

Jizi and Domains of Space: Dao, Natural Environment and Self

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How can Chinese ink painters contribute to global art in ways that are contemporary and authentically Chinese? The question is whether traditional Chinese landscape paintings can address the present-day needs of individual human beings across the world. The ink-washes of traditional mountain and water (山水 *shanshui*) painting are often regarded as most expressive of traditional Chinese philosophy. With the works of this exhibition, Jizi demonstrates that *shanshui* aesthetics is still the basis for a principle of spiritual union that gives each human being a sense of home in the visible landscape and the universe. Jizi's mission statement develops the principle of union in more detail: "the unification of Heaven and Earth and Humanity, insight into the Dao, the material universe and myself." There are then three domains at work – invisible Dao, the natural environment and the human being's own individual nature – and Jizi's paintings display them as three related dimensions of space. Most importantly, the artistic intention is to express the breadth of a fundamental idea of Chinese philosophy: "Heaven and humanity are one" (天人合一, *tian ren he yi*). By analyzing Jizi's images, we learn how this idea of the unity of heaven and the human can inspire particular individuals to care for the natural environment.

The Search for "Chineseness" and Paths of Synthesis and Tradition

The timeliness of Jizi's commitment to *shanshui* painting and traditional Chinese philosophy is clear, given the growing interest in what is now called "Chineseness." Today, after success in the international venues of art, many contemporary Chinese artists seek to make their contributions uniquely Chinese. To retain local creativity, they search for some guiding content of "Chineseness." This is neither a turn to conventional nationalism nor an attempt to rank one culture above another. It is to explore what is historically Chinese and available to all for consideration. This trend of "re-Chineseness" also stems from a momentous dialectic of global significance unfolding in China. The more materialist thinking manages modernization, the greater the impetus to explore resources of traditional Chinese culture for spiritual balance. Jizi contributes his innovations during this search for "Chineseness."

To evaluate Jizi's paintings for their effectiveness, it helps to consider the diverse attitudes and compositional

features he has developed. To a large extent, he has created the space of invisible Dao with an attitude of synthesis and features of cosmic construction. The second space of natural environment is crafted with an attitude of traditionalism, and it exhibits forms of monumental landscape. The third space of the individual human being is conveyed by non-objective formlessness, figure-ground reversals and enclosed interior displays that are neighboring and interlocking.

As the exhibition shows, the attitude of tradition and forms of monumental landscape are suggested by *Boundless Land* (2009), *Flying Snow No. 1* and *No.2* (2010) and *Epic of Nature* (1994-2006). The attitude of synthesis and the influence of Surrealism are suggested by the imaginary character of the landscape in *Between Sky and Earth* (2009) and the dreaminess of *Sky Aura* (2009). Receding geometric plane in *The Extension of Time No. 1* (2013) references the motion in Futurist paintings. Formless areas exist in the corners of *Between Sky and Earth*, while enclosed displays of interior space are evident in *Dao of Ink No. 13* (2008).

Images of Union: Invisible Dao, Earth and Humanity

Does Jizi succeed in expressing clearly the principle “Heaven and humanity are one” (天人合一, *tian ren he yi*)? The first insight provided by the exhibition is that Jizi adds on to *shanshui* painting so that the synthesis provides images of the invisible domain of Dao. Shitao (1642-17107) refers to the domain of Dao in his writings about ink painting, but he never depicts this invisible realm. One of Jizi’s most stunning achievements in this regard is *Epic of Nature*, where the primordial world of Dao begins with waters and oceanic swirls, progresses through monumental ridges and culminates in a new world surrounded by flashes that suggest others. In *The Extension of Time Number 1*, he looks upon the scene of heaven, as Dao moves through the universe and its structures of time and space. At times, Jizi anthropomorphizes the dimension of Dao, as can be seen indirectly with the lifesaving arc in *Ark of Heaven* and the bright human profile in *Sky Aura*. But the domain of Dao is dynamic and never a mere pupil of human conceptions.

Has Jizi shown the unity of the space of Dao with the space of natural environment? Yes. He depicts this unity magnificently with *Between Sky and Earth* (2009), a work of calm beauty. With a celestial space above and physical ruins of human cultures below, this painting expresses well the unity of nature and the human.

In short, forces of the universe and historical events in the natural environment do not exist separately from one another. Jizi's perspective is global: images of the Great Wall stand next to carefully drawn Greco-Roman pediments and entablatures. Interesting differences emerge from a comparison with *Course of Empire: Desolation* (1837) by Thomas Cole (1801-1848), the founder of the Hudson River School of landscape painting. Both artists depict the history and passing of human cultures; but Cole emphasizes decay caused by materialism while Jizi notes new growth. One remaining question is whether *Between Sky and Earth* expresses unity with the third space of the individual human being's own peculiar existence.

This exhibition reveals how Jizi has stretched the model of *shanshui* painting so it can express the place of the third space of the individual person. To show this third space, Jizi develops two stylistic features: non-objective formlessness and interior displays. In the case of *Between Sky and Earth*, the third space is displayed by images of formlessness at the four corners. The formlessness of these areas is significant, because of the importance assigned to formless or non-objective images by Jing Hao (active 940), a painter and writer who Jizi read and accepted. According to Jing Hao's writings from the Five Dynasties period (907-960), a *shanshui* painting must always include an image of a formless *interior* surface so that it can resonate authentically with the animating vitality displayed whenever a person takes an actual look at the natural environment. Thus the four corners (two with his seal) signal that Jizi is still partly a neo-traditionalist who meets *shanshui* criteria for paintings that resonate with the vitality of nature. Therefore *Between Sky and Earth* expresses fully the principle "Heaven and humanity are one": nothing – not even the domain of Dao or material forces of history – exist separately from the space of the individual human being who is represented by images of a formless sensuous surface.

In *Dao of Ink No. 13*, this third space is represented as an enclosed interior display. The idea here and in the *Dao of Ink Series* is this: a display of the visible natural environment can always be looked at in a second way, namely, as an enclosed *interior* sensuous surface or texture that is visible to oneself and no one else. This is a breakthrough and Jizi's gift for painting: *Dao of Ink No. 13* explains *by showing* how a beholder can look non-objectively and watch the space of the visible landscape transform from that of an external object into the third space of an intimate, interior sensuous-surface and an innate textured self-existence.

After this swopping of interpretations for the space of sensuous surface, the beholder acquires an authentic feeling of unity with nature. For the individual person, the non-objective sensuous surface of the visible is a space that serves as the body or root for realizing invisible Dao, the primordial nature of the universe as a whole.

Global Dialogue and Transformation

Jizi's work is an early contribution to a more balanced and inclusive global community of artists capable of new thinking about nature and the unity of life. He has added two features to traditional Chinese landscape painting: images of the space of Dao and images of the space of the individual person's own unique sensuous existence. By affirming *shanshui* painting with images that resonate more strongly with the third space of interior sensuous surface, Jizi awakens us: the human being's own individual nature is the display of the private character of the natural environment. Is this awakening relevant to contemporary social problems? Yes. When sensuous surface is noticed as the individual person's own nature, the visible landscape takes on an aesthetic dimension of environmental beauty that signals living in happiness. The unity of one's individuality with visible landscape inspires an imperative to protect the environment. As Jizi has said, when you feel that you are inseparable from nature, you cannot continue to damage the environment.

The paintings here are icons for cross-cultural dialogue on which domains of existence promote unity, wisdom and spiritual balance. After Jizi, what are we to think of twentieth-century object-oriented theories which claim that art about life is expressive of public objects, material things and not what is private? The globalization of Jizi's paintings offers each of us an opportunity to reassess our ideas about unity with nature.

Sources

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