) identity. In Shitao’s treatise, what testifies to artistic excellence is the spontaneous dissolution of the attachments to the psychological self that prevent the painter from recognizing himself as a relationship. Traditional disciplines, or arts, foster an experience of abandonment of the egocentric self: this is a necessary condition for the self to re-emerge at another level, as a functional and relational identity. The assiduous practice of an art encourages the process of self-transformation. Every single brush stroke, repeated countless times in order to be incorporated by the painter, is unique; in that uniqueness, in that event the globality of the process of *Dao* is renewed (see Sini 2012: 43-9, Billeter 2010: 17-21).

At the core of the pictorial or poetic image there is always an exercise of “receptivity” (*shou*). A landscape, rather than to be seen, is to be listened to, felt, it should be perceived with all the senses involved. Life implies the ability to flow, without rooting in a rigid manner – this is why the metaphor for breathing had such a huge success in East-Asian cultures. Painting is a sort of training to avoid the stasis that prevents a good mobilization of energies. The great image that appears from the white of a paper is immanent to the process of all the images-phenomena, i.e. to all the forms in the world: painting means to regenerate life.

5. *The experience of landscape: from aesthetics to ethics*

In the aforementioned text by Shitao, we find precious indications on the meaning and techniques of landscape painting, which constitutes the most emblematic form for the pictorial art of Chinese *literati*: “The substance of mountains and rivers [i.e. landscape] contains the reality of the universe” (Coleman 1978: 71). The author continues: “I, having mastered one-stroke painting, can penetrate into the form and spirit of mountains and rivers. This is why I have always kept to mountains and rivers during the past fifty years. I neither neglected them as useless nor let them conceal their secrets. Mountains and rivers let me communicate for them” (Coleman 1978: 75). Only by managing to understand the intrinsic order of the world’s relational totality, can we penetrate the “intimate nature”

of the landscape. In Chinese, “landscape” does not correspond to a panoramic view or to a portion of territory observed and reproduced on a surface, but expresses a polar relationship between high and low, between solid and liquid, between firmness and mutability. The landscape is a system in transition which on paper, thanks to the play of shades, appears and disappears, emerges and plunges into the clouds and mists, into the white and indistinct emptiness that encloses the ever-changing animation of nature itself. Another term is used in Chinese to convey the notion of landscape: *fengjing* 风景, that is “wind-light”.

Viewed as “wind”, landscape comes to be thought of as diffusion and not merely as density: as a discreet, not altogether appreciable influx and not merely as patient and tangible. In China wind prompts us to think of landscape in terms of its variation as well. Since earliest antiquity the Chinese have distinguished “eight winds” (*ba feng*, 八风), by provenance and direction. The “wind” known as “luminous” (*feng jing*, 风景) is warm and mild. It is this wind, through its semantics, that favors (fecundates) the advent of landscape. (Jullien 2018: 47)

This coupling and correlation display another perspective of landscape. Here we are not facing the relation between high and low, or immobility and dynamism, but we “see” through the wind and the light the invisibility that produces effects and the visibility that shines, or the mutability, and the brilliant character of scenery. The manifestation of a landscape is indeed between visible (light) and invisible (wind), it is not detached from the senses, but nonetheless it is not attached to materiality.

One may think of a landscape as *shanshui* or *fengjing*, in both cases one will find that in the texts and treatises on painting the act of creating and perceiving images is portrayed as an exercise of overcoming the will to fix and define the outline of an object or a territory. What really counts is not tracing a large amount of lines and details, but reducing every strict determination to allow the observer to intervene. The onlooker must *merge with the image*, completing the empty spaces, making it a lively element of nature itself, “between” visibility and invisibility. Painting and looking at images become ethical actions, because they free the forms, it allows the breathing character of nature to circulate in the images themselves, just as in phenomena. The painter does not have to block and define the brush’s strokes, but on the contrary he should make the traces fluid and nuanced. It is a painting without “object”, offering hints or traces that allow the operative, energetic qualities to be perceived. As François Jullien writes:

“Mountains-waters” symbolizes these dualities that hold the world in tension, and the infinite exchanges that result from them. Hence, far from being conceived as a fragment of land subject to the authority of the gaze and delimited by its horizon, the Chinese landscape puts into play the functional aggregate of opposing yet corresponding elements, and it is that dynamism as a whole, whatever the scale, that the brush will be called on to capture. The Chinese painter, in his most insignificant painting, figures the process of things as a whole, the entire, infinitely diverse play of its polarities. (Jullien 2009: 122)

The work itself becomes a process, the image vibrates in a vital tension, but it stays fluid and moving. This tension is not that of a struggle, a fight between the artist and their work or inspiration. To become a master, the Chinese or Japanese artist has to learn a *dis*-tension: they must eliminate the destroying tension that often inhabits their soul, and fill it with a living and positive tension in the image. In this way, the image will be truly alive, not a copy or imitation, but a fragment of life, a part of nature itself. Its lively character depends on the inner logic, which couples elements and makes the vital energy (*qi*) flowing throughout the landscape dynamic. While the European tradition has developed and fostered a logic of composition, of structured, syllogistic argumentation, the Chinese tradition followed a different path. Thinking, tracing sinograms, painting, or giving birth to poetic figures – all these practices are essentially based on coupling, pairing, combining polar opposites. At this level, as we already pointed out, the phantasmatic identity of the artist dissolves. At this level, you live and move *in* life and art, flow in them returning to a beginner’s mind, free from any pre-established technique.

6. *Art and life as events of “de-coincidence”*

There is no primacy of the eye, in the plastic or figurative arts such as painting or calligraphy. Other coherences are at stake here, other ways of accessing the landscape and the signs of the world. European philosophy, since Plato to the present day, has often insisted effectively on vision (even in metaphorical form or extended to the other senses, as in the last works by Merleau-Ponty), exploiting the resources of the eye, not only to describe the mechanisms of pictorial art, but more particularly to understand and define the theoretical activity itself (see Heidegger 2004: 73-126, Krämer 2012). Instead, the Chinese texts on art and aesthetics focus on the overall condition that allows one to perceive in a pure, non-partial way. More than the very act of looking or listening, the most important

dimension of artistic experience is a preliminary act of purification, of interior insight, which allows perception and breathing to flow freely together.

The European consideration of painting has focused on the gaze and, in its quest for greater objectivity, has gone back to how the retina produces sight. It has shown little interest in the necessary condition of painting: not staring at something on the outside but purifying the inside, breaking free from the world and contemplating. The term “contemplation” (*recueillement*), as opposed to “gaze”, should be understood as a conjunction of two meanings: as contemplation of self, freed from importunities and uncleanness, and as a gathering up (the other sense of *recueillement*) of the landscape within oneself. It is from the angle of *recueillement* that literati art chose to approach and conceive of painting over the centuries, in increasingly explicit terms. (Jullien 2009: 161)

This means to activate a way of seeing that goes beyond the purely optical function. So, looking at a landscape or at a picture is a deep contemplation, a reciprocal immersion of the painter's body and the body of nature. The same breath-energy condenses and thins and is translated into the multiple forms of reality, in visual images, or in the characters traced by ink on paper. The deepest capacity of the poet-painter consists in integrating his own vital breath with that of nature and the entire universe: this energy collects and expands again in a rhythmic pulsation, exceeding the limits of the page. A subtle vibration of vitality matures an intimate correspondence: this is the real process that involves in a single movement what is perceptible and what is not, the singularity of the subject at work and the entirety of the processes in which it is inscribed. Sea, river, mountain, trees, rocks are no longer just “seen”, or “looked at” by a viewer. The painter flows, grows, rises together with them, welcomes within themselves the very creation of the landscape in which she is transfused. This is the deepest and broadest “vision”, which allows new possibilities and resources to emerge, since it prevents us from flattening our own life in a dull adaptation to a rigid and static situation. The artistic practice effectively becomes the practice of wisdom when it introduces an authentic form of “existence”, that is, what is not reduced to the monotonous repetition of the identical, to the sterile coincidence of oneself with oneself. The artistic experience – not only for the painter or poet, but also for those who are users, spectators, if they learn how to “feel” with their heart-mind (*xin*) – is an exercise (*askesis*, in Greek, or *gongfu* 功夫, in Chinese) to perceive. It makes existence emerge, it exposes life outside (*ek-*) or beyond the dull coincidence with its basic needs. Only in

this way, insofar as it is a form of self-transcendence, the living person really becomes an authentic human subject, in continuous tension and renewal, who discovers multiple forms of dwelling in the world (this recalls some perspectives of Twentieth-century philosophical anthropology: see for instance Plessner 2019).

Some thematic knots of the Chinese tradition are linked and thus interact, in an unexpected way, with many aspects of the European tradition. Between form and event, between art and life, there can certainly be a gap, and a de-coincidence appears, with no need for a final synthesis. The productivity and fruitfulness of this intertwining is guaranteed precisely by virtue of – and not in spite of – the impossibility of reconciling the two dimensions. Life remains wider than art: art is always a part, a subset of life. Yet, art offers life the opportunity to reflect itself, not to sink into coincidence or into a flat adaptation, in order to continually transcend, exceed itself. Indeed, modern European reflection has stressed the tension and distance, the moments that show internal cracks and fractures in the relationship between art and life, or the constantly frayed character of human existence depicted by the artistic enterprise (see Voza 2005). Instead, what the Chinese aesthetic tradition – at least, up to the encounter with Western modernity – has primarily insisted on was a harmonious encounter, a continuity, or the possibility of fading into one another for art and life. But even for Taoist thought, which has given great inspiration to landscape painting and which has also encouraged the search for long life, extreme attachment to life is not necessarily positive: those who yearn for life end up wasting it (see Jullien 2007: 70-1). On the contrary, classical Chinese aesthetic thought shows – without underlying the lacerations of the enigmatic nature of human existence, as tragedy does in Western culture – how artistic practice offers itself as a possible path (*Dao*: the method, or the Way) to learn to truly live.

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