7

Visualizing the Divine in Medieval China

Katherine R. Tsiang

Introduction

In Chinese civilization, as in many other cultures, the worship and visual representation of the divine or spiritual in art began in ancient times and has taken many forms throughout history. The early medieval period, third through sixth centuries CE, saw particularly active growth of religious imagery in a context of multiple belief systems and a multicultural environment. It was a time of political disunity after the fall of the first great imperial dynastic era, the Han (206 BCE–220 CE), when non-Han Chinese people who had occupied peripheral areas of the former empire grew more powerful and established regional feudal kingdoms. Though the period has been regarded as one of cultural decline from the perspective of dynastic histories, it brought about the formation of major religions, the compilation of religious texts, and the production of religious and other art on a large scale. It was in fact a period of great richness of visual culture, in which people began to recognize individual artists and record their names in history. Those educated in Chinese classical history and literature sought to preserve and reinterpret ancient traditions in the face of the rise of beliefs and practices derived from traditions originating outside Chinese culture. Social, political, and cultural developments of this period laid the institutional foundations for the reunified empire of the Tang dynasty (618–907), and established formative precedents not only in religious art but also in the fine arts of calligraphy, painting, and literature.

The period between the Han and Tang dynasties saw an unprecedented development of religious imagery as well as religious beliefs about divinity, the spirit world, and the afterlife. Buddhist art of this period has received the most attention because of its monumental projects and the survival of many Buddhist images of stone or bronze, as well

A Companion to Chinese Art, First Edition. Edited by Martin J. Powers and Katherine R. Tsiang.
© 2016 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published 2016 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

cave temples with preserved sculptures and mural paintings. Buddhism emerged as the fastest-growing and most influential religion in this period after its introduction from India around the first century CE. Its spread and establishment as a Chinese institution from the early medieval period into modern times involves transmission, adaptation, translation, and interaction with native religious beliefs and practices over centuries that saw cycles of sponsorship and suppression by ruling houses, and the rise and fall of popular schools. In this early period, native Chinese beliefs about spirits of the natural world that persisted from ancient times interacted with Indian Buddhist beliefs to stir the visual imagination. Religious Daoism (Taoism) grew as an institution in part in response to Buddhism, with the result that image-making also became integrated with Daoist religious observance. Finally, ancestor worship, a major area of cultural production and ceremonial practices from ancient to modern times, was an important factor in the construction of tombs and family shrines that featured religious images during this period. The cult of ancestors in China is supported by Confucian views of family and society and also relates to religious concepts of death, the afterlife, and the universe. In the last century, there has been increasing interest in and study of the art of tombs in light of an ever-growing body of visual material and artifacts brought to light through extensive archaeological activity in China.

Conventionally, the type of art discussed here has been categorized by religious affiliations with Buddhism, Daoism, and ancestor worship. Although treating the art of these traditions separately makes for a cleaner narrative, recent research reveals that concepts of the divine were quite fluid in the society, and heterogeneity in texts as well as imagery—once considered anomalous—was common (Mollier 2008). This invites new taxonomies of sacred imagery that extend across conventionally defined religious institutions. Therefore, this chapter presents some perspectives organized around three main types of images: (i) figures of divine presence, (ii) sacred spaces and divine cosmologies, and (iii) landscape as sacred geography.

Historical Background

Peoples of China performed sacrifices to gods of nature and other spirits in ancient times. By the last centuries BCE, texts record a pantheon of celestial divinities—such as the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwang mu) and King Father of the East (Dongwanggong), spirits of the four cardinal directions, sacred mountains, and mythical and legendary figures. Some were represented pictorially in anthropomorphic, animal-based, or semi-human forms. Sacrifices were made to these ghosts and spirits and to nourish the spirits of ancestors and protect the living. Eventually there developed a unified hierarchical organization with the chief deities in the heavenly realm. Two deities in particular, the Heavenly Thearch (Tiandi) and a dominant astrological deity called Grand One (Taiyi), can be regarded as embodiments of the unity of the cosmos. Influential philosophers of the time, such as Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BCE) conceived of the cosmos as permeated by elemental qualities that formed the basis of the system of all natural processes and relationships (Harper 1999: 815–830). These elemental properties included *qi* (cosmic vapors), y*in* (cold/inert), *yang* (hot/active), and the Five Agents (earth, wood, metal, fire, and water), the latter calling to mind the four elements familiar to European cosmology. With the consolidation of the Chinese empire during the Han period (206 BCE–220 CE), facilitated by improved communication and

a central administration, these early concepts of the natural world became widely established, though localized cults still persisted.

Within this unified system, order and change in the heavenly realm, the earthly world, the realm of human society, and the individual person were mutually interrelated in what is known as a "correlative cosmology" (A. Wang 2000). In the late second century BCE, Dong Zhongshu developed the idea of interrelated phenomena into a systematic cosmology in which human political power and social conduct were seen to parallel heavenly events. Based on principles of *yin*, *yang*, and the Five Agents, he proposed that order in the earthly realm should model itself on that of the cosmos through administrative structure and ritual observances such as seasonal sacrifices, and civil and military operations. Later in the Han period, the emperors began to honor their ancestors as the equal of Heaven (the ancestor of all things), and to invoke cosmic signs to confirm and justify their regimes (Powers 1981: 31–33).

These early traditions constituted part of the foundation of what is now known as religious Daoism, an institution that introduced a divine system of authority over the spirits of nature. In classical texts such as the *Laozi, Zhuangzi, Huainanzi*, etc., the Dao referred to principles informing natural process, but in religious Daoism the Dao was transformed into an all-present divinity and an anthropomorphic object of liturgical veneration. In the late Han period, Laozi, a figure believed to be the author of the founding philosophical text of Daoism, the *Daodejing* (The classic of the way and virtue), came to be regarded as an embodiment of the Dao. By the early centuries CE, legends had accrued such that Laozi had become an immortalized recipient of imperial sacrifices and a symbol of cosmic harmony. Around the same time, contemplation practices arose that allowed the adept practitioner to call on and see spirits as essences of the cosmos within the body.

Buddhism, introduced from India via the Central Asian trade routes that were opened in the first century BCE with the expansion of the Han Empire, is associated with the "Western Regions." The historical Buddha, or "Enlightened One," known as Shakyamuni, or "Sage of the Shakyas" is believed to have been born in the fifth century BCE into the princely clan of the Shakyas in northern India. According to scriptural records, he was conceived miraculously when a sacred white elephant descended into his mother's body. He was born from her side as she stood in the Lumbini Grove holding on to the branch of a tree and was able to walk and speak at birth. The young prince Shakyamuni grew up in palatial surroundings, but after becoming aware of the suffering in life, he left the palace to seek enlightenment. He established a monastic movement based on ideals of poverty and self-discipline to overcome desires that are the cause of suffering and that bind the living to an endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Through renouncing worldly life, undertaking ethical action, and cultivating the mind through concentration, he achieved spiritual awakening and ultimate liberation, *parinirvana*. In the centuries following the death of Shakyamuni, Buddhism developed into an institutionalized religion with temples and monasteries, not unlike the development of Christianity in the West and, as in Christianity, with believers who stressed faith and performance of rituals while others were based in monastic life and study. Similarly in both traditions, an elaborate imagery of devotional figures and holy beings arose, drawing from native beliefs and legends. Through Buddhism the Chinese adopted a variety of Indian philosophical concepts, such as, karmic causation within eternal cycles of life, the tortures of hell, and the idea of multiple universes in space and time, as well as Indian cultural images introduced via Central Asia and ocean routes.

Figures of Divine Presence

A major feature distinguishing art of the medieval period in China is emergence of the iconic figural image, a seated image facing forward and flanked by smaller standing attendants in a hierarchical and axially symmetrical arrangement that directs attention toward the central focus of veneration. The frontal orientation is in distinct contrast to the Han conventional depiction of humans, divinities, culture heroes, and prominent historical figures in profile or three-quarter view. Looking at the new iconic image, the viewer naturally receives the gaze of the central figure and can sense being in its presence. This type of divine image became the predominant type in multiple contexts of religious veneration in China. An important turning point appears to have been the introduction of Buddhism to China. While the appearance of the frontally seated iconic figure is linked to the introduction of Buddhism, the earliest Buddha-like images in China may not have been understood as such, as they did not at first appear in specifically Buddhist contexts (Wu 1989: 134–138). Foreign envoys and traders may have brought images and practiced Buddhism before it took hold among the Chinese. As in the case with Christian icons that emerged in late antiquity in Europe with adoption of cult images of the "pagans," the iconic type of image could be adapted to multiple kinds of signification and had the potential to serve many purposes (Belting 1994). In funerary contexts of the second and third centuries, Buddha-like figures came to be associated with immortals such as the Queen Mother of the West. She is represented in tombs and on tomb furnishings. At the same time paradise-like scenes with tall buildings surrounded by small figures of immortals, animals, and birds depicted on stoneware "granary jars" placed in burials also sometimes included small seated Buddha figures, as if the Buddha was understood as another kind of heavenly immortal.

Buddhist Images

The iconic seated figure of the Buddha image appeared in India in the first centuries CE and spread with Buddhism all across Asia. It is frequently the central figure of worship within a group of divinities—attendant bodhisattvas, enlightened disciples, and heavenly *apsarases* deriving from early Indian Buddhist imagery. The Buddha is shown with extraordinary physical signs or markings (such as the *ushnisha*, a protuberance on the top of the head; the *urna,* the whorl of hair on his forehead; and the halo of light radiating from the back of the neck). He is usually seated with legs crossed, facing forward, and often with right hand raised in the gesture of reassurance, creating an engaging, seemingly mutual, viewing experience known in India as *darshana*.

While at first the Chinese associated the Buddha with immortal spirits, by the fourth and fifth centuries, they understood his human origins better. Together with iconic images of the Buddha, they depicted narrative scenes of events of his life (including the birth, departure from the palace, enlightenment, first sermon, and death or *parinirvana*). Buddhism grew rapidly with the sponsorship of rulers and wealthy patrons. Because of the belief that temple-building and image-making were merit-producing acts that could improve the lot of donors and family members in this life and their future rebirth, people gave generously to build Buddhist temples and created images, offering lavish gifts of money, grain, incense, silks, jewels, and other valuables. In the fifth and sixth centuries Buddhism and Daoism both alternately saw official support and

FIGURE 7.1 Western Paradise of the Buddha Amitabha. Limestone relief from Xiangtangshan Cave 2 with traces of pigment; 158.9 × 334.5 cm. *Source*: Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC: Purchase, F1921.2.

suppression, but continued to grow. Under the Northern Qi (550–577), Buddhism was the official religion and Daoism purged, with many Daoist priests forced to shave their heads and become Buddhist monks.

A Northern Qi relief carving from the Southern Xiangtangshan caves is one of the earliest known representations of the theme of Amitabha Buddha's Western Paradise, where believers could be reborn in their next life simply through faith. The cult of Amitabha's "Pure Land" arose in the early medieval period and was popular for many centuries in China and other parts of Asia up to the present. Amitabha, the central figure of the carved stone frieze, sits on a large lotus flower surrounded by other figures, mostly princely looking crowned bodhisattvas (Figure 7.1).[1] Around them are palatial buildings, flowering trees, flying divinities, and musical instruments floating freely in mid-air. The scene is largely based on Buddhist texts, most closely on the *Longer Sukhavativyuha sutra*, also known as the *Scripture of Amitabha*, which describes luxuriant jewel-laden trees, pristine bathing ponds, gentle breezes, and beautiful music in the Western Paradise (Gomez 1996: 176–186). The two principal divine attendants of the Buddha, the bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta, are also mentioned in the scripture. They are shown also sitting in the foreground of the relief frieze beside the lotus ponds. They gaze down at small figures being reborn from lotus blossoms, Buddhist symbols of purity and rebirth into paradise. Similar scenes appear frequently in the painted murals of the Buddhist cave shrines of Dunhuang after the sixth century. Though the Buddhist art of this period suggests the introduction of new Indian and Central Asian prototypes, the emergence of the cult of Amitabha and its popularity through many subsequent centuries also indicates the persistence of the association of divinity and immortality with the West in the Chinese imagination.

Daoist Images

The Western Regions were early on associated with divine spirits and immortality in China. The goddess known as Queen Mother of the West was an ancient cult figure

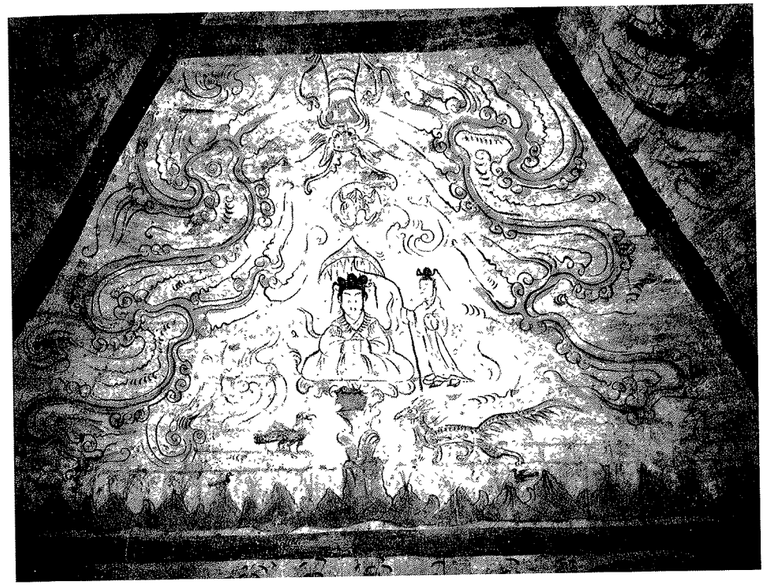

FIGURE 7.2 "Queen Mother of the West," mural painting, west side of tomb ceiling, Dingjiazha village, Jiuquan, Gansu. *Source*: With permission of Cultural Relics Publishing House, Beijing.

believed to dwell on the mythical western mountain, Kunlun, and to possess the power to endow living beings with long life or immortality. In the first centuries CE she became the predominant divinity in large areas of the Han Empire and can be identified frequently in funerary contexts. Relief sculpture and painting of the Queen Mother as an iconic figure first appeared during this time and continued into the early medieval period. Painted murals in Tomb 5 at Dingjiazha village, Gansu province, assigned to the late fourth or fifth century, depict the Queen Mother on the western sloping side of the ceiling (Figure 7.2) (Gansu sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiu suo 1989). Her image follows the iconographic type, shown frontally and surrounded by her divine attendants, including the nine-tailed fox and three-legged crow. These fantastic creatures, along with the swirling clouds and the moon with its divine toad directly over her head, identify her extraordinary powers and place her in a heavenly setting. She is part of the larger cosmological design of the tomb chamber.

Clouds, vividly rendered on the tomb ceiling, are an important element of religious imagery of the early medieval period, which has foundations in the Han dynasty. Patterned cloud scrolls were pervasive in the art of the Han period, often appearing as ornamental designs on objects of bronze, lacquer, ceramic, and textiles. Cloud patterns represented the free movement of cosmic vapors, providing a setting for wild and fantastic creatures in the mountains and for the free flight of heavenly immortals. Clouds were also associated with a variety of philosophical concepts. Chinese of the Han period

saw these designs as representing the fluid natural processes of the universe, a conception that had important implications for their thinking about the social and political as well as the natural world (Powers 2006: 225–296). Cloud-like patterns appear around Daoist heavenly spirits and were also adopted in Buddhist art.

Just as the Buddha came to be worshiped as a god, Laozi was deified in religious Daoism, and vivid accounts of his life were circulated, some in parallel with popular stories of the Buddha's life. The life of Laozi as seen in a collection of Daoist hagiography by Ge Hong (283–343) includes details of his miraculous birth from under his mother's arm as she stood under a tree, clearly derived from the story of the Buddha (Campany 2002: 194). Laozi was also said to have traveled to the Western Regions where his teachings led to the emergence of Buddhism (Kohn 1998: 24–28). Compared to Buddhist imagery, however, images of Daoist divinities were rare in early medieval times. Perhaps because of the ultimately mysterious quality of the Dao, early Daoists discouraged the worship of images. While image-making was a major merit-making activity among Buddhists, Daoists criticized those who constructed images as ostentatious and heterodox. Nevertheless, image-making developed in some communities during the fifth and early sixth centuries and became widespread in later periods. As Buddhism gained a strong foothold with support from rulers in northern China, Daoists responded to these rivals with severe measures. Under the leadership of Celestial Master Kou Qianzhi (365–448), and with support from the court, Daoism was briefly declared the official religion of the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534) resulting in the official proscription of Buddhism and the burning of temples in the middle of the fifth century. After the lifting of restrictions, Buddhism resumed its growth. These religious struggles, which call to mind sectarian rivalries in Europe, left their impact on the production of images in the late fifth and early sixth centuries. Buddhist images of the late Northern Wei came to look more "Chinese," wearing long flowing Chinese-looking robes, instead of the revealing garments worn in India, and manifesting scrolling cloud-like patterns in their halos. The changes in style can be linked to Northern Wei political reforms to create a Chinese dynastic empire.

Other kinds of accommodation and appropriation are apparent in a group of stone sculptures of the fifth and sixth centuries from sites concentrated in what is today Shaanxi province. Carved stelae from this region feature images identified as the deified Laozi and the Buddha, sometimes on the same piece of sculpture, and even seated side by side. They have been the subject of much attention because of the relative dearth of Daoist images from the early medieval period and because of their eclectic appearance. Scholars have noted the shared iconographic features of the sculpted images and mixed doctrinal references in the inscriptions (Abe 1996–1997; Bokenkamp 1996–1997). Images of Laozi enjoyed a period of localized production in the early sixth century and were not seen again until the Tang dynasty, when Daoism had official sponsorship under a regime whose emperors worshiped Laozi as their ancestor.

Ancestral Spirits

Since ancient times the ancestor cult in China was a driving force for the construction of large and elaborate tombs and ancestral shrines. Widespread concepts about spirits of the dead and the afterlife, together with Confucian ideals of respect for family elders, gave rise to particular forms of veneration of ancestors. Burial practices and attendant ceremonies designed to honor the deceased and also ensure that the spirits of the

departed would not return to mix with the living provided families with opportunities to display real and imagined wealth for the comfortable afterlife of the dead. Through these practices they gained social prestige and protection for their descendants. Chinese tombs were at the same time places mandated by social convention to conceal the dead and serve as sites for public performance. They could be elaborate microcosms for rendering concepts about life, death, and heavenly afterlife. Just as European patrons might have themselves or their deceased relations portrayed in burials in the presence of the Blessed Virgin or saints, people in China depicted images of the deceased on the walls of tombs in association with exemplary historical figures, heavenly spirits, and fantastic creatures such as dragons and phoenixes with maps of the sun, moon, and stars.

Beginning in the second century, families began to depict the deceased in iconic form as the venerated ancestor spirit whose transformation takes place within the liminal space of the tomb. In tombs of the fifth and sixth centuries the deceased commonly appears seated facing forward and dressed in formal robes. In northern China between the Han and Sixteen Kingdoms Period (304–439), we find ancestral figures in transition. The mural paintings in the antechamber of Tomb 5 at Dingjiazha show the figure of the deceased in a context that can be seen as a Chinese paradise, an idealized world. Depicted in three-quarter view, common in the Han period, he sits in a pavilion on one side of the back wall, just above and to the right of the entrance to the inner coffin chamber surveying bountiful scenes of planting and harvesting and enjoying a musical performance. The Queen Mother and her heavenly attendants (Figure 7.2) appear on the ceiling above him. In the burial chamber located behind the antechamber the deceased is represented symbolically. There, clustered above the coffin, vivid red clouds like those in the heavenly realm surrounding the Queen Mother signify his passage into the spirit world.

From the fourth through sixth centuries, the images of the deceased are frequently painted on the back wall of the burial chamber, singly or as a couple, sitting on a luxurious screened dais facing directly outward toward the viewer. They wear formal robes and hats and have a retinue of smaller standing servants, entertainers, and other attendants at the sides. The much published tomb of Xu Xianxiu, dated 571 in the Northern Qi and discovered near Taiyuan in Shanxi province, contains some of the best-preserved mural paintings of the early medieval period. On the back wall of the tomb, Xu and his wife are depicted sitting in a canopied pavilion in front of a folding screen, dressed in fine silk and fur garments and drinking from expensive lacquer cups (Wu 2010: 75). A tray with vessels piled with steaming hot food sits on the dais between them. Numerous servants holding wine vessels, fans and banners; musicians, grooms, and other members of the retinue accompany them, many of which have non-Chinese-looking features and wear foreign-style attire.[2] Additional details imply the divinized state of Xu Xianxiu and his wife, or its immanence. Xu was an official of Chinese descent serving the Northern Qi rulers who were of mixed Xianbei and Chinese ethnicity, and whose state religion was Buddhism. Xu's own faith and aspiration to be reborn in a Buddhist paradise is suggested in the murals by large lotus blossoms floating in the air above the assembled figures. The group of figures appears ready to send off the couple to the spirit world on a saddled horse prepared for him and an oxcart for her, both of which customarily appear in tomb murals of this period.

Since pre-Han times the territory of China was populated by a mix of ethno-linguistic groups. Due to repeated invasions from northern and western tribal groups after the fall of Han, the medieval period was a time of especially intense cultural interaction

that lasted into the tenth century. In many spheres and levels of society the various peoples of northern China, Central Asian traders, Buddhist monks, and foreign envoys mixed. Under these circumstances, the higher ranks adapted a wealth of material and intellectual resources in new ways into a hybridized culture. They had an active interest in dance, music, and visual and material arts of foreign origins. The funerary art of the period reflects this diversity, portraying people wearing traditional Chinese clothing and foreign garb, entertainers performing foreign music and dances, and figures with distinctly non-Chinese facial features and hairstyles, with curling hair and beards. In this multicultural society, people depicted their ancestral spirits with the aid of visual themes derived from Buddhism, Daoism, Zoroastrianism, and other religious traditions.

Sacred Spaces and Divine Cosmologies

Tombs and Heavenly Visions

Tomb 5 at Dingjiazha is modeled on tombs of the late Han that were organized around a cosmological program complete with heavenly immortals, sun, moon, and stars on the ceiling (Gansu sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiu suo 1989). Its particular significance in this study is its microcosmic depiction of a universe that derives from native Chinese concepts of natural harmony. The ceiling depicts the celestial realms with divinities among numinous red clouds—the Queen Mother of the West, with the moon above her on the western sloping side (Figure 7.2), and the King Father of the East on the opposite slope of the ceiling with a red sun overhead. An auspicious heavenly deer on the south slope and a flying horse on the north also appear among swirling red clouds. Depicted on the four walls below are scenes of productive human activity—such as agriculture, food preparation, and entertainment. A large tree on the lower half of the south wall has been identified as the sacred tree of the earth god with many small trees growing on both sides. Mountain ranges inhabited by wild animals and birds along the base of the ceiling depict an intermediary region between heaven and earth. The chamber as a whole is an idealized vision of heaven, earth, and human activity in harmonious balance, that is, a kind of paradise.

Though we know little of Daoist ritual spaces of this time, texts inform us that native Chinese religious practice was closely associated with offerings to spirits and the quest for immortality through ritual observances and practices such as the ingestion of elixirs of long life and inner alchemy involving the contemplation and nourishment of deities inside the body. Though Daoists did not generally practice image veneration, medieval Daoist texts contain vivid descriptions of Daoist deities, fantastic heavenly beings along with their palaces of divinities, and celestial excursions among the stars with spectacular views of heavenly phenomena. Yang Xi (330–ca. 386) was one who received visions of visits from heavenly goddesses and whose accounts, collected in the *Declarations of the Perfected* (*Zhen'gao*), are included in the Daoist Canon. The goddesses transmitted messages to humans and invited them to partake in the joys of celestial bliss, to leave their entanglements with society and politics and live in the mountains. One revelatory poem in Yang Xi's text features the Lady of Purple Tenuity, twenty-sixth daughter of the Queen Mother of the West. On her travels through the cosmos on a carriage drawn by dragons and borne by a whirlwind she encounters divinities among shimmering lights and accompanied by the songs of divine simurghs and phoenixes (Kroll 2003: 184–190). Flights to heaven were a prominent literary motif of the period from Han to the early medieval period (Chan 2010).

Cave Shrines

Such visions of the celestial realms also inspired image-making by Chinese Buddhists who created many cave shrines with sculpted images following the example of Indian Buddhists. The images in the Chinese Buddhist caves show a mixture of image types. For example, the Buddhist cave Mogao Cave 249 at Dunhuang (first half of the sixth century) has much the same interior space as the antechamber of Tomb 5 at Dingjiazha and depicts many heavenly divinities that appear to be more Chinese than specifically Buddhist in the celestial scenes painted on ceiling. These figures, riding on phoenixes or in carriages drawn by phoenixes and dragons, have no counterpart in Indian Buddhist art, but resonate with descriptions of Daoist immortals. The figures in heavenly carriages on the north and south ceiling panels have been identified as the Queen Mother of the West (Figure 7.3) and the King Father of the East, with the central mountain associated with both Mt. Kunlun and the Buddhist world-mountain Sumeru. Chinese celestial spirits appear together with Buddhist figures of *apsarases*, Indian-looking Brahmin ascetics, and a multi-armed *ashura*. A mountain range with animals running and leaping encircles the base of the ceiling, as in the Dingjiazha burial chamber. Though many elements in this cave are unmistakably Chinese in origin, they are organized around a Buddhist program. The ideal realm depicted around the walls is a future world in which Maitreya,

FIGURE 7.3 Divinities in the heavenly realm, mural painting, Mogao Cave 249 ceiling, Dunhuang, Gansu province. *Source*: With permission of The Lo Archive.

Buddha of the Future, presides. As the cave's main sculpted image, Maitreya sits in the central niche on the back wall attended by numerous bodhisattvas both painted and sculpted. Many other small painted Buddhas, closely arranged in rows on the side walls, illustrate the pervading presence of the essential Buddha nature in countless worlds of space and time. Buddhas of the past, present, and future could be included in a single cave and envisioned in the practice of *samadhi*.

Buddhist caves created microcosmic spaces for worship and meditation by hollowing chambers from stone cliffs and mountainsides that were richly carved and painted with iconic figure groupings and narrative scenes. This type of architectural and liturgical design was transmitted along the trade routes through Central Asia into China from India. Monks' cave retreats became centers of Buddhist teaching and worship across vast territories of Asia. Buddhist cave-making in western China is recorded to have begun by the fourth century.

As early as the fourth century, caves had also come to play an important role in Daoist practice, perhaps inspired by the Buddhist use of caves as sacred spaces for contemplation. Daoists of this period are not known to have created caves with manmade images, but they wrote about sacred caves whose descriptions are based on naturally occurring caves. Called "grotto-heavens" *dongtian*, a term that can also be interpreted as "penetrating to heaven," they were self-contained microcosms for contemplation. A fifth-century Daoist text identifies and describes 36 grotto heavens. Though located within mountains, they contain suns, moons, stars, and palaces of divine immortals, and they are attainable through meditative techniques. As such, the Daoist cave has been characterized as an "interiorized counter-universe" (Verellen 1995: 276–278).

Embodiments of Divine Realms

Religious practices in both Daoism and Buddhism involved bodily training in ritual performance, recitation, and meditation, and the body was understood as the ultimate locus of spiritual transformation. In the early medieval period Daoist practice shifted from sacrifices offered to external spirits to the contemplation of inner gods and inner alchemy to achieve longevity. Practitioners treated the body as a sacred site within which deities moved and interacted. They believed that a perfected transcendent being could manifest all things and be in all places, like the Dao itself. Early medieval Daoist scriptural texts describe somatic pantheons including the Queen Mother of the West, the King Father of the East, and other heavenly spirits of the Dao including Laozi himself, along with methods of nourishing them and moving them through the interiorized cosmos. Practices such as this could enable one to achieve transcendence and self-divinization through merging with the mystery of the Dao (Pregadio 2006: 132–137; Puett 2010: 238–244).

A similar development occurred in the Chinese Buddhism of this period. At first Buddhists venerated immortal, salvific, or messianic figures who offered the promise of good future rebirth for the deceased, as recorded in dedicatory inscriptions engraved on sculptures that expressed wishes for rebirth in paradise. With increased numbers of learned monks and the translation of Buddhist scriptures into Chinese, Buddhist practice came to be understood as offering the means to transcend earthly existence. As a result, we find different kinds of religious aspirations in later dedicatory inscriptions. In addition to earlier wishes for rebirth in paradise, by the mid-sixth century, worshippers

frequently express resolve to become enlightened and ultimately to become a Buddha. This altered perception of divine wisdom resulted in new kinds of iconic images.

An essential element of Buddhahood, the "Buddha nature" *foxing* (related to the Indian concept of *tathāgatagarbha*), is believed to occur in all living beings and to pervade the cosmos so that enlightenment is universally possible. The *Mahāparinirvāna Sutra* (*Daban niepan jing*) presents this concept as the Buddha's final teaching. This all-pervading presence of the Buddha nature can be seen as analogous in some aspects to the concept of the universal Dao and its embodiment by Laozi in native Chinese religious and philosophical thought. Buddhists believed that through the observance of precepts, study, ritual practice, and mental concentration one could realize the Buddha nature in oneself by which one could transform the body and heighten its faculties so as to perceive and contain all the countless worlds. According to the *Lotus Sutra* (*Miaofa lianhua jing*), a body purified by its teachings can manifest the entire cosmos from the highest levels of existence down to hell, all phenomena and living beings (Hurvitz 1976: 275–276). The *Flower Garland Sutra* (*Huayan jing*) mentions limitless "dharma realms" of existence that fill the Buddha's body and can be universally revealed to all beings. A distinctive type of sculptural figure from the sixth century that appears to be a visualization of this kind of cosmic embodiment portrays in visual form all the various realms of existence. A now headless figure of a standing Buddha in the Freer/Sackler Galleries of Art preserves the most detailed carvings known for this subject.[3] A hierarchical arrangement of relief images from top to bottom on the front shows Buddhas and other divinities inhabiting the highest heavenly realms; spirits, humans, animals, and demons in the earthly realms; and the torments of hell in the underworld. On the back side, the reliefs appear to represent scriptural texts, including the *Vimalakirti sutra* (*Weimojie jing*) (Tsiang 2008: 172).

Landscape as Sacred Geography

For both Daoists and Buddhists, excursions into the mountains served as a gateway to the spirit world instantiated in the natural world, an escape from mundane social and political constraints, and a source of minerals and herbs for making medicines and elixirs of immortality. Long recognized as sources of water and of life, and as active forces in the circulation and dispersal of vital energy, mountains had been seen as sacred since ancient times. Mythical mountains such as Kunlun, Penglai, Yingzhou, and Fangzhang were believed to be the dwelling places of immortal spirits. Rulers performed seasonal sacrifices to sacred mountains including those of the central peak and four directional mountains, a practice that continued through the imperial era into recent centuries.

Landscape representation that emerged in the early medieval period was in dialog with these traditions, and by the early part of the second millennium, landscape became the predominant genre of painting, particularly among the educated. While not previously recognized, landscape painting from the early medieval period discovered in recent archeological finds as well as their mention in received texts, indicate that it was already an art form in this period. Representations of landscape in fact existed centuries before in other media. Already during the Han dynasty, imperial gardens and parks contained constructed landscapes with lakes and mountains named for the mountain abodes of immortals, and mountain forms frequently appeared modeled on bronze

incense burners and ceramic vessels. By the fifth century, in addition to the earlier legends of mountains as the homes of immortals, sacred landscapes had been incorporated into hagiographical traditions, based on legends about Daoist sages, Buddhist teachers, and their spiritual powers.

A group of early sixth-century poems and other inscriptions engraved in stone on Cloud Peak Mountain on the Shandong Peninsula record the elation of Zheng Daozhao (455?–516) and his associates who ventured into the mountains, their spirits lifted by their proximity to immortals and sages and perspectives on the larger universe. Zheng Daozhao left stone engravings of his poems and named directional peaks in the vicinity as mountaintop altars affiliated with divine spirits. In doing so he sought to create a sacred landscape and an extraordinary garden-like microcosm on a grand scale as a medium for communication between humans and immortals, including ancestral spirits.

> On mountain excursions, I delight in distant enjoyment,
> Looking toward the green [sea] and gazing at the white sand.
> Over vast waves float the snow-white geese of the immortals.
> While numinous elves fly in jade chariots.
> The golden carriages meet the sun's varied colors, …
> Soaring dragons abound in the starry waters,
> Fluttering phoenixes gleam in their misty abodes.
> Going and coming on the path of wind and clouds,
> In and out among the vermilion brightness of rosy clouds.
> (Harrist 2008, 132)

The scholar-recluse Zong Bing (375–443), whose writings are important to our understanding of the rise of landscape painting, advocated wandering or dwelling in the mountains as a means of self-cultivation. Zong's essay "Preface to the Painting of Mountains and Rivers," notes that wise men of old purified their hearts and expanded their minds by communing with nature. This kind of thought can be tied to writings in the Daoist tradition, but, in fact, Zong Bing was a devout Buddhist and also a learned scholar of Confucian classics. In his essay, *Mingfo lun* (*Hongming ji*: vol. 2, 13), "Explicating Buddhist Doctrine" he writes,

> If we wander about in the wilderness and climb the high peaks, we can view great expanses of marvelous landscape, the breadth of heaven's clarity, and the marvels of the sun and moon's penetrating brilliance. How could we not find in all of these the majesty of the divine sages and noble spirits? Only by departing from the hurrying crowds of people and affairs of this world! Indeed it is by cherishing the distances that we open our minds to the spiritual way, and through being moved by quietude that we are illuminated in response to the bright forces.

Zong Bing also mentions that viewing landscape painting could invoke a comparable response of the spirit and a sense of harmony with nature indicating that landscape was already a painting genre of some significance (Bush and Shih 1985: 36–38).

In early medieval tombs, figures frequently appear in a setting of landscape elements. Fourth and fifth-century brick tomb reliefs in the area of Nanjing, the Southern Dynasties capital depicted the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove (a group of third-century scholars, musicians, and writers who engaged in metaphysical discussions) sitting under trees, drinking wine and playing music. Figures seated in landscape settings became a theme in funerary art of the Northern Dynasties, as well, painted in tomb murals and carved on stone mortuary beds. In some cases the figures are clearly identified with labels as Confucian paragons of virtue whose stories of service and sacrifice to parents and spouses were part of popular lore. In other examples, similar looking scenes with figures in landscape settings are not identified but appear to represent the deceased with attendants and family members, linking them with the ideals of filial paragons and worthy sages of the past. In many of the scenes created for the funerary context, the landscape also is inhabited by wild animals and fantastic creatures such as the phoenix and dragon and other spirits. The adoption of various elements from socially didactic and religious imagery served to represent the deceased in their transformation into ancestor spirits (E. Wang 2003).

Landscape became the principal subject of Chinese art in later centuries, but it was almost unknown in this period until recent archaeological finds. Landscape representations appear in several depictions of painted screens discovered in burials of the late sixth century, both on murals and on stone tomb furniture. The tomb of Kang Ye, found near Xi'an and dated to 571 of the Northern Zhou period, contained a stone screened mortuary couch on which the body lay, dressed in fine Chinese silk robes. A Sogdian residing in northern China, Kang Ye was native of Samarkand and served as an official under the Northern Wei (Xi'an shi wenwu baohu kaogu suo 2008: 14–35). The twelve pictorial panels of his mortuary couch screen had finely engraved scenes painted with polychrome and gold pigments depicting figures on outings and seated under trees. The groups of elegant ladies and gentlemen are reminiscent of filial piety scenes on mortuary furnishings of the first half of the sixth century, but rather than being of a didactic nature, they depict retinues of family members and friends on pleasurable excursions and feature a figure that can identified as Kang Ye himself, a bearded man dressed in Chinese long robes and a Sogdian cap. Kang also appears in a formal iconic pose sitting in front of a paneled screen in a small Chinese-style building. The screen, as can be made out in a detailed drawing of the engraved ornament, is decorated with a landscape showing distant views of mountains (Figure 7.4). This is one of several examples of landscapes depicted on screens found in tombs of this period that suggest the transcendence of the deceased through association with mountainous landscapes. The inclusion of a fire altar in front of Kang's pavilion, exotic parrots on the roof, and the foreign appearance of his retinue of servants indicate that he may have retained customs and preferences related to his Sogdian-Zoroastarian origins. At the same time lotuses springing up from the ground and in other parts of the landscape make reference to Buddhist paradise scenes. In sum, the scenes provide for the comfort of the deceased in multi-referential medley.

Archeological discoveries such as this provide evidence for a scholarly reassessment of an existing early painting. *Admonitions of the Court Instructress*, a handscroll painting illustrating the text of Zhang Hua's poem, "Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies," was composed in 292 of the Western Jin period and is inscribed in sections on the painting. Once believed to be a later copy of a work attributed to Gu Kaizhi, it is now recognized as possibly from the late fifth or early sixth century and produced under the Northern Wei (Munakata 1991: 36–40; Wu 2003: 98–99).[4] While mostly comprised of painted figural groups, it depicts a landscape scene in one section (Figure 7.5). The artist arranged the mountains as a symmetrical and

FIGURE 7.4 Drawing of engraving on the stone funerary bed of Kang Ye, dated 571. *Source*: With permission of the Office of Archeological Research of Xi'an City, Shaanxi Province.

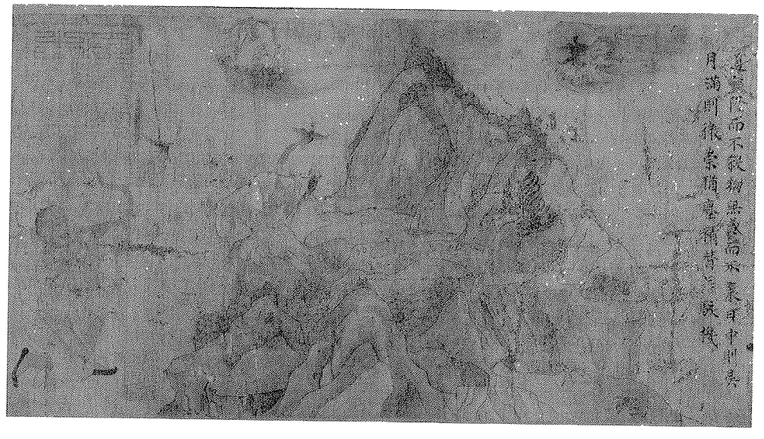

FIGURE 7.5 Landscape, from *The Admonitions of the Court Instructress*, probably 5th–6th century. Detail of a handscroll painting; ink and colors on silk; H: 24.37 cm. *Source*: © The Trustees of the British Museum.

harmonious whole, a miniature cosmos complete with sun, moon, and wild animals, including a tiger seated opposite a pair of auspicious, crimson-colored long-tailed birds. On one side of the mountains, however, a large archer kneels threateningly with his crossbow. In the context of this work of predominantly figure painting, the landscape scene can be understood as metaphorical. The excerpt of text beside the landscape warns that in the course of nature, change brings down the exalted, who enjoy their status only temporarily, and furthermore that rising to glory takes great effort, while falling into calamity can be a quick as a shot from a crossbow. Three scenes farther along, a group portrait of the royal family appears with two wives and children seated together with the princely father and household managers. The triangular configuration of the group is strikingly like that of the painted mountain peaks of the landscape scene, with the prince in the position of the tiger seated opposite the two wives. Verses that accompany the harmonious family scene advise using care about one's speech, curbing pride, and being attentive to those at home. It warns that a ruler's domestic situation is a determining factor in his fortunes and those of his kingdom. The compositional similarity between the figure group and the mountainous landscape strongly suggests a correlation between fostering harmony in the home and the divine harmony of the larger world.

Conclusion

Religion was a major driving force in the production of visual arts during the medieval period in China. Imagery of the divine in this period developed from a variety of culturally and socially constructed ways of seeing attained through a process of assimilation, accommodation, and transformation. The Chinese from ancient times believed that the natural world was the abode of immortal spirits in which mountains were a sacred place of potential communion with numinous celestial and earthly powers. Clouds and mountains were the intermediaries between heaven and earth. Imagery of the divine at first did not focus on anthropomorphic figures, as in the West; instead, spirits could take many forms, including animals, fantastic creatures, and phenomena from nature. In the first millennium of the Common Era the worship of the deceased as ancestors, Daoist aspirations to immortality, and the goal of Buddhist enlightenment and birth in a pure land offered many ways of representing divinity in human form in art. Temples and tombs involved larger cosmological concepts in their construction—invoked in Daoist liturgy and meditation, represented in Buddhist pantheons, and depicted in tombs for the deceased. Depictions of the divine extended to landscape representation as both Buddhist and Daoist practitioners retreated to remote areas and constructed monasteries and temples in the mountains.

Examining various types of sacred imagery across these thematic categories shows us that borrowing and adaptation of images within different religious traditions was common during this formative period. Types of images could be transmitted independently of ideology, or images from one religious tradition could appropriate another's narratives to carry related concepts from one belief system to another. The study of texts has shown that different moral teachings were not generally thought of as mutually exclusive, and that the adoption of texts or terminology from other traditions was not necessarily condemned as heterodox. Certain concepts and practices relative to images could be considered universal, and adaptations of existing imagery to different ideologies could be regarded as affirmations of their authority and efficacy.

SEE ALSO: McCausland, Figure Painting; Sturman, Landscape; Liu, Concepts of Architectural Space in Historical Chinese Thought; Egan, Conceptual and Qualitative Terms in Historical Perspective; Wu, Garden Art

Chinese Terms

Daban niepan jing 大般涅槃經
Daodejing 道德經
Dingjiazha 丁家閘
Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒
dongtian 洞天
Dongwanggong 東王公
Dunhuang 敦煌
fajie renzhong xiang 法界人中像
Fangzhang 方丈
Foxing 佛性
Ge Hong 葛洪
Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之
Hongming ji 弘明集
Huainanzi 淮南子
Kang Ye 康業
Kou Qianzhi 寇謙之
Kunlun 昆侖
Laozi 老子
Longmen 龍門
Maijishan 麥積山
Mingfo lun 明佛論
Penglai 蓬萊
Qi 氣
Taiyi 太一
Tiandi 天帝
Weimojie jing 維摩詰經
Xianbei 鮮卑
Xiangtangshan 響唐山
Xiwang mu 西王母
Xu Xianxiu 徐顯秀
yang 陽
Yang Xi 楊羲
Yaowangshan 藥王山
yin 陰
Zhang Hua 張華
Zhang Ling 張陵
Zhen'gao 真誥
Zheng Daozhao 鄭道昭
Zhuangzi 莊子
Zong Bing 宗炳

Notes

1 Digital photographs and a 3-D model of the sculpture can also be viewed on the Xiangtangshan Caves Project website, http://xts.uchicago.edu
2 A digital rendering of the tomb murals can be seen on the University of Hawaii Press Journals Log site, http://uhpjournals.wordpress.com/2008/04/21/archives-of-asian-art-vol-57–2007/, from an article by Bonnie Cheng, Fashioning a Political Body: The Tomb of a Rouran Princess, *Archives of Asian Art*, 57 (2007), p. 23, fig. 19.
3 A 3-D model of this sculpture detailing the carved surfaces can be viewed on the Freer/Sackler Gallery website, http://www.asia.si.edu/cosmic-buddha/
4 Kiyohiko Munakata has discussed this painted landscape scene in relation to Gu Kaizhi's essay "A Note on How to Paint Mt. Yuntai." The mountain was the setting for the story of Daoist Heavenly Master Zhang Ling and his divulgence of secret Daoist teachings to his disciples. See, also, the chapter by Shane McCausland in this volume.

References

Abe, S. (1996–1997). Heterological Visions: Northern Wei Daoist Sculpture from Shaanxi Province, *Cahiers d'Extréme-Asie*, 9: 69–84.

Belting, H. (1994). *Likeness and Presence: History of the Image before the Era of Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bokenkamp, S. (1996–1997). The Yao Boduo Stele as Evidence for "Dao-Buddhism" of the Early Lingbao Scriptures. *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie*, 9: 54–67.

Bush, S. and Shih, H. (1985). *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Campany, R. F. (2002). *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth: A Translation and Study of Ge Hong's* Traditions of Divine Transcendents. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Chan, T. K.-K. (2010). Jade Flower and the Motif of Mystic Excursion in Early Religious Daoist Poetry. In A. K. L. Chan and Y.-K. Lo (eds.), *Interpretation and Literature in Early Medieval China*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Gansu sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiu suo (1989). *Jiuquan Shiliuguo mu bihua*. Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe.

Gomez, L. (1996). *The Land of Bliss: The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light, Sanskrit and Chinese Versions of the Sukhāvatīyūha Sutras*. Honolulu and Kyoto: University of Hawaii Press and Higashi Honganji shinshu Otani-ha.

Harper, D. (1999). Warring States Natural Philosophy and Occult Thought. In E. Shaughnessy and M. Loewe (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 BC*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 813–884.

Harrist, R. E., Jr. (2008). *The Landscape of Words: Stone Inscriptions from Early and Medieval China*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Zong Bing (n.d.). *Hongming ji* (ed. Sengyou). *Taisho shinshu daizokyo*, 52(2102): 1–96.

Hurvitz, L. (trans.) (1976). *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Kohn, L. (1998). *God of the Dao: Lord Lao in History and Myth*. Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Chinese Studies.

Kroll, P. W. (2003). Songs of the Lady of Purple Tenuity. In P. W. Kroll and D. R. Knechtges (eds.), *Studies in Early Medieval Chinese Literature and Cultural History: In Honor of Richard B. Mather and Donald Holzman*. Provo, UT: Tang Studies Society, pp. 149–211.

Mollier, C. (2008). *Buddhism and Taoism Face to Face: Scripture, Ritual, and Iconographic Exchange in Medieval China*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Munakata, K. (1991). *Sacred Mountains in Chinese Art*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Powers, M. J. (1981). An Archaic Bas-Relief and the Chinese Moral Cosmos in the First Century AD. *Ars Orientalis*, 12: 25–40.

Powers, M. J. (2006). *Pattern and Person: Ornament, Society and Self in Classical China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center.

Pregadio, F. (2006). Early Daoist Meditation and the Origins of Inner Alchemy. In B. Penny (ed.), *Daoism in History: Essays in Honour of Liu Ts'un-yan*. New York: Routledge.

Puett, M. (2010). Becoming Laozi: Cultivating and Visualizing Spirits in Early Medieval China. *Asia Major, Third Series*, 23(1): 223–252.

Tsiang, K. (2008). Resolve to Become a Buddha (*Chengfo*): Changing Aspirations and Imagery in Sixth-Century Chinese Buddhism. *Early Medieval China*, 13–14: 126–130.

Verellen, F. (1995). The Beyond Within: The Grotto-Heavens (*dongtian*) in Taoist Ritual and Cosmology. *Cahiers d'Extreme Asie*, 8: 265–290.

Wang, A. (2000). Correlative Cosmology: From the Structure of Mind to Embodied Practice. *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* (Special issue: Reconsidering the Correlative Cosmology of China), 7: 110–132.

Wang, E. (2003). Refiguring: The Visual Rhetoric of the Sixth-century Northern Wei "Filial Piety" Engravings. In S. McCausland (ed.), *Gu Kaizhi and the Admonitions Scroll*.

London: The British Museum Press in Association with Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, pp. 108–121.
Wu Hung (1989). *The Wu Liang Shrine: The Ideology of Early Chinese Pictorial Art.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Wu Hung (2003). The Admonitions Scroll Revisited: Genre, Iconography, Narratology, Style, Dating. In S. McCausland (ed.), *Gu Kaizhi and the Admonitions Scroll.* London: The British Museum Press in Association with Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, pp. 89–99.
Wu Hung (2010). *Art of the Yellow Spring: Rethinking Chinese Tombs.* London and Honolulu: Reaktion Books and Hawaii University Press.
Xi'an shi wenwu baohu kaogu suo (2008). Xi'an Bei Zhou Kang Ye mu fajue jianbao. *Wenwu*, 6: 14–35.

Further Reading

Lopez, D. S., Jr. (2001). *The Story of Buddhism: A Concise Guide to its History and Teachings.* New York: HarperCollins.

8

Landscape

Peter C. Sturman

A recent exhibition at the National Palace Museum in Taipei brought together two long-separated pieces of the single most celebrated landscape painting in the history of China: Huang Gongwang's (1269–1354) *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* (National Palace Museum, Taipei, www.npm.gov.tw/en). A long handscroll painted over more than three years as the artist traveled along the Fuchun River in Zhejiang Province, Huang Gongwang's painting was recognized as something special even as he dallied over it. Huang had promised the painting to a friend, a monk by the name of Wuyong, whose patience finally ran out and, according to the artist's inscription, insisted that Huang bring his painting to a close. Huang Gongwang's *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* gained famed over the next two centuries, admired by some of the most renowned painters and critics of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, who added inscriptions to the scroll's mounting and end. Then, near tragedy: in 1650 an overly possessive owner of the scroll ordered from his deathbed that *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* be burned so that it could join him in the afterlife. Barely saved from the flames by a family member, the slightly damaged scroll somehow became divided, with a short initial section (minus a few inches lost to the fire) traveling its own path to the present day and ultimately a different home in the Zhejiang Provincial Museum. Precisely 361 years after that near disaster Huang Gongwang's painting was reunited, though it would be more accurate to say the two sections were brought in close proximity: that short initial section of Huang's painting, only some fifty centimeters in length, has since grown into its own imposing scroll replete with a title ("A Corner of the Fuchun"), an imaginary portrait of Huang Gongwang, and about twenty-five feet of trailing inscriptions. The two scrolls made a very interesting, not to mention historic, pairing.[1]

The strange journey of *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* says much about landscape as a subject of Chinese painting. For one, the status accorded Huang Gongwang's painting is extraordinary, especially considering the casualness with which the painting

A Companion to Chinese Art, First Edition. Edited by Martin J. Powers and Katherine R. Tsiang.
© 2016 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published 2016 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.