

# CHINESE VIEWS OF NATURE AND ART

## Themes in common with Bashō's writings

### I. NATURE

- Nonbeing
- Tao
- Heaven
- Nature's transformations
- Spontaneity of nature
- The Creator
- The life, spirit, and feelings of things
- Oneness and interrelationship in nature

### II. THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE ARTIST

- Tranquil observation of nature
- Oneness with nature

### III. THE CREATIVE PROCESS

- The spontaneity of the artist
- Exhaust

### IV. THE CREATIVE WORK

- *Wen*: nature's patterns and the arts
- The artistic work and the natural world

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## NATURE

### NONBEING

There are a number of passages in the *Chuang Tzu* that refer to nonbeing or related concepts. Nonbeing is not the absence of reality but **a reality whose fullness our mind cannot comprehend**. It does not have the limitations of time and space that Being has. Being is something we can experience with our senses and think about with our minds and its categories. For Chuang Tzu and other Taoists, there is **a reality beyond Being**. It is usually presented as creative, **the source of Being**.

*Chuang Tzu*, 12(131-32): In the Great Beginning, there was nonbeing; there was no being, no name. Out of it arose One; there was One, but it had no form. Things got hold of it and came to life, and it was called Virtue. Before things had forms, they had their allotments; these were of many kinds. Out of the flow and flux, things were born, and as they grew they developed distinctive shapes; these were called forms. The forms and bodies held within them spirits, each with its own characteristics and limitations, and this was called the inborn nature. If the nature is trained, you may return to Virtue, and Virtue at its highest peak is identical with the Beginning. Being identical, you will be empty; being empty, you will be great. You may join in the cheeping and chirping and, when you have joined in the cheeping and chirping, you may join with Heaven and earth. Your joining is wild and confused, as though you were stupid, as though you were demented. this is called Dark Virtue. Rude and unwitting, you take part in the Great Submission.

*Chuang Tzu*, 23(257): It comes out from no source, it goes back in through no aperture. It has reality yet no place where it resides; it has duration yet no beginning or end. Something emerges, though through no aperture--this refers to the fact that it has reality. It has reality yet there is no place where it resides--this refers to the dimension of space. It has duration but no beginning or end--this refers to the dimension of time. There is life, there is death, there is coming out, there is going back in--yet in the coming out and going back its form is never seen. This is called the Heavenly Gate. The Heavenly Gate is nonbeing. The ten thousand things come forth from nonbeing. Being cannot create being out of being; inevitably it must come forth from nonbeing. Nonbeing is absolute nonbeing, and it is here that the sage hides himself.

Certain passages suggest the **continuity between nonbeing and being**.

*Chuang Tzu*, 6(84): Who can look upon nonbeing as his head, on life as his back, and on death as his rump?...Who knows that life and death, existence and annihilation, are all a single body?

Two analogies may help in trying to understand what really cannot be understood. The first is **individual waves emerging out of an undifferentiated ocean**. Every moment, the phenomenal world of Being arises out of Nonbeing, and then returns to it. A second analogy is from astronomy: a **black hole**. A black hole is an area of space where a massive star has collapsed onto itself. Gravity is so strong that not even light can escape – thus it is invisible and appears as a black hole in space. Also, with gravity that strong, the laws of physics simply do not work. So the black hole exists, but we cannot see it and we cannot comprehend what it is like. There is a major difference, however, between a black hole and Nonbeing. A black hole is located in a particular place and has measurable dimensions. Nonbeing, on the other hand, has no location or size.

## **THE TAO**

The term *tao* is used in various different ways, often without metaphysical significance. In particular, "the Way" is often a **term for the ideal**. It is "the ideal spiritual Way of the sage." More often, it is a term for the **true nature of reality**. Although it can have somewhat different meanings, the most common and important one is a term for the natural process of the universe, the **pattern and structure of the universe** manifests when it proceeds naturally. The spiritual and social goal is to live in harmony with the Tao. To depart from it is to depart from the life of the cosmos.

*Chuang Tzu*, 31(352): the Way is the path by which the ten thousand things proceed. All things that lose it, die; all that get it, live. To go against it in one's undertakings is to fail; to comply with it is to succeed.

The main point here is that the world is characterized by **orderly change and harmonious interrelationships**. The most fundamental pattern and structure for the Chinese is **yin and yang**. These are complementary opposites: the changing processes of night and day, winter and summer; and the opposites that imply each other: valley and mountain, wet and dry, dark and bright, female and male.

## HEAVEN

The Heaven of Chinese thought is very different from the Heaven in Christianity and Islam, in which Heaven is a separate spiritual realm separate from the natural world. For the Chinese, there really is **only one, organic universe**.

Heaven has a number of meanings in Chinese thought, and that ambiguity is found in Chinese religion and art, but there are two basic meanings. **One meaning is simply the celestial part of nature**, which is usually presented in the phrase "Heaven and earth," i.e. the phenomenal world of the ten thousand things, as opposed to the Absolute Tao.

Heaven and earth work their **changes through spontaneous action (called "inaction" or "nonaction") and without words**.

*Chuang Tzu*, 18(191): The inaction of Heaven is its purity, the inaction of earth is its peace. So the two inactions combine and all things are transformed and brought to birth.

*Chuang Tzu*, 13(145): Heaven does not give birth, yet the ten thousand things are transformed; earth does not sustain, yet the ten thousand things are nourished.

The second meaning of Heaven refers to the **patterns or dispositions of the natural world**. In some cases, Heaven seems **equivalent to the Tao of the natural world**. This more metaphysical notion of Heaven **includes a sense of cosmic unity, emptiness, and clarity**.

## THE SPONTANEOUS TRANSFORMATIONS OF NATURE

We often think of nature as a collection of things: trees, rivers, bobcats. Change happens, but it is secondary for it happens to things that, until they die, are fundamentally unchanging. For the Chinese, **nature is primarily a series of ongoing transformations** (*hua*). In the West we tend to think of creation as an event that happened once a long time ago, an act of a transcendent deity who created the universe *ex nihilo*, "out of nothing." For the Chinese, **creation happens every moment as nature continuously transforms itself**. It is not an act of a conscious deity but rather the spontaneous unfolding of life. All things of the present are momentary forms in a process of change. As such, all things are full of life and, in some sense, have a spirit of life and feelings that we can connect with. It is these transformations and the spirit of things that the artist must be able to experience and transmit in his art.

The phenomenal world (Heaven and earth) is filled with the transformations of birth, change, and death that are **spontaneously self-generating** (*tzu-jan*) and thus occur by inaction (*wu-wei*).

*Chuang Tzu*, 18(191): The inaction of Heaven is its purity, the inaction of earth is its peace. So the two inactions combine and all things are transformed and brought to birth.

*Chuang Tzu*, 13(145): Heaven does not give birth, yet the ten thousand things are transformed; earth does not sustain, yet the ten thousand things are nourished.

**Change is pervasive, swift, and inevitable**. For Chuang Tzu, change is so uncertain, there is a strong sense of the **instability to life**.

*Chuang Tzu*, 17(182): The Way is without beginning or end, but things have their life and death--you cannot rely upon their fulfillment. One moment empty, the next moment full--you cannot

depend on their form.... The life of things is a gallop, a headlong dash--with every movement they alter, with every moment they shift. What should you do and what should you not do? Everything will change of itself, that is certain.

However, in most of the Chinese tradition, the spontaneous change of nature is seen as **orderly and beautiful**.

### Tung Yu

“if one looks at all living things on earth, they are just the transformations of one *ch'i* (matter-energy). Its functioning and modifications are appropriate to things and no one is conscious of the process, so that it is achieved naturally [by *tzu-jan*].”

--tr. Bush, *Literati* 56 (#105)

### Ching Hao

There are the divine (*shen*), wonderful (*miao*--profoundly mysterious), clever, and skillful painters. The divine painter makes no effort but achieves the forms spontaneously by following the transformations of Nature.

--tr. Siren, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting*, 41

### Ssu-k'ung T'u

Stand together with heaven and earth,  
Your spirit transforming with them.  
If you truly meet with this,  
You may avail yourself of it forever.

--tr. Yu, *The Poetry of Wang Wei*, 10

### Tung Yu

Those who discuss painting say, "To be excellent at achieving a sense of life (*sheng-i*) and capable of not deviating from the truth, that is all there is to it. Through this one can reach perfect artistry." If one asks what a sense of life consists of, they answer, "We might call it naturalness (*tzu-jan*)," and if one asks about naturalness, they then say, "What cannot differ from the truth has got it."

--tr. Bush, *Literati* 56 (#105)

## THE CREATOR/CREATIVE (*tsao hua*; *zōka* in Japanese)

One of the terms used by Chuang Tzu and Chinese painters and poets that has been difficult for Westerners to understand is *tsao hua* (in Japanese *zōka*). It is usually translated as “the Creator.” Literally it means something like “make-transform.” As we will see in more detail later with Bashō, the term refers to several ideas. FIRST is that the world we live in is not of our making; **something else creates it**. SECOND, the world is a process of transformation that is **continuously creative**. THIRD, this creative process is highly **skillful**, not in the sense of a conscious craftsman but of a divinely inspired artist. FOURTH, this creative beauty is **awesome and marvelous**, a great treasure. What term could suggest these qualities of nature? *Tsao hua*. It refers to the power and tendency of nature to creatively and beautifully transform itself. In a few cases, it is discussed in anthropomorphic terms, but in general it is more of a vaguely articulated sense of sacred power of nature’s creativity. Thus I prefer to use the Creative.

One of the most surprising images in the *Chuang Tzu* is the Creator [*tsao hua*]. Chinese religious

thought is known for its non-theistic, organic view of nature, with no transcendent creator deity. Yet reference to "the Creator" is found in four different chapters, and indirect references to a Creator figure are found in other chapters. Does this mean that the *Chuang Tzu* presents a Western-like notion of a creator deity?

No. First of all, the **common translation "the Creator" is misleading**. A more literal rendering of the term (there are actually several closely related terms) is "that which transforms": that which produces the myriad changes that are ongoing in nature. There are references in the *Chuang Tzu* to the birth of things and even of the universe (similar to those found in the *Tao Te Ching*), references to "the Creator" concern *transformation*, the changes already existent things undergo. What is being commented on is the **ongoing metamorphosis of the world we live in**, not the creating of things in the Western conventional sense.

Scholars differ in their interpretations of this notion of "the Transformer," and many simply ignore it. But it is probably best to think of this image as a **metaphor** for (1) the **overflowing creative transformations of life**, in which our world is always undergoing manifold changes, and for (2) the apparent **skill and intelligence** in these changes, even though the changes are unpredictable.

While the language seems anthropomorphic, there is **no real sense of a separate deity** with a master plan. I think it would be better to translate the term as "the Creative," the creative principle and power of the universe. The *Chuang Tzu* seems to be saying: "the world is fundamentally characterized by constant transformations: we can call that process and the power of change *tsao hua*, that which transforms."

The presents **no definitive concept** of the Creative. In fact, it suggests that we cannot know this creative principle and power, we can only sense that "something" is working to produce the transformations that are life.

*Chuang Tzu*, 2(37-38): Music from holes; mushrooms spring up in dampness. They seem to have a True Master but we can't see the form.

*Chuang Tzu*, 20(218): There is a being who transforms the ten thousand things, yet we do not know how he works these changes. How do we know what is an end? How do we know what is a beginning? The only thing for us to do is just wait!

### *Su Shih*

Moreover, everything in the world has its owner, and if a thing doesn't belong to us, we don't dare take a hair of it. Only the clear breeze over the river, or the bright moon between the hills, which our ears hear as music, our eyes see as beauty in--these we may take without prohibition, these we may make free with and they will never be used up. These are the endless treasures of the Creator, here for you and me to enjoy together!

--Watson, *Su Tung-p'o*, 90

### *"Hsüan-ho hua-p'u"*

The mountains give protection, the streams give moving energy, the ocean extension, the earth support. The spiritual beauty of Nature (the Creator), the brightness and darkness of *yin* and *yang*, the distances of thousands of miles, all this can be represented, one cannot do it.

--tr. Siren, *Chinese on the Art of Painting*, 71-72

### Kuo Hsi

Wonderfully lofty and divinely beautiful are these painted mountains. In order to exhaust their marvels and grasp the work of the Creator, one must love their spirit, study their essential features, wander about them widely, satiate the eyes and store up the impressions in the heart.

--tr. Siren, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting*, 48

### THE LIFE, SPIRIT, AND FEELINGS OF THINGS IN NATURE

To a large degree, the West (especially since the scientific revolution) has tended to see nature as a collection of lifeless things. Plants have a kind of life, but they can't move and have no consciousness. Animals are the only things with life, although some early scientist-philosophers considered them really to be unfeeling machines who couldn't even experience pain. The rest of nature is inert. Movement and spirit must come from the outside, for in and of itself, matter is lifeless. **The Chinese saw all of life as animated by a vitality (*ch'i*), a spirit (*shen*), and lifefulness (*sheng*).** The artist must be able to experience the life of things, enter into the spirit, and transmit that vitality in his paintings.

*Ch'i* is a term that became increasingly important in Chinese metaphysics. It basically means "breath," but has the nuance of **"the breath of life,"** and thus vitality and spirit. In the *Chuang Tzu*, as elsewhere, it has two basic referents: humans and the cosmos. In the human context, *ch'i* refers to actual breath, but even here has a psycho-spiritual associations. It is connected with one's **spiritual vitality**, and as such proper breathing is essential.

*Chuang Tzu*, 6(77-78): The True Man of ancient times slept without dreaming and woke without care; he ate without savoring and his breath came from deep inside. The True Man breathes with his heels; the mass of men breathe with their throats.

This spiritual vitality of breath **must be protected** for it is related to the mystical ideal.

*Chuang Tzu*, 19(198): [The Perfect Man can avoid injury and fear.] "This is because he guards the pure breath--it has nothing to do with wisdom, skill, determination, or courage. Sit down and I will tell you about it. All that have faces, forms, voices, colors--these are all mere things. How could one thing and another thing be far removed from each other? And how could any one of them be worth considering as a predecessor? They are forms, colors--nothing more. But things have their creation in what has no form, and their conclusion in what has no change. If a man can get hold of this and exhaust it fully, then how can things stand in his way? He may rest within the bounds that know no excess, hide within the borders that know no source, wander where the ten thousand things have their end and beginning, unify his nature, nourish his breath, unite his virtue, and thereby communicate with that which creates all things. A man like this guards what belongs to Heaven and keeps it whole.

In the *Chuang Tzu*, cosmic *ch'i* seems to be something like the **vital spirit of the universe**.

*Chuang Tzu*, 2 (36-37): Tzu-ch'i said, "The Great Clod belches out breath and its name is wind. So long as it doesn't come forth, nothing happens. But when it does, then ten thousand hollows begin crying wildly....

Tzu-yu said, "By the piping of earth, then, you mean simply [the sound of] these hollows, and by the piping of man [the sound of] flutes and whistles. But may I ask about the piping of Heaven?"

Tzu-ch'i said, "Blowing on the ten thousand things in a different way, so that each can be

itself--all take what they want for themselves, but who does the sounding?"

**Chu Yün-ming**

People may say: "Grass and trees have no feelings {*ch'ing*}. . . ?" But they do not realize that everything in the universe has some kind of life (*sheng-i*) and that the mystery of creation {*tsao hua*}, changing and unsettled, cannot be described in forms.

--tr. Bush, *Literati* 135 (#218)

**Teng Ch'un**

People think that men alone have spirit; they do not realize that everything is inspirited.... Consequently the manner of painting which gives the resonance of the spirit and the movement of life is the foremost.

--tr. Siren, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting*, 89

**Mo Shih-lung**

The Tao of painting is to hold the whole universe in your hand. There will be nothing before your eyes which is not replete with life. . . ."

--tr. Siren, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting*, 136-7

**Ssu-k'ung T'u**

The changing appearance of wind-swept clouds,  
The quintessential spirit of flowers and plants,  
The waves and billows of the sea,  
The rugged crags of the mountains--  
All these resemble the great Tao:  
Identify with them intuitively [*miao*], even to the dust.\*  
Leave forms behind but catch true likeness,  
then you will come close to being the right man.

--Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature*, 35

➤ this image is drawn from the *Tao Te Ching*. The line can also mean that "all things in Nature accord with each other perfectly."

**ONENESS AND INTERRELATIONSHIP WITHIN NATURE**

The theme of oneness is central to the *Chuang Tzu* and virtually any Taoist – any Chinese – view of nature.

*Chuang Tzu*, 21(226): In this world, the ten thousand things come together in One...."

Although any philosophic statement about reality ultimately falls short of a true depiction of the world, the *Chuang Tzu* praises a statement that there are no boundaries among things. Things (to the extent we can talk of them as "things" and thus discrete entities) exist in a **field of interrelationships**.

*Chuang Tzu*, 2(41): The understandings of the men of ancient times went a long way. How far did it go? To the point where some of them believed that things have never existed--so far, to the end, where nothing can be added. Those at the next stage thought that things exist but recognized no boundaries among them. Those at the next stage thought there were boundaries but recognized no right or wrong. Because right and wrong appeared, the Way was injured, and because the Way

was injured, love became complete. But do such things as completion and injury really exist, or do they not?

In addition to the radical interrelationship among things, there are images of a more **metaphysical oneness: a unity in the *ch'i* of the universe**, which seems to be a single vitality that permeates and animates the world, the mysterious oneness of Heaven.

This oneness, however, is not an undifferentiated oneness. Instead the world of nature is characterized by distinct phenomena, but they are deeply interrelated. When things spring into being, they are distinct, each a different song in Heaven's piping, self-realized ("minding its own business").

*Chuang Tzu*, 2(36-37): Tzu-ch'i said, "The Great Clod belches out breath and its name is wind. So long as it doesn't come forth, nothing happens. But when it does, then ten thousand hollows begin crying wildly....Tzu-yu said, "By the piping of earth, then, you mean simply [the sound of] these hollows, and by the piping of man [the sound of] flutes and whistles. But may I ask about the piping of Heaven?"

Tzu-ch'i said, "Blowing on the ten thousand things in a different way, so that each can be itself--all take what they want for themselves, but who does the sounding?"

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## THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE ARTIST

### TRANQUIL CONTEMPLATION OF NATURE

In order to create, the artist must develop a certain kind of consciousness, one that can connect with and draw from the processes of nature. One of the qualities is a keen awareness of nature. Part of what is involved here is close observation, but ultimately it is a **spiritual understanding and intimacy with nature that** is required. The artist must develop the **ability to sense the life and spirit of mountains and rivers**. For this he needs an **inner tranquillity**.

#### *Kuo Hsi*

He who learns to paint flowers takes a stalk of the flower, places it in a deep hole in the ground and examines it from above; in this way the flower may be completely grasped. He who learns to paint bamboos places a stalk of bamboo in the clear moonlight so that its shadow falls on a white wall; in this way the real shape of the bamboo comes out. He who learns to paint landscapes should not do it differently. He should go himself to the mountains and streams and contemplate them in order to grasp their aspects and meaning. The effect of real streams and valleys is comprehended only at a distance; when seen close by, only their component elements are grasped.

--tr. Siren, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting*, 46-47

#### *Kuo Hsi*

Wonderfully lofty and divinely beautiful are these painted mountains. In order to exhaust their marvels and grasp the work of the Creator, one must love their spirit, study their essential features, wander about them widely, satiate the eyes and store up the impressions in the heart.



--tr. Siren, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting*, 48

### Mo Shih-lung

Painters of the past usually took the old masters as their models, but it is preferable to take Heaven and Earth as teachers. One should observe every morning the changing effects of the clouds, break off the practicing after painted mountains and go out for a stroll among the real mountains. When one sees strange trees, one should grasp them from the four sides....One should observe them thoroughly and transmit the spirit naturally, and for this purpose the form is necessary. The form, the heart and the hand must correspond mutually, and one must forget all about the imagination (what the spirit offers). Then there will, indeed, be trees in the picture, which have life also on the silk....

--tr. Siren, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting*, 141

### Kuo Hsi

I have therefore in my leisure hours looked through some poems of the Chin and T'ang periods and sometimes found among them excellent verses which express the things which are in man's heart or the views which present themselves to his eyes.

But if I did not live in perfect harmony and ease and were not seated at a bright window before a clean table burning incense to dispel all anxieties, the fine verses and excellent ideas would not take shape; the inner mood and beauty of their meaning would not be realized in my thoughts. How can it then be said that the principal thing in painting is easily reached?

--tr. Siren, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting*, 49

## ONENESS OF THE SAGE/ARTIST WITH NATURE

The artist's relationship with the natural object can be characterized as a kind of "oneness." Through a deep concentration on the object, and a "dark" or spiritual contemplation, the **separation between the artist and object can be overcome**. The nature of this experience, or different related experiences, were discussed in various ways, some of which were strongly influenced by Chuang Tzu's writings. The artist is supposed to "**enter into the spirit**" of the object. A type of "identification" is achieved in which the subject/object duality is lost. Because things are all part of nature's ongoing transformations, this type of identification was discussed in terms of entering into the transformations of things. This allowed the artist (or the sage) to **roam with things as they transformed**. One result of this type of experience is that Everything seen and touched is **full of nature's creative life** (see the last two quotations in this section). Keep this idea in mind when we read Bashō on seeing everything as a moon and flower.

The sage recognizes the oneness of the world by attaining a particular state of mind. This state of mind is characterized by **non-discrimination**. The sage does not make such discriminations, does not carve the world up into distinct objects but instead sees their unity. Sometimes the *Chuang Tzu* suggests this vision of unity with the image of the sage "embracing" things.

*Chuang Tzu*, 5(69): If you look at them from the point of view of their differences, then there is liver and gall, Ch'u and Yüeh. But if you look at things from the point of view of their sameness then the 10,000 things are only one.

At times the *Chuang Tzu* uses the imagery of "**entering**" the oneness of ultimate reality. But note that while the text says that the world is a "great unity" it still talks of individual things "living

naturally and of themselves." The unity seems to be that each thing remains connected to the oneness of undifferentiated nonbeing.

*Chuang Tzu*, 6(89): Be content to go along and forget about change and then you can enter the mysterious oneness of Heaven.

By becoming identified with the great unity of reality, the sage **loses the normal sense of having an individual self**.

*Chuang Tzu*, 21(226): In this world, the ten thousand things come together in One, and if you can find that One and become identical with it, then your four limbs and hundred joints will become dust and sweepings; life and death, beginning and end will be mere day and night, and nothing whatever can confound you--certainly not the trifles of gain or loss, good or bad fortune.

The sage responds to the transformations of nature in two basic ways. The first is to **contemplate** the creative flux of life. The second is to **join with it**. Such a view is quite radical, for it involves losing control and losing one's sense of a self as a static being with personal interests. Chuang Tzu is saying that we must undergo a radical change, from living life as a distinct and abiding self to living in a selfless unity with the creative universe. In this way the **sage embraces and embodies life's creative transformations**. Such a life involves a spiritual freedom beyond the comprehension of most people. The *Chuang Tzu* often presents this freedom as a **wandering with the Creative**. This ideal appealed to the wayfaring Bashō.

*Chuang Tzu*, 7(93-94): "I'm just about to set off with the Creator. And if I get bored with that, then I'll ride on the Light-and-Lissome Bird out beyond the six directions, wandering in the village of Not-Even-Anything and living in the Broad-and-Borderless field."

### **Tung Yu**

Hsien-hsi was a potential official of Chi-hsia who lived in the landscape, among cliffs and valleys. He was born loving the piled-up ranges and mountains, the denseness of gorges and the height of peaks. He stored his love in his mind, and after a while it became part of him. He concentrated on it without relaxing, even forgetting the outside world; until exceptional clarity was contained in his breast and he could not avoid having it. Then one day he suddenly saw many mountains spread out before him, emerging piled together one on top of the other, in a hazy glow in clearing mists, and they corresponded in each part from top to bottom with those he gradually released outside, unable to hold them back. For what has been transformed by the art of the mind comes forth when it is time and makes use of painting to lodge its releasing; thus cloud and mist, wind and rain, and thunder's transmutations follow in turn. At this time the artist suddenly forgets his four limbs and body; then what he sees with his insight is all mountains, so he is able to achieve Tao.

--tr. Bush, *Literati*, 53 (#96)

### **Hsieh Ho** (fl. 479-532)

praised painters for their ability to "enter the spirit [*ju shen*]."

--Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature*, 38

### **Yen Yu** (fl 1180-1235)

"The ultimate attainment of poetry lies in one thing: entering the spirit. If poetry enters the spirit, it has reached perfection, the limit, and nothing can be added to it."

--Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature*, 37

- Liu: "it is possible that by *ju shen Yen* also meant...entering into the life of things and capturing their spirit or essence. This latter interpretation can be supported by a number of earlier usages of the phrase." Keep this in mind when we read *Bashō*.

### Su Shih

When Yü-k'o painted bamboo,  
He saw bamboo, not himself.  
Nor was he simply unconscious of himself:  
Trance-like, he left his body.  
His body was transformed into bamboo,  
creating inexhaustible freshness.  
Chuang Tzu is no longer in this world,  
So who can understand such concentration?  
--tr. Bush, *Literati*, 41



## THE CREATIVE PROCESS

### THE SPONTANEITY OF THE ARTIST

The process of creating a painting or a poem is directly related to the creativity of nature. **The artist participates in nature's creative power, and thus acts in a spontaneous way.** Artists who do not act with this kind of spontaneity are not true artists; instead they are mere craftsmen. By being spontaneous, as nature is, the artist can capture the life of the object. Because of the spontaneity involved, Su Shih could talk of artistic creativity being instantaneous, without hesitation.

### Ching Hao

There are the divine, wonderful, clever and skillful painters. The divine painter makes no effort but achieves the forms spontaneously by following the transformations of Nature. The wonderful and profound painter penetrates with his thoughts the nature of everything in heaven and earth, and thus the things flow out of his brush in accordance with the truth of the motif. The clever painter draws vast outlines, which are not in accordance with the truth of the motif; the things he makes are strange, queer and have neither reason nor resemblance. This is the result of brush-work without thought. The skillful painter carves out and pieces together scraps of beauty which but seem in accordance with the great principles; he forces the drawing and works in a highly exaggerated fashion. It may be said that reality is not enough for him, as he makes such display of floridity.

--tr. Siren, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting*, 41

### Tung Yu

Those who discuss painting say, "To be excellent at achieving a sense of life and capable of not deviating from the truth, that is all there is to it. Through this one can reach perfect artistry." If one asks what a sense of life consists of, they answer, "We might call it naturalness (*tzu-jan*)," and if one asks about naturalness, they then say, "What cannot differ from the truth has got it." However, if one looks at all living things on earth, they are just the transformations of one *ch'i* (matter-energy). Its functioning and modifications are appropriate to things and no one is conscious of the process, so that it is achieved

naturally [by *tzu-jan*]. Now, painting is truly wonderful. But when one outlines forms and sets forth colors all at once, seeks for things to match them, imitates what they resemble, and finishes the work by arranging, this is all the ordering of human effort: how can it be in harmony with naturalness?

--tr. Bush, *Literati* 56 (#105)

### Su Shih

When bamboo first comes into being, it is only an inch-long shoot, but the joints and leaves are all in it...Now when painters do it joint by joint and add to it leaf by leaf, will this be bamboo? Thus, in painting bamboo one must first have the perfected bamboo in mind. When one takes up the brush and gazes intently, one will see what one wants to paint and rise hurriedly to pursue it, wielding the brush forthwith to capture what was seen. It is like the hare's leaping up when the falcon swoops down; if there is the slightest hesitation then all will be lost.

--tr. Bush, *Literati*, 37 (#60)

- Bashō talks about such instantaneous creativity, where not a hair's breadth comes between the artist and the work.

## THE ARTIST AND THE CREATIVE

The goal of the artist is to join with the Creative. Indeed, the ideal is to be the Creative, to be a medium through which the Creative makes its beautiful transformations. The artist does that through a **spiritual discipline** that involves losing our normal worries, judgments, distinctions, thought processes, and the very notion of an individual self separate from the world out there. Emptying oneself of these “secondary” and artificial things, the artist acts spontaneously on his true nature. Sometimes this is discussed in terms of “forgetting” – forgetting all the artificial junk that goes with being human.

Chuang Tzu like to speak in terms of “**waiting**.” This refers to a state of mind in which the “self” is no longer there to control things. One **wait for one's true nature to take over**. In fact, this is what it means to join the Creative, to embody the natural actions of the Tao.



## THE CREATIVE WORK OF ART

What can we say about the work of art itself? It **presents the creative transformations of nature**. In doing so, it **transmits the spirit** of the objects in nature. Because it manifests the ongoing transformations and spirit of nature, a successful painting will be “**fresh**” with life. Su Shih in particular liked to use that term in judging paintings, and Bashō did as well. One other quality is worth mentioning because of its relationship to Bashō's works. According to at least one painter, the goal is not to have a “complete” painting. In order to present the lifefulness of the objects, some aspects of the representation should be left out. A completely full and detailed painting would be stifling to the imagination and unable to capture the vitality of the object. Bashō also spoke of leaving a haiku poem “**unfinished**,” without everything described, in order to allow the reader to enter the poem.

## WEN: THE RELATION BETWEEN NATURE'S PATTERNS AND ART

One of the critical issues in the philosophy of nature is the **relationship between nature and culture**. In the West we have tended to see these as separate, just as we have seen humans as separate from nature (we even talk of humans as not part of the category of animals). When humans create

something, it is culture and the process of human creation is fundamentally different from what happens in the natural world. For the Chinese, human creativity and nature's creativity are basically the same process. Art, at least the art that goes beyond conscious skill of a craftsman, partakes of the creative power of nature. A term that suggests this continuity between human and nature's creativity is *wen*. Its basic meaning is "configuration," a **patterned marking**. From this basic meaning it took on the sense of an **embellishment**, something that is creatively added to undifferentiated matter. From there *wen* came to be used for **culture**, what humans do and create as they live in the natural world. And most specifically the term came to be used for **literature**, the most highly developed creative markings of human culture.

Liu Hsieh, in his famous book *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* ("The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons"), develops this notion of *wen*. The book contains an extended **celebration of how human creativity is part of the larger power of creativity of the natural world, to which we and human culture belong**. Because of the multiple meanings of the term, each usage has its own nuances, which are included in the following translations.

### Liu Hsieh

"The power of *wen* [configurations/culture/literature] is great indeed! It was born together with heaven and earth. How so? At first the dark [i.e., heaven] and the brown [i.e. earth] interspersed their colors; then the square [i.e., earth] and the round [i.e., heaven] separated their bodies; the sun and moon, twin jade discs, suspended their signs attached to heaven; the mountains and rivers, shining like fine silk, spread their orderly arrangements over the earth--these are really the *wen* [configurations/embellishments] of the Tao. Looking up, one might contemplate that which emitted lights, and bending down, observe that which contained compositions within. When the high [i.e., heaven] and the low [i.e. earth] each had its position fixed, then the Two Forms were born. Man alone made a third, being the concentration of natural spiritual powers. These are called the Trinity. Man is the finest essence of the Five Agents, and truly the mind of heaven and earth. When mind was born, then language was established; when language was established, then *wen* [literature/patterns] shone forth. This is a natural principle [*tao*]."

--*Wen-hsin tiao-lung*, in Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature*, 22

"Extending our observation to all classes of things, we see that animals and plants all have their *wen* [patterns/embellishments]. . . . Now, how can these be decorations added from without? They are really just so of themselves. As for sounds issuing from woods, which form melodies as do pipes and strings, or fountains striking rocks and evoking resonances as harmonious as those produced by jade chimes and bronze bells--these show that when forms are established, then compositions are completed; when sounds issue forth, then *wen* [pattern] is born. Now, if insentient objects have such abundant colorful adornments, how can he that is a vessel with a mind be without his *wen* [embellishments/culture/literature]?"

--Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature*, 22-23

"The origin of human *wen* [culture/literature/embellishments] began with the Great Primordial [T'ai-chi]. In profoundly manifesting the divine light, the signs in the *Book of Changes* were the first. Pao-hsi began the book by drawing the trigrams, and Confucius completed it with the *Wings*. But only on the first two hexagrams, Ch'ien and K'un, did he compose the commentary 'Wen-yen' [patterned/embellished words]. Now, the *wen* [pattern/configuration/embellishment] of words--is this not indeed the mind of heaven and earth?"

--Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature*, 23

[Pao Hsi, Confucius] "based themselves on the mind of the Tao to spread their literary compositions, and investigated divine principles to set forth their instructions.... They contemplated the configurations [*wen*]

of heaven to exhaust all changes, and observed the configurations of man to accomplish cultural transformations. Only then could they bring together the principles of the universe like the warp and woof of weaving, encompass and enwrap permanent rules, expand their deeds and tasks, and make words and meanings shine forth brilliantly. Hence we know that the Tao, through the sages, perpetuates [or bestows] *wen* [literature], and the sages, by means of *wen* [literature], manifest the Tao, so that it can prevail everywhere without hindrance and be used daily without destitution. In the *Book of Changes* it is said, 'What arouses the movements of the world lies in the words.' The reason why words can arouse the world is that they are the *wen* [configuration/writing] of the Tao."

--Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature*, 23-24

## **THE ARTISTIC WORK AND THE NATURAL WORLD**

One of the key goals of Chinese art and literature is to represent the natural world. The work of art should portray reality. But the **reality that is to be depicted** is not the outward form of nature but the **inner vitality of nature**, the *ch'i* and transformations of mountains and trees.

### **Su Shih**

Landscapes belong to a superior class, but it is difficult to make them pure, strong, original and to represent their endless transformations.

--tr. Siren, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting*, 60

### **Teng Ch'un**

By revolving their thoughts and preparing the brush the painters can represent the characteristics of everything, but here is only one method by which it can be done thoroughly and exhaustively. Which is that? It is called the transmitting of the spirit. . . . Consequently the manner of painting which gives the resonance of the spirit and the movement of life is the foremost.

--tr. Siren, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting*, 89

### **Chang Yen-yüan**

In painting, one should avoid worrying about accomplishing a work that is too diligent and too finished in the depiction of forms and the notation of colors or one that makes too great a display of one's technique, thus depriving it of mystery and aura. That is why one should not fear the incomplete, but quite to the contrary, one should deplore that which is to complete. From the moment one knows that a thing is complete, what need is there to complete it? For the incomplete does not necessarily mean the unfulfilled. Indeed, the defect of the unfulfilled is precisely the failure to recognize a thing as complete enough. When one paints a waterfall or a spring, the brushstrokes should be interrupted without the breath's being interrupted; the forms should be discontinuous without the spirit being so. Such is the case with a divine dragon in the midst of clouds: Its head and tail do not seem to be connected, but its being is animated by a single breath.

--tr. Cheng, *Empty and Full*, 76