

A Semiotic Study of Chinese Landscape Painting

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Abstract: The aim of this essay is to redefine Chinese landscape painting within the framework of existing definitions of landscape painting in Western discourse on art. Accordingly, the author applies Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of the sign system and signification process to the study of Chinese landscape painting. Based on a close reading of the earliest landscape painting in Chinese art history, the author discusses the Saussurean theory of an arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified, and argues that in Chinese landscape painting this relationship is non-arbitrary because the strategies used for visual representation relate to the pictographic and ideographic qualities of Chinese writing script. The author addresses the first classical theoretical text on landscape art in Chinese aesthetics, and demonstrates that Chinese landscape painting is not a mere representation of beautiful scenery, but a metaphysical approach to the Tao, the "Way" toward eternity in nature.

Keywords: landscape painting, Saussurean sign, Tao, arbitrariness, non-arbitrariness

索绪尔符号和中国山水画的重新定义

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摘 要: 本文旨在西方艺术话语对风景画现存定义的框架内重新定义“中国山水画”。从这个角度, 笔者应用索绪尔关于符号系统和表意过程的概念来研究中国山水画。通过细读中国艺术史上第

一幅山水画，笔者讨论了索绪尔能指与所指之间的任意性关系，并指出这一关系在艺术中应该非任意性，因为山水画的构成是视觉再现，涉及中国书写中的象形相似和表意暗示。就这一点而言，笔者进一步冒险进入中国美学中的第一个山水艺术经典理论文本，以此表明中国山水画不仅是对美丽风景的再现，而是一种通向“道”的形而上学的方式，是自然中的永恒方式。

关键词：山水画 索绪尔符号 道 任意性 非任意性

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According to Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 - 1913), a sign consists of a signifier and a signified^①(Saussure, 1965, p. 97; Harris, 1983, 2009, p. 65), and is conditioned by the arbitrary relationship between the two. However, this is not necessarily true of the semiotics of art. As visual art is traditionally defined by visual resemblance, such as the precision of realistic representation emphasised in Western painting from the Renaissance to the 19th century, I argue that the sign in art is characterised by non-arbitrary relationship between the signifier and signified. This further defines semiotics in an art-historical context and highlights its crucial difference from Saussurean semiology. The conventional definition of landscape art is limited to the signifier only, positioning landscape as subject matter rather than background. However, due to the non-arbitrariness of visual signs in art, I argue that landscape art should be redefined to accommodate both signifier and signified, as well as the non-arbitrary process of signification. Chinese landscape painting offers an invaluable case study.

In this essay, I first examine the Saussurean concept of signs in relation to the semiotics of art history, and use the findings to redefine Chinese landscape painting. Specifically, I explore Saussure's principle of the arbitrariness of the sign and offer counter-examples of non-arbitrariness. I also discuss a classical treatise on Chinese art theory, with especial attention to the representation of landscape and the

① “Signifier” and “signified”, and “signal” and “signification” in Roy Harris’ English translation, are common English equivalents of Saussure’s “signifiant” and “signifie” in French. In this essay, I use the more common terms “signifier” and “signified”, except when quoting Saussure.

embodiment of the Tao in landscape painting. This discussion begins with a semiotic reading of a major early Chinese art work, *Spring Outing*, and concludes with a redefinition of Chinese landscape painting.

I . The Sign and Representation

In visual art, a sign is a representational and referential image. In traditional art theory (before the modern and modernist eras), the term “signifier” referred to the visual elements or formal aspects of an image, such as brush-strokes, texture, lines, planes, shape, space, value, mass, colour and light. Those were seen as the building-blocks of images and thus the foundation for the theoretical interpretation of art works. Landscape painting takes natural and civilised scenery as its subject matter, representing mountains, peaks, cliffs, rocks, woods, trees, rivers, streams, boats, bridges, buildings, roads, figures, street scenes and so forth. Implicit in these images is the relationship between mankind and the surrounding world. Therefore, representation is the primary function of visual signs in art, and the precondition for further interpretation of a painting’s referential implications.

To initiate this discussion, I offer a reading of a 6th-century Chinese landscape painting, *Spring Outing*, attributed to Zhan Ziqian (545 – 618 CE), a Sui dynasty (581 – 619 CE) artist. The painting is presently in the collection of the Palace Museum in Beijing. It is the oldest Chinese landscape painting extant today, and the first known landscape painting in Chinese art history. Analysis of this painting can help us to better understand representation in relation to semiotics and landscape art.

In the middle of the painting, a river runs down towards the viewer from the upper left-hand corner to the lower right-hand corner; on the left bank of the river, small hills are shown dotted with trees, and on the right, hills and peaks similarly dotted with trees are seen from afar to the foreground. Three images dominate the composition: first, the hills and peaks, which represent mountains in nature; second, the river, which signifies flowing water in nature; and third, the trees, which indicate woods in nature.

We can now read the painting more closely, focusing on the formal appearance of the above images. The surface of the river is made up of thin curved lines, sometimes continuous and sometimes broken, whose wavy pattern represents gentle

waves, the effect of a mild spring breeze on the water's surface. The mountains are mild too: on both sides of the river, more thin curved lines, mostly continuous and drawn in light shades, gentle and feminine, indicate the softness of the mountain landscape. This kind of landscape is usually found in southern China, in the Lower Yangzi Region. On each bank there are three kinds of trees: some with bare branches, some with lush leaves, and some with blooming flowers; together, they refer to the season of early spring.

In the middle of the river, there is a small boat with four tiny figures inside it: a female master in red who is listening to music, attended by a servant in blue; a musician in white playing a flute-like instrument for her patron; and a boatman in white pushing the boat with a pole. Similar tiny figures can also be seen on the river shore and in the woods, enjoying strolling, horse-riding and sightseeing. All of these activities signify the themes of leisure and springtime.

In the above description, certain key verbs are used, such as “represent”, “signify”, “indicate” and “refer”. How do these verbs relate to each other, and to the images described? These relationships are representational, indicating the function of the signifier. In the context of semiotics, representation involves using the signifier for the signified; in the context of visual art, representation involves using an image for something else, such as reality. Is the painting also representational? Together, the images of the river, mountains, trees, boat, figures, horses and so on represent the theme of springtime. The name of the painting, *Spring Outing*, is also representational, as it denotes a seasonal leisure activity. The painting also represents a certain aspect of social reality: leisure time and the enjoyment of nature in the daily lives of the middle-upper class. The people of this class are represented by the female master on the boat and the scholar-officials on the river bank and in the woods, whose class and identity are indicated by their hairstyles and clothing. However, spring is not a time of leisure for the working class, who are represented by the musician, boatman and servants. The seemingly innocuous landscape thus highlights class distinctions as well as multiple layers of reality and interpretation.

First and foremost, Chinese landscape painting is representational, and semiotics is concerned with representation. Plato once said that a painting of a bed is an imitation of an actual bed made by a carpenter, who in turn imitated the idea

of a bed created by God. In Plato's terminology, the verb "imitate" and the noun "imitation" are representational. According to Aristotle, written words represent spoken words and spoken words represent the speaker's thoughts. These ancient Greek scholars initiated philosophical discourse on the sign and the representational process of signification. More than 2,000 years later, in the early 20th century, Saussure developed a theory of sign and signification and named it "semiology", which derives from the Greek word for "sign", "semeion".

In Saussure's terminology, the representational relationship between the visual appearance of the images in *Spring Outing* and the real landscape in nature constitutes a sign system. What are the essential characteristics of this relationship? Saussure elaborated his ideas about signification in his foundational work on modern linguistics and semiotics, *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), and argued that the relationship between signifier and signified is primarily arbitrary.

II. Arbitrary vs. Non-Arbitrary Signs

Saussure based his theory of arbitrariness on phonological and phonetic evidence. He argued that the sound of a word and the object it signifies together form a sign. "In our terminology a *sign* is the combination of a concept and a sound pattern[...]. We propose to keep the term *sign* to designate the whole, but to replace *concept* and *sound pattern* respectively by *signification* and *signal*." (Saussure, 2009, p. 67) Addressing phonology and phonetics, Saussure observed that the sound of the Latin word "arbor" reminds the listener of a tree. In this case, the sound pattern "arbor" is a signifier (signal) of an actual object, a tree, which is the signified (signification). Saussure, who was interested in universal linguistic rules, argued that this signifying mechanism operates at a general as well as a specific and individual level. In other words, the signified object is also the abstract concept of a tree, which may be any kind of tree.

Saussure's approach moves from the specific to the general. Following this logic, I can develop the above idea a little further, to address visual representation. First, the written word "tree" is a signifier representing the sound signal in English for "tree" and also representing both an actual tree and the abstract concept of a tree. Second, the image of a tree is a visual signifier that represents both an actual tree and the concept of a tree. Compared with the written word, images are more

universal, transcending language differences. In the landscape-painting tradition, images of trees and woods, regardless of type, are usually painted in green, and green is used as a visual signifier for forestland in almost all cultures. The colour has also become a universal symbol of peace, as in the case of the green olive branch in Biblical symbology. In other words, certain recurrent signifiers appear to be understood across cultural boundaries and contexts. Another example is provided by the simple semi-abstract images on road signs worldwide, which signify traffic rules and road conditions.

The above discussion is relevant to Saussure's principle of arbitrariness and to my own argument regarding non-arbitrariness. Based on phonological and phonetic evidence, Saussure proposed that the relationship between the signifier and the signified has two key characteristics: first, it is arbitrary; second, it is linear. To explain the first characteristic, Saussure noted that the sounds signifying trees have nothing to do with real trees. As the sound signal is arbitrary, classical Latin speakers chose to say "arbor", the French say "arbre" and the English say "tree", while the Chinese say "shu". Explaining the second characteristic, Saussure argued that the linear relationship between signifier and signified is temporal, because it takes time to make a sound and to pronounce a word.

The principle of arbitrariness, as well as that of non-arbitrariness, is important to the study of visual art. Elaborating on the arbitrariness of signification, Saussure discussed the invariability and variability of the relationship between signifier and signified. The principle of invariability may seem inconsistent with that of arbitrariness. Saussure explained this apparent contradiction as follows. "The signal, in relation to the idea it represents, may seem to be freely chosen. However, from the point of view of the linguistic community, the signal is imposed rather than freely chosen." (Ibid., p. 71) I argue that the differences in the sounds denoting "tree" in Latin, French, English and Chinese support Saussure's theory of free choice, which corresponds to his principle of arbitrariness. However, once a certain sound has been chosen, it cannot be changed by speakers; rather, cultural influence forces them to incorporate this sound into their shared language. Saussure described this invariability as a "contract", both linguistic and social, which all speakers of the language agree to obey. Saussure's principle of variability differs from that of arbitrariness. It concerns not "freely chosen" sound, but changes to

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sound in the process of language development. In this sense, the signifying role of a sound pattern changes in the history of language evolution, and so does the signifying role of an image in art history.

Saussure's principle of arbitrariness has drawn questions and caused debate. I am sceptical about the application of this principle to the visual signifier. As Saussure did not provide a sufficiently in-depth explanation of his theory of an arbitrary linguistic sign, later scholars tried to fill this gap and critically defend Saussure's theory. In the 1970s, the American scholar Jonathan Culler published a short book on Saussure, in which he offered a descriptive interpretation of the principle of arbitrariness. Culler remarked that first, "languages are not nomenclatures" and "[e]ach language articulates and organizes the world differently"; second, the signifier can evolve; and third, the signified may also change. Regarding the significance of this principle, Culler observed that "both signifier and signified are purely relational or differential entities". (Jonathan, 1980, p. 15)

However, others scholars have cast doubt on Saussure's principle of arbitrariness. In the 1980s, the British scholar Roy Harris, who produced the first English translation of Saussure's *Cours*, published a book on Saussure in which he pointed out the contradiction within this principle. Harris opined that as the theory of arbitrariness was largely based on nomenclature, Saussure had to offer some non-arbitrary exceptions as a remedy or compensation. The problem for Harris was that the relationship between signifier and signified is conditioned by social institutions within a speaker's political, religious, legal and economic context, which Saussure ignored. Harris noted that Saussure paid more attention to internal elements than to external considerations. In his discussion of Saussurean arbitrariness, Harris also addressed the relationship between "parole" and "langue". (Roy, 1987, pp. 64 – 69) This relationship is relevant to my later discussion of the semiotic structure of visual art.

Unlike Harris, some scholars have argued for Saussure's incorporation of external considerations into his theory of arbitrariness, especially in relation to the parole-langue interaction. In the 1990s, the Australian-Italian scholar Paul J. Thibault published a book entitled *Re-reading Saussure*, in which he claimed that despite emphasising the internal arbitrary relationship of signifier and signified,

Saussure also acknowledged the external context of this relationship. Relevantly, Thibault went on to consider Saussure's distinction between absolute and relative arbitrariness in association with the motivation for sign making. (Paul, 1997, p. 217, p. 277) I go one step further to suggest that Saussure's theory of relative arbitrariness left open the possibility of non-arbitrariness. Indeed, among Saussure's non-arbitrary exceptions, the image signifier offers the best support for my argument regarding visual art.

Visual art is image-based, and visual signifiers are hardly arbitrary. The American scholar Boris Gasparov delivered lectures on Saussure at Columbia University at the beginning of the 21st century, in which he critically analysed the arbitrariness principle. He used the Peircean term "iconic signs" to refer to image-based visual signifiers, and claimed that these kinds of signifiers were not arbitrary. Interestingly, he related his claim to Saussure's example of the non-arbitrariness of the Chinese language. (Boris, 2013, p. 73) The Chinese written system originated from images and visual resemblance; specifically, it was both pictographically and ideographically constructed. Therefore, Saussure believed that the Chinese signifier is less arbitrary than his other examples from Latin, French and so on.

Saussure also discussed non-arbitrary symbols, onomatopoeic words and exclamations. The symbolic signifier is of particular relevance to my topic. In Chinese landscape painting, the signifier is imagistic, visually resembles the signified and is culturally conditioned. In terms of the extrinsic qualities of the signifier-signified relationship, cultural context plays a decisive role in both constructing and deciphering the sign. In other words, the two processes of encoding and decoding a sign are both intrinsically and extrinsically defined. Coincidentally or otherwise, as previously discussed, the main images used in Chinese landscape painting, mountains and water, may offer useful examples of the non-arbitrary sign.

Visual signs may be said to transcend language barriers. Even without a translation of the linguistic elements associated with a painting, such as title or artist biography, students can read the images of another culture, at least at a descriptive level. For example, Western students are able to identify the hills, peaks, river and trees in *Spring Outing*. The trees with bare branches indicate the immediate aftermath of cold winter; the trees with lush leaves indicate gradually increasing warmth; and the trees with blooming flowers indicate spring. It is not too difficult to

identify the visual forms of trees as the signifiers and the season of spring as the signified; together, the two constitute a seasonal sign. This analysis implies that due to its basis in visual resemblance, which is non-arbitrary, art contains a kind of universal underlying language that can be interpreted by viewers from a wide range of backgrounds.

However, despite the absence of language barriers to interpretation, the meaning of non-arbitrary image signs is also shaped by context. Western students with some geographical knowledge understand that the soft lines depicting hill contours in *Spring Outing* refer to the gentle mountains of southern China. Similarly, students with appropriate cultural knowledge understand that the delicate lines depicting waves refer to southern rivers, as well as to the soft and mild femininity of the southern Chinese personality and character. Clearly, knowledge of external context takes our reading of images to another level, offering us much greater access to implied meaning.

Based on the above discussion of Saussure's theories of arbitrary and non-arbitrary visual signs, I now define the semiotics of art history as the study of visual signs in art, wherein signs and signification are characterised by a non-arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified.

III. Signification Process: Landscape Embodies Ideology

The concept of a non-arbitrary sign is relevant to our analysis of images in art, which has moved from arbitrary sounds to arbitrary and non-arbitrary written words, and then to non-arbitrary images. Similarly, in anthropological and historical terms, the development of human culture usually progresses from oral to visual and finally textual. This is certainly true in the case of Chinese culture: in the history of Chinese civilisation, image-making occurred before the development of written words, and the Chinese script was first a series of pictograms, then ideograms, and has since taken on even greater meaning.

A chapter of Saussure's *Course* is devoted to the "representation of a language by writing", during which written words are shown to represent spoken words. This is certainly true of the Chinese writing system, on which Saussure made the following observation. "A language and its written form constitute two separate systems of signs. The sole reason for the existence of the latter is to represent the

former.” Saussure went on to describe Chinese writing script as the “classical example” of an ideographic system “in which a word is represented by some uniquely distinctive sign which has nothing to do with the sounds involved. The sign represents the entire word as a whole, and hence represents indirectly the idea expressed”. (Saussure, 1983, 2009, p. 24, p. 26)

Chinese script, whether pictographic or ideographic, “has nothing to do with the sounds involved”, but much to do with images, as it is image-based and visually representational. In the early 2nd century, an Eastern Han dynasty (25 – 220 CE) scholar of philology Xu Shen (ca. 58 – ca. 147 CE) compiled an etymological encyclopaedia of Chinese characters, entitled *Explaining and Analyzing Characters* (*Shuowen Jiezi*), to explore the origin and formation of the Chinese script. Xu Shen observed of pictographic characters that “[w]hen Cangjie first started to create the writing script, he categorized the characters based on visual resemblance”. Cangjie was one of the Yellow Emperor’s scribes 4,000 – 5,000 years ago. In ancient Chinese mythology, he created Chinese characters and the Chinese writing system. His method of creation was non-arbitrary. According to Xu Shen, “[l]ooking at the footprints of birds and animals, Cangjie realized that their patterns and forms could be categorized; he thus started to create a writing script”. (Duan, 1986, p. 425) Xu Shen categorised Chinese characters into six types: the pictogram appeared first, and the ideogram developed from it. The non-arbitrariness of the creation of Chinese characters is confirmed by the historical fact that the pictograph—based on visual resemblance—is the original form of Chinese script, and the foundation and source of the other five character types, including the ideogram.

For instance, the written character for “mountain” in modern Chinese, “山”, comes from the ancient pictographic symbol of three pyramid-shaped triangles connected to each other side by side, with the middle triangle larger and taller than the other two. This character was carved on an oracle bone more than 3,000 years ago. The character does not refer to a specific and individual mountain, due to its visual simplification and abstraction, but represents the landscape feature of a mountain and the concept of a mountain in general. The non-arbitrary connection between this pictographic character and a mountain is visually direct, as the image of the three triangles resembles the shape, contour and outline of all mountains. Therefore, this character is also used as a radical to compose other characters

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related to the concept of mountains, such as “嵐’” for mountain wind. This character has two parts: a mountain radical on top and the character denoting wind beneath. Etymologically, this character is ideographic as well as pictographic, as it refers to the origin of the wind, namely the mountain valley. Although the pronunciation of the character “lan” is arbitrary, and has nothing to do with the Chinese sound for “mountain”, “shan”, its written form is non-arbitrary, as it is constituted by the characters for “mountain” and “wind”.

Pictography and ideography are two of the six major ways in which the Chinese writing script was created and has evolved over the last 4,000 years. Similar to the character for “mountain”, what for “water” in modern Chinese is “水”. This pictographic character comes from the ancient symbol of water waves and currents, which consists of three or five curved lines with a stronger line in the middle to denote the main stream in a body of flowing water. This character is also used as a radical to form other characters related to the concepts of water or river, such as the ideographic character “泪” for tears, which consists of a water radical on the left and the image of an eye on the right.

Some scholars of Chinese etymology studying Xu Shen’s categorisation have recently discussed the direct connection between Chinese painting and Chinese script, and emphasised the commonality of the representational image in pictograms, ideograms and pre-historic petroglyphic carvings found on cliffs and rocks in China. (Zang, 1995, p. 109) In my opinion, non-arbitrary visual resemblance forms a direct connection between these types of script. Chinese script and art seem to have the same origin; as the old saying goes, “writing and painting share the same source”. The Chinese script is pictographic and ideographic, based on images that represent signified objects and concepts, such as mountains and water. Chinese painting, especially landscape painting, is the same. Landscape painting, the main genre of Chinese art, is simply called “mountain-water painting”, which signifies its key subject matter or main images, as exemplified in the painting *Spring Outing*.

The ideogram is certainly not only a visual representation, as it carries powerful conceptual implications. This offers useful insights into the tradition of ideological embodiment in Chinese landscape art. In *Spring Outing*, the images of hills, peaks and a river indeed represent landscape elements, but the representation does not stop there. In the tradition of Chinese mountain-water painting, landscapes with

small figures generally represent a certain aspect of life, which in turn represents a Taoist principle: a man is but a small part of nature. This principle is ideological, and points towards ancient philosophy dealing with ways of life, such as the Way of Taoism. Semiotically, the representational relationship between the signifier and the signified is multi-layered. In *Spring Outing*, there are at least three levels of representation. On a formal level, the appearance of the landscape images is a signifier, denoting mountains, a river and the woods. Together, the signifier and the signified constitute a visual sign of a spring scene. On a social level, as discussed, the scene becomes a social signifier, representing a certain aspect of the real life of the middle-upper class. Ideologically, the social signified becomes a philosophical signifier, representing the Taoist understanding of the meaning of life.

The continuous and multi-layered process of representation described above is also a pivotal process of signification during which a signified becomes a new signifier belonging to another sign. Using Saussurean terminology, the pictograph is more imagistic and the ideograph is more conceptual. This shift in signification from visuality to ideology is a fundamental characteristic of Chinese landscape art, which is not only a representation of idealised nature but also an embodiment of philosophy.

IV. Form and Ideology: Chinese Aesthetics of Landscape Painting

The tradition of embodying philosophy in nature has a long history in Chinese art: it can be traced back to the 4th century, when intellectuals enjoyed a reclusive life and were particularly interested in metaphysics. Against this historical and cultural backdrop, the earliest Chinese texts on landscape painting introduced and shaped the tradition of metaphysical embodiment in natural landscapes. The most important of these texts to have survived is attributed to Zong Bing (375 – 443 CE).

The subjects of Zong Bing's text, entitled *Preface to Painting Landscape*, are landscape and the embodiment of Tao within it. Three main topics are addressed in the treatise. The first is Zong Bing's central idea that nature possesses the Tao, and landscape painting offers an image of nature. Therefore, travelling within a natural setting is a way of enjoying the Tao, and landscape painting is a way of representing and embodying the Tao. Following logically from the first, the second topic is the

representation of nature. As natural scenes are vast, whereas human vision is limited and paintings are small, Zong Bing argued that knowledge of visual perspective should be used to convey spatial depth in landscape paintings. Third, Zong Bing developed further the idea of Taoist spirituality in landscape art, and ended with an emphasis on the importance of the artist's cultivated personality.

Consistent with Zong Bing's reclusive inclination, both Taoist and Buddhist thoughts are implicit in his writing, but collectively named "Tao". His main idea is clearly stated at the opening of the *Preface*, as follows: "The saints possess Tao and project it onto objects, whereas the sages purify [their] minds and perceive [the Tao from] images [of objects]." (圣人含道暎物, 贤者澄怀味象。)(Peng, 2009, p. 46) Here, "objects" refers to the material world of nature, or the forms of nature. Although this statement is simple, it is of great relevance to the function of landscape art. A Chinese scholar recently argued that the "saints" to which Zong Bing referred were Confucius, Laozi and Zhuangzi, as well as Buddhist masters. (Xu, 2008, p. 33) I agree, and suggest that "saints" may also refer to artists in the context of this treatise; that is, painting landscapes is considered a means of projecting the Tao onto objects, painted images of nature. The artist thus helps to embody the Tao through his art, and becomes similar to the saints. Therefore, appreciating landscape painting is a way of embracing the Tao by embracing images of nature. In this sense, the artist also takes the role of mediator between the saints and the sages. Echoing the opening statement and elaborating on the mediating roles of artist and art, Zong Bing wrote the following. "The saints implement the Tao with spirit, and the sages comprehend it; mountains and water manifest the Tao with the forms [of nature], and Confucian scholars enjoy it." (Peng, 2009, p. 47) "Forms" here refers to the images of nature in landscape painting, such as depictions of mountains and rivers.

I consider two verbs in Zong Bing's opening statement to be crucial: "project" and "perceive". The first explains why and how an artist makes art, and the second explains why and how a reader enjoys art. Unfortunately, two versions of the first verb are used in the treatise: "project" (暎) and "correspond" (应), which have the same pronunciation in Chinese. Some scholars take the first version and some the second, but the two are not equivalent. It is essential to discuss the two versions of this verb, as the distinction is directly connected with the author-text-reader

relationship, which is key to Zong Bing's theory of philosophical embodiment. In addition, this discussion supports my interpretation of embodiment.

The renowned Chinese scholar Yu Jianhua (1895 – 1979) pointed out the difference between the two versions of the verb, but neither discussed this difference nor explained his preference for “correspond”. Therefore, he interpreted the first half of Zong Bing's opening statement as follows. “The saints possess Tao in heart, and use the Tao to reflect myriad objects in the external world.” (Yu, 2007, p. 66) Oddly, one young Chinese scholar chose to use “project” but interpreted it as “correspond”. (Peng, 2009, p. 47) The choice of “correspond” denies the subjectivity of saints and artists; they are passive rather than active in the process of embodying the Tao. Conversely, some scholars have overstressed subjectivity and positivity, and emphasised the Tao over landscape. Chen Chuanxi, a Chinese art historian, chose “project” to translate Zong Bing's opening statement, and remarked that “this treatise is not really about art, but about metaphysics” (Chen, 2006, p. 9). According to this scholar, as metaphysical embodiment was fundamental to Chinese landscape painting from the very beginning, both Chinese art theory and Chinese landscape painting are matters of metaphysics rather than art.

Like Chen, I choose to translate Zong Bing's opening statement using the verb “project”, although I believe that the treatise is primarily about nature and landscape art rather than metaphysics. I prefer the verb “project” for a number of reasons. In terms of writing style, the rhetorical device used in Zong Bing's opening statement is that of parallel couplets, which was very popular when Zong Bing was writing. It was the rhetorical device most commonly used in rhapsody, the mainstream genre of prose writing in the period. This device requires all words and syntactic structures in two parallel lines to match each other grammatically. In Zong Bing's opening statement, the subjects “saints” and “sages” in the two parallel lines match each other, and the verb “project” in the first line matches the verb “perceive” in the second line: the saints offer the Tao and the sages accept the Tao. The grammatical objects in the two lines, “objects” in “project it onto objects” and “images” in “perceive [the Tao from] images [of objects]”, also match each other. In this statement, as previously mentioned, “objects” refers to the material world of nature or the forms of nature, and “images” are the visual representations of nature. In semiotic terms, natural objects are signifiers used by the saints to encode the

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Tao, from which sages decode the Tao. How do the saints “project” the Tao onto these objects? As artists, they imitate and represent nature in art; specifically, they paint nature in the form of landscapes, wherein viewers perceive the Tao. In this sense, the artist mediates between the projector and the perceiver.

With the above in mind, I suggest that the verb “correspond” in the first parallel line does not match the verb “perceive” in the second line. The conflict between versions of a single verb has also caused problems for scholars of Chinese art in the West, who have produced different translations of Zong Bing’s treatise. A well-known Swedish scholar of Chinese art, Osvald Siren (1879 – 1966), translated Zong Bing’s opening statement as follows: “The wise ones cherish Tao and harmonize with [conform to] the objects; the virtuous men conceive in their pure minds the beauty of the forms.” (Siren, 2005, p. 14) In this translation, Siren chose “correspond” and thus failed to grasp the relationship between the saints (“the wise ones” in his translation) who project the Tao onto nature and the sages (“the virtuous men”) who perceive the Tao in nature. A well-known New York based Chinese scholar, Lin Yutang (1895 – 1976), also failed to grasp the logic of the interaction between projector and perceiver, as indicated in the following translation: “[t]he sage possesses Tao and deals with things accordingly, while wise men keep their hearts pure to enjoy material forms.” (Lin, 1967, p. 31)

The above two scholar-translators misrepresented the author-text-reader relationship, as their translations lacked a mediator between the projector and the perceiver. Although Zong Bing did not mention the role of the artist in his opening statement, his treatise is about landscape painting, and he did imply that the landscape artist mediates between the saints who project the Tao onto nature and the sages who perceive the Tao in nature. Why is the landscape painter a mediator? He makes paintings that represent nature and embody the Tao, and thus connects the saints and the sages through his art. Indeed, for Zong Bing, representing nature and embodying the Tao in the image of nature were the primary functions of landscape painting. This is the main argument of his treatise.

Zong Bing’s landscape theory is systematic and logical, and depicts a process of communication: saints project the Tao onto nature; artists capture the Tao from nature and render it implicit in landscape painting; and sages (readers/viewers/audiences) enjoy the image of nature in landscape painting and thus perceive the Tao

through the representation of nature. I argue that Zong Bing created a blueprint for Chinese landscape art with four essential components: the context, the artist, the art work and the reader/viewer. (Abrams, 1994, p. 6)

I identify the first essential component, context, with Zong Bing's saints, who project the Tao onto nature. This projection does not wholly determine context, but provides a critical ideological foundation for landscape artists and their work. In this sense, the saints are just like God in Plato's *Republic*, who offers the carpenter and artist the abstract idea of a bed. In semiotic terms, the saints construct the ideological pretext for the sign, and for landscape painting.

I identify the second essential component with the author or artist who perceives the Tao from context, i. e., from nature and from the saints. As previously discussed, the saints project the Tao onto nature. However, they may also turn into artists who mediate between projector and perceiver. This transformation of identity directly resembles the process by which the signified of a sign becomes the signifier of the next sign. The shifting role of the artist embodies the fluidity of Saussure's sign. Therefore, the artist plays two semiotic roles. As a decoder, he or she reads the saints' code in nature, and as an encoder, he or she inscribes the Tao in the image of nature in landscape painting.

I regard landscape painting not only as the product of an artist, the mediator, but as a medium that represents nature, embodies the message of the saints and presents this message to readers/viewers. How can art accomplish such an important task? From a formalist perspective, representing the image of nature requires knowledge of visual perspective. Zong Bing was the first theorist in Chinese art history to discuss the requirement of spatial depth for realistic representation, noting that "the farther away an object is, the smaller it appears" (Lin, 1967, p. 32). However, his understanding of perspective was simplistic and incomplete, and cannot be compared with the more scientific and sophisticated knowledge of the subject developed by Italian artists a millennium later, during the Renaissance.

From a reader's perspective, some modern scholars, such as Chen Chuanxi, have argued that Zong Bing's emphasis in the *Preface* was primarily spiritual. However, I believe that Zong Bing developed a binary concept by pairing ideology (the spirituality of the Tao) with form; he clearly stated that "the saints implement the Tao with spirit, and the sages comprehend it; mountains and water manifest the

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Tao with the forms [of nature], and the Confucian scholars enjoy it”(Peng, 2009, p. 47). Chen Chuanxi overstressed the philosophical content of Zong Bing’s treatise, and claimed that the text was about metaphysics rather than art. (Chen, 2006, p. 9) According to Chen, Zong Bing regarded landscape painting as merely a way of representing the Tao. I take the opposite position: the text is predominantly about art, not metaphysics, and embodying the Tao is regarded as a way of increasing the aesthetic quality of landscape painting. I argue that it is precisely the binary interaction between form and ideology that makes the representation of nature and the embodiment of the Tao possible.

In his *Preface*, Zong Bing elaborated on the above four components of the world of Chinese landscape painting by stressing the interaction of form and ideology and emphasising the embodiment of the Tao in landscape art. He described a continuous process of signification with the artist in the pivotal position, as mediator. As his text was the first to address landscape in Chinese art history, I argue that this text shaped the genre of Chinese landscape painting and initiated the tradition of embodying ideology, the metaphysical Tao, in landscape painting.

V. Conclusion

The earlier discussion of the non-arbitrary sign in visual art can be resumed in light of the above analysis of the Saussurean sound signifier, Chinese written words and Zong Bing’s theory of landscape art. What is the Chinese pictographic and ideographic sign, and how is it related to landscape painting? In short, it is a visual and representational sign, just like the images of hills and peaks that represent mountains and the curved lines that represent a river in the landscape painting *Spring Outing*.

Based on two well-received scholarly books on modern and postmodern landscape art, Kenneth Clark’s *Landscape into Art* (1949) and Malcolm Andrews’ *Landscape and Western Art* (1999), I now define landscape painting as an artistic genre with natural and civilised scenery as its subject matter. Most Chinese scholars have defined Chinese landscape painting in the same way. (Kenneth, 1977, p. 1; Malcolm, 1999, p. 25; Chen, 2006, p. 1) Conventionally, emphasis is placed on the visual subject of a painting. In other words, this definition stresses that the subject of landscape painting is natural or civilised scenery, in comparison with

definitions of the genre that emphasise the use of landscape as a setting or background. Semiotically, proponents of the conventional definition consider the signifier only (in this case the formal appearance of the image), not the signified, and thus not the sign. However, Chinese landscape painting involves a relationship between the signifier and the inevitable, purposeful signified.

As I have discussed throughout this essay, the most important purpose of Chinese landscape painting is not simply to depict scenery, but to embody ideology through the depiction of scenery. Therefore, the signifier is the image of the scenery depicted in the painting, and the signified is the ideology, specifically the concept of the Tao, embodied and implied in the image of the scenery. These new insights lead to a final redefinition of Chinese landscape painting as an artistic genre with natural and civilised scenery as its subject, which embodies the ideology or philosophical concept of the Tao in its images of nature. Accordingly, a plain representation of scenery without metaphysical embodiment or implications is not landscape painting in the strict sense afforded by traditional Chinese aesthetics and art history. One must thus ask how my new definition relates to the conventional definition. The latter provides a general framework for the landscape subject, whereas my definition is specific to Chinese landscape painting.

W. J. T. Mitchell recently redefined the concept of “landscape” by converting the term from a noun to a verb. He suggested that we think of landscape “not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed” (Mitchell, 1994, 2002, p. 1). What Mitchell really meant was the process of forming something beyond image. In his summary, modernists viewed landscape painting in narrative terms, as a progressive history of changes in visual form, and postmodernists viewed landscape semiotically and hermeneutically, as an allegory of psychological or ideological themes. In the context of 21st-century critical theory, I read landscape art, and Chinese landscape painting in particular, as a continuous process of signification, which is realised by a shift from the signified to the signifier of another sign. In other words, the formal appearance of a landscape image signifies an aspect of nature, and the signified aspect of nature becomes a signifier of a new sign: it further signifies the Tao and the artist’s cultivated personality.

In Chinese landscape painting, images of nature represent the loftiness of

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literati culture and the personality of literati artists, which is cultivated by the Tao. The relationships between man and nature and between man and society are also implicit in these images. Moreover, Chinese landscape painting encompasses philosophical principles concerning ways of life, as well as spirituality. Therefore, to redefine Chinese landscape painting in light of semiotic theory, we must consider both the non-arbitrary signifier and the signified, not the superficial signifier alone, as well as the continuous process of signification. Redefining Chinese landscape painting as an interactive relationship between the form and ideology of non-arbitrary visual signs is largely a matter of coding. From the artist's point of view, this definition concerns the mechanism of encoding, and from the reader's point of view, it involves the mechanism of decoding.

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