LANDSCAPE INVESTED

Political Reformation, Poetic Protest, and Painting in the Late Northern Song

FOONG Ping
2009
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CHRONOLOGIES

Imperial Dynasties

Qin Dynasty 秦 (221-206 BCE)
Han Dynasty 漢 (206 BCE-220)
Sui Dynasty 隋 (581-618)
Tang Dynasty 唐 (618-907)
Five Dynasties 五代 (907-960)
   Southern Tang 南唐 (937-975)
Song Dynasty (960-1279)
   Northern Song 北宋 (960-1127)
   Southern Song 南宋 (1127-1279)
Liao Dynasty 辽 (907-1125), Khitans
Jin Dynasty 金 (1113-1234), Jurchens
Yuan Dynasty 元 (1271-1368)
Ming Dynasty 明 (1368-1644)
Qing Dynasty 清 (1644-1911)

Pre-Dynastic Ancestors of Taizu

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<td>Zhao Tiao 趙眺</td>
<td>Xizu 僖祖</td>
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<td>Shunzu 順祖</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zhao Jing 趙敏</td>
<td>Yizu 翼祖</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zhao Hongyin 趙弘殷 (899-956)</td>
<td>Xuanzu 宣祖</td>
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Northern Song Emperors and Empresses *
Known dates and selected reign eras or regencies

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<td>Zhao Kuangyin 趙匡胤 (927-976)</td>
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* Based primarily on Hargett (1982) and Yamauchi (1983)
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<td>1022-1033, Renzong</td>
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<td>Cao 曹 (1017-1079), Empress Dowager. Wife of Renzong</td>
<td>Cisheng Guangxian 慈聖光獻</td>
<td>1063-1064, Yingzong. During the emperor’s bouts of illness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gao 高 (1032-1093), Grand Empress Dowager. Wife of Yingzong</td>
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Figure 1: Guo Xi (after 1000-ca. 1090), *Early Spring* (Zaochun tu 早春圖), signed and dated 1072. Hanging scroll, ink and light color on silk, 158.3 x 108.1 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei
Ink landscape painting is a distinctive feature of Song Dynasty culture and is one of the most important of the elite artistic traditions of China. In the Northern Song (960-1127), its painters produced some of the most celebrated artworks in Chinese history. The powers of these images of cosmic order and wild beauty have not diminished after a millennium. These timeless scenes transport us to places where: an expansive mountainous vista is swathed by a shimmering mist, burbling waters rush through a forest of sheltering pines and craggy rocks, massive peaks tower over a slow-moving pack train, a desolate, cold scene is pierced by bell-sounds from a concealed Buddhist temple. The viewer is invited into remoteness and contemplation, but not necessarily escape. Paintings of this genre depict distinct regions—the soaring peaks of the north and northeast, or the lush and earthy terrain of the southeastern coast—in order to invite viewers to experience the different geographies, and to reflect upon specific regional artistic legacies. The landscapes from this period that survive exhibit great artistic achievements, but they were not mere ornaments.

Natural settings are laden with potency in the Chinese tradition as places of physical refuge and as the repository of paradisiacal, sacral, and rustic values. Connecting heaven and earth, mountains are especially powerful focal points; deities and immortals dwell there, as do recluses and sages. In their bounty and mystery, mountains have the power to fulfill wishes: they are places where boons are granted and spiritual nourishment gained in transcendental experiences. From the earliest times, pictorial evocations of nature have provided a focus for intellectual and philosophical contemplation, and the first representations of “mountains and water” as principal subject matter were associated with these meanings. By the tenth-century, the ink landscape was deemed by the educated class as a representative scholars’ category of practice, one whose values were worthy of support in their critical discourse.

The ink-monochromatic aesthetic arose outside of court as a preference of scholars rather than aristocrats. In the tenth and eleventh-centuries, painters explored themes of reclusion and retreat in depictions of landscapes inhabited by those on the periphery of urban society: fishermen, woodcutters, travelers, recluses and sometimes, scholars. The independent dispositions of these natural (fishermen, woodcutters) or elective (travelers, recluses, scholars) inhabitants of places remote from metropolitan centers represented a moral stance: the powerful idea of a scholar’s principled withdrawal from society in protest against the actions of his ruler. This view, at the heart of Chinese eremitic topoi at least since the Han Dynasty, remained meaningful for some literati of the Northern Song who suffered from the consequences of disagreeing with the ideologies supported by their sovereign. However, it was also during this dynasty when ink-monochromes painted expressly for view by the emperor and the most prominent members of his government drew upon the scholarly ethic and tastes to demonstrate imperial authority.

To understand what it means for the Song Dynasty court to embrace wilderness ideals in an imperial setting, we need to comprehend its adoption of this medium. The ink landscape and its representations of scholarly ideals become synonymous with this dynasty in later memory. And so we must ask: how were pictures of mountains and waterfalls and its values of high-minded reclusion adapted for the court context? How were its overtones of anti-institutional defiance deflected? To ask these questions is not at all to imply that the Song court, as relative latecomer to the genre, was induced to take up landscape
imitatively. Rather it is to emphasize the need to consider how the court adapted this aesthetic for Imperial City spaces, its institutions, and its conventions. Landscape tropes prevalent in philosophy, literature, and the visual arts are not exclusively the province of scholar-officials. Aristocrats, too, appreciated them. As a consequence of our suppositions about literati culture and taste as dominant, we have not adequately considered courtly appreciation as a source of motivation for its acceptance by the imperial establishment: why did emperors, empresses, imperial kinsmen and eunuchs choose landscape in the Northern Song?

***

The Northern Song is a foundational period in modern Chinese art history for several well-known reasons. We know landscapes can represent imperial power. Contemporary texts explain mountainous imagery—awe-inspiring depictions of towering and immovable formations—as representations of the emperor and as allusions to his inexorable ruling powers. Because we have accepted such metaphorical interpretations as largely normative for this period, we have proposed the late-eleventh century as the pivotal moment when scholar-amateur theory and practice brought about a transformation of Chinese painting, a historical development sometimes described as the “literati revolution.” These two essential aspects of our knowledge about the period’s art history are, in other words, interconnected narratives.

The central ideas of the literati movement were first established by the most celebrated intellectuals of the Northern Song, most notably Su Shi and his circle of friends who adopted painting as a means of personal expression. Their eminence brought recognition and legitimacy to the scholars’ views on artistic forms. They infused these defining views with the values of their literary training and conceptualized their movement as a challenge to prevailing aesthetic norms. Suspicious of dazzling surfaces and technical skill, the literati changed the measures of a painting’s success by turning away from virtuosic execution and toward the intellectual integrity of a piece. New standards for judging painting borrowed from calligraphic theory and practice. The literati thus refocused merit upon the executor, perhaps untrained in picture-making, but distinguished as a gentleman. Cultivated in a gentleman’s skills, his virtue, they argued, would be manifest in his spontaneous brushwork and its formal qualities.

Courtly tastes for the opulent and the auspicious may in a functional sense contrast the Confucian scholar’s “natural” preferences for the unstudied and the monochrome. However, in the opinion of some, the emergence of the scholar-amateur discourse on art not only indicates the vitality of Song Dynasty literati culture, but can even be construed as a sign of imperial decline. The scholars’ challenge to the aristocrats’ cultural hegemony can then also be found in the court’s appropriation of ink landscape. In such an account of literati ascendency and aesthetic difference, our picture of imperial culture becomes obscured. The corporate practices of Song royalty and the Inner Court organs of eunuchs and art Academy members can only be taken as subordinate to the scholars’ original claims to the genre and to the heterodox identities of eremites.
The circumstances under which ink landscape first gained its role as a premier cultural form at court is intimately tied to the class rivalries implicit in the above competition narrative. But the way that the ink-monochrome, a painting genre with anti-aristocratic roots, became synonymous with the government and with the image of the Northern Song court is a problem of cultural prerogative that requires more particular consideration of the political dynamics of the period. The reign of Shenzong is especially important. Shenzong ushered in an unprecedented activist monarchy, unmatched in the historical record for the scope of reformations enacted during his rule. The Song government comprised his influential councilors who were generally aligned to either “reformist” or “antireformist” ideologies. At this time of deep divisions within the polity, grand views and monumental landscapes graced walls of new government buildings inside the Imperial City as never before. These vast scenes represented Shenzong’s political vision. His favorite painter, Guo Xi, who considered landscape depictions analogous to cosmic power, imperial power and benevolent governance, enabled the Emperor to consolidate the royal house’s long-standing interest in ink landscape. We cannot underestimate the connection between cultural and political will against this picture of imperial control.

In the Northern Song, the ruling family and the shi-elite scholar-officials no doubt competed for social and political power in their aesthetic agendas at court. Controlling the taste for landscape painting, however, was no simple matter: power to generate taste fluctuated between the classes in a complex cultural dynamic. The functions of these paintings cannot be neatly separated into the respective needs of aristocrats and officials. For that matter, class itself—pedigree determined by birth or marriage or by education and high office—cannot necessarily serve as a predictive guide to aesthetic preference. Others have already begun to question our tendency to couple class with culture too closely: do we not find aristocrats inhabit the role of literatus, expressing desires to withdraw into the remote mountains of a painting for a simpler country life? Or scholars who marvel at the sheer beauty of ornamentation, such as in the decorative craft of the virtuoso flower painter?

An essential part of this book is to account for the efforts of the imperial establishment in cultivating ink landscape and its iconography as a dynastic project. To rebalance our picture of elite art and artists of the period, I explore the roles of landscapists in creating imperial power and defining a courtly visuality. A clearer picture of long-term court support for elevating the status of painting and its painters in these roles makes it possible to better understand why the medium became acceptable in scholar-amateur practice. Indeed by engaging our standard narratives as nesting developments, our understanding of the control of art as an expression of class relations becomes all the richer.

Representations of nature came to be charged with significance by court institutions and literati circles alike during this time of acrimonious dispute in the polity. Just when landscape paintings gained unprecedented visibility as visual representations of right rule and good government in the Imperial City, in the private sphere, they also became social artifacts that augmented group ties, which then came to have political significance as well. In their various thematic manifestations, landscape paintings became potent symbols through which imperial authority could be represented as well as objects through which exiled scholars expressed disaffection and dissent.
The role of painting as a medium for expressing imperial and civil authority is a complex one because cultural negotiation was just one of numerous interrelated factors contributing to the intricate dynamics of power at court. The dynamics of cultural prerogative are complicated by how political advantage was achieved. The bureaucratic processes derived from Confucian antiquity that were characteristic of the Song Dynasty determined the way political power was generated between the ruler and his chosen officials, namely, through a circulating exchange balancing imperial rule and state command. Furthermore, court members did not make individual artistic choices or participate in the symbolic meaning of collecting culture from any single basis of authority. Their identities may well have combined their official and non-official roles. Those who invested in the medium of painting activated landscape’s multiple capacities from hybrid vantages: the emperor as artist, empress dowager as ruler and patron, aristocrat or scholar-official as painter, eunuch or artist serving governmental interests. Recognizing the occasions when these identifications manifested is therefore important for understanding the diversification of ink landscape’s political significance in the Northern Song.

This analysis of the economy of cultural power at court can be framed by two observations about how Inner Court organs, which managed the administration of artists in the Imperial City, related to the Outer Court of civil bureaucrats. For eunuch-run institutions of the inner court, on the one hand, greater recognition within networks of civil power brought more status to inner court activities, such as when its members attained closer association to the bureaucratic ranking system of the civil service. On the other hand, the influence of scholar-run institutions can be traced through physical access to the center of imperial power, especially to spaces organized with respect to the emperor. In short, I am concerned with spatial relationships—institutional and physical proximities—as background against which to properly interpret paintings that appear to validate and legitimize the place of those holding hereditary positions. By doing so, we can then also reexamine paintings attesting to the values of those who earned their positions by merit through the education system, with which they were in dialog.

***

Aesthetic, social and political forces are embedded in relationships between imperial and civil spaces. Paintings and painters worked and vied for status in the Song court within two kinds of spaces: the physical and non-physical. My analysis of physical space includes buildings and architectural compounds, which display hierarchical orderings in relationship to the emperor’s symbolic location inside the Imperial City. The non-physical comprises institutional spaces, the hierarchies that governed the positions of scholar-officials in the Outer Court and the positions of eunuchs and artists in the Inner Court. These spatial constructs allow us define what the court deemed to be acceptable locations for art and artists and can thus be studied as historical configurations of their status and utility. Through this broad, physical and non-physical conceptualization of space and its hierarchies, we can analyze the roles that art and its administration came to assume in imperial culture in structural terms.
Space in the Imperial City is organized relative to the Son of Heaven, and so the relative locations of its constituents—palaces, inner court institutions, governing bodies, libraries, and archives—contain evidence for evaluating status and for indicating loci of political power. Chapter One considers how, in a significant departure from court tradition, landscape was introduced in the tenth-century into the main hall of the most influential advisory arm of government inside the Imperial City, the Hanlin Institute of Academicians. Nearly a century after that, the movement of landscape from an inner court to an executive context was further reasserted. Large-scale landscape screens dominated as centerpieces of the renovated buildings that housed the highest echelons of the central government in the Imperial City. Commissioned from Guo Xi, the leading imperial painter of the time, these works of art were intended to represent the new direction of the restructured government under Shenzong. While ink landscape now attained unprecedented association to civil power, the endurance of imperial efforts to realign ink landscape for its own purposes—spanning almost the entire Northern Song period—becomes clear through the evidence of the Hanlin Institute.

The two chapters that follow address the authority of painting and painters at court. Chapter Two focuses on the history of state sacrifice, a declaration of imperial authority, and how two extant masterworks—Guo Xi’s Early Spring and Li Gonglin’s Classic of Filial Piety—and other recorded works by these two artists engage with politically motivated ritual debates. Their paintings not only depict the most important of Song Dynasty state rituals as subjects, but are themselves commentaries on the political factionalism that colored efforts at ritual reform. In fulfilling their charges, the political stances expressed by these two elite artists at court—a professional landscapist and a literati-painter of figural subjects—differ. By examining the political commentaries embedded in their works, however, we come to understand how they both created new paths for their genres, and were equally concerned with demonstrating the role of painting as a medium with contemporary relevance in the affairs of state.

In Chapter Three, familiar materials take on a different cast within the frame of imperial interests. In that chapter, I present the “Li Cheng style” not as a formal problem of stylistic lineage as would be conventional, but as an effort by the court to consolidate its command over one of the most important of artistic legacies of the age through efforts at preservation, transmission, collection, and documentation. In making this claim individually and institutionally throughout the Northern Song, members of court envisioned Li Cheng as the founding scholar-painter of an imperial landscape style for the age. These three chapters together make up Part I of this volume, and provide three vantage points to argue for how the imperial establishment assumed the ink landscape as a distinctive cultural medium of the Song Dynasty.

Part II considers the significance of this century-long investment in landscape by the court. The medium of painting acquired new social dimensions, a development marked by the appearance of “intimate scenes” in the final decades of the eleventh-century. Private communications in the intimate mode as an expressive outlet for scholars became socially possible at this time, which in turn provided the grounds upon which scholar-amateur theories were established.
Chapter Four shows Guo Xi as a creator of intimate scenes, in particular, the handscroll *Old Trees, Level Distance*. Our impression of him as the quintessential painter of commemorative works for Emperor Shenzong is complicated by this aspect of his oeuvre. But more importantly, Guo Xi’s intimate landscapes resonated with the exile experiences of disenfranchised officials—most notably writers of the scholar-amateur aesthetic who were also Shenzong’s political opposition. This finding adds another dimension to standard narratives that contrast literati and court aesthetics. Guo Xi, the imperial painter of monumental works, also created landscape themes in which scholar-officials entrusted personal and profound confidences.

Finally, Chapter Five considers how painters of various social classes—aristocrats, officials at court, and professionals—began to create works in this intimate mode that contrasted those for public display. We note works made for social occasions such as making an acquaintance or bidding farewell. Themes were literary in nature and imagery chosen so as to invite comment or inspire poetic exchange. The creation and reception of landscape paintings thus became a new avenue of personal communication between friends and acquaintances. Here, landscape imagery brought forth idyllic places to evoke nostalgia and longing. Sometimes paintings elicited biting protest in viewers’ poetic responses as they invoked their own experiences of exile. This adoption of painting as an amateur pastime forms the crucial beginnings of literati art. It is an investment predicated on a reformulation of who could paint landscape and, importantly, also on the wider valuation of persons who did paint for a living.

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Spatial paradigms can broaden the research agenda for Song Dynasty painting. There are further implications for considering how imperial architectonic spaces and its institutions are related to political power in our efforts to study how artists, works of art, and art collections occupied these spaces. By investigating the role of art and its administration within the ruling structures that define cultural forms and functions, we can potentially also begin to clarify how imperial taste is connected to government art, or how inner court art collections were affiliated to those managed by the state.

We can further analyze how painters were recognized beyond mere craftsmanship for their ability to affirm political authority through their person and their artistic production. The ascension of this medium in the imperial context is predicated on change in the institutional standing of privileged professional artists. The position of expert-servitors 技術官 in the Imperial Academy as ranked members of the bureaucracy is a distinguishing feature of Chinese art history. This unique phenomenon makes it possible to trace the increasing prestige of those who were calligraphers and painters. Negotiations for status were instantiated most conspicuously by the ranks, financial rewards, sumptuary allowances, and transfers into regular office that elite expert-servitors aspired to in the Northern Song, as afforded to members of the regular civil service in a parallel system. This upward trend is thus corroborated by institutional solutions for assigning privilege to expert-servitors and is my topic of investigation elsewhere.
Guo Xi 郭熙 (after 1000-ca. 1090, 郭経 Chunfu 淳夫), one of the greatest landscape painters of the Northern Song, helps us tell a story of the diversifying role of ink landscapes better than any other. As Shenzong’s favorite painter he and his art enjoyed special renown. His paintings adorned palatial halls and, eventually, were commissioned to mark profound changes in the organization of the emperor’s government. Guo Xi is the only painter of the period to leave us both paintings in his hand and a treatise, *The Lofty Message of Forests and Streams* (Linquan gaozhi 林泉高致), on landscape painting. His treatise expounds on both theory and technique of the landscape genre and gives us a sense of how to place his contributions within a tradition of previous landscape painters at the Song court. We also have “Notes on Guo Xi’s Paintings” (Huaji 畫記), a chapter appended to *Lofty Message*, thanks to Guo Si 郭思 (ca. 1050-after 1130; 郭思德之), the painter’s son. “Notes” includes Guo Xi’s own handwritten account of his career as well as Guo Si’s annotated list of his father’s most famous court works. Studied in tandem with surviving landscapes attributed to the tenth and eleventh centuries, we can better understand Guo Xi’s career, which in turn helps us interpret two important factors in the rise of ink monochrome landscape: how did landscape itself not only become a subject favored by the aristocracy but also the chosen form to commemorate political change under the Emperor Shenzong?

**Guo Xi and the politics of eleventh-century ink landscapes**

*Early Spring* (Figure 1) is Guo Xi’s most famous surviving work. More than any other painting, it demonstrates the painter’s special ability to exalt the rule of the emperor, a talent that set him apart from others in his early years at court. Guo Xi’s consummate skills come to bear in *Early Spring*: its mountains are wrapped in mystery by obscuring mist while diminutive human figures play out orderly, subordinate roles. The scene presents a forbidding wilderness in harmony with timeless authority. Guo Xi’s marvelous control over ink and tonality achieves a sense of atmospheric depth and coherence through careful arrangements of empty space. The elements of the landscape are thus bound together—the tactile and the ephemeral—in balance.

How might we interpret *Early Spring* as a form of political expression or a manifestation of political authority? Guo Xi’s own treatise offers us an answer. For the landscape painter, the harmonious order of nature reflects the harmonious order achieved by the emperor himself:

> A great mountain is dominating as master over the assembled hills. So it orders the ridges and peaks, forests and valleys by hierarchy, which are far or near, large or small in relation to its sovereignty. Its appearance is like a great lord, glorious and facing south [as does the Emperor on his throne]. Even though a hundred nobles hasten to his court, [the mountain] is without an arrogant or capricious disposition. A tall pine stands erect as model for all other trees. So it orders the vines and

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1 The best reproduction is Sōshun zu (1980), a life-sized, silk facsimilie produced by the Nigensha publishing house.
creepers, grasses and trees by hierarchy, which are stirred and aroused, lean and rely on its teaching. Its posture is dignified like that of a gentleman in his prime. Even though a multitude of lesser men serve him, [the pine] is without an overbearing or despairing attitude.\(^2\)

For Guo Xi, innate authority is effortless; it naturally manifests itself in the relationship between the “great mountain” (the emperor) and smaller hills, ridges, and peaks (the emperor’s subjects). He extends this metaphor to the prerogative of the “tall pine” (the Gentleman) over lesser trees and plants (men of lesser education and lower social standing).\(^3\) Thus the landscape painter employs images—mountains and certain tree species—to evoke hierarchical relationships, indisputable hierarchies dictated by nature itself. The editors of the Xuanhe huapu, a catalog of paintings in the imperial collection, considered this kind of representational landscape to be a crucial part of Guo Xi’s contribution to the form. When the Xuanhe Painting Catalog was published, only thirty years after Guo Xi’s death, it included an excerpt from the above passage.

The human figures in Early Spring exemplify Guo Xi’s theory. A complement of traveling figures is usual for landscape: monks carry their provisions, returning to the grand Buddhist monastic complex nestled deep in the mountains; a mounted official, presumably also journeying to the monastery, passes over a narrow bridge; two porters step to the side politely to let the official pass. All is as it should be in peaceful and orderly co-habitation. Other figures may have significance beyond their roles as actors in the simple narrative of transit. They occupy space at the bottom of the composition on either side of the winding mountain spine, each facing toward it (Figure 2).

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\(^2\) Guo Xi, Linquan gaozhi, “Shanshui xun” 山水訓 [Advice on Landscape Painting], SHQJ 1: 498. For another translation, see Bush and Shih (1985): 153. Murck (2000): 34, suggests that the statement was ghost-penned by his son Guo Si, who published his father’s theories on landscape painting. Guo Si was indeed deeply involved with his father’s writings as editor and publisher, but I find it difficult to distinguish Guo Si from Guo Xi this specifically. For a discussion of Linquan gaozhi editions and publication dates, see Foong (2006), Chapter Two, “Guo Xi’s Linquan gaozhi and Guo Si’s Huaji.” I have suggested that Guo Si first published “Shanshui xun” as “Shanshui juezuan” Mountain Secrets [Compilation of The Secrets of Landscape Painting] in 1110, and then republished it as part of an expanded Linquan gaozhi compilation around 1120.

\(^3\) Pine trees are already associated to the gentleman in Jing Hao’s 荊浩 (ca. 870-ca. 930) Bifa ji 筆法記 [A Note on the Art of the Brush], but this explicit comparison of the central mountain to a ruler may be Guo Xi’s own.
The fishing women on the left have just disembarked from their boat with two children and a dog. On the right, one fisherman drags in his nets, while the other poles the boat. Something can be made of the attitude of this fisherman, who seems to look up in awe at the great mountain in front of him, much as the audience is also expected to do in viewing the painting. The mountain/ruler is awesome and powerful, but provides for its residents/subjects munificently. They hasten in its direction, as should all men, toward the benevolent reign of a great emperor.

![Figure 2: Guo Xi, Early Spring, fisherfolk at the base of the mountain, left and right](image)

Though *Early Spring* can be interpreted in multiple ways—an auspicious New Year’s picture or a picture of nature in flux with Daoist connotations—most scholars agree that this painting celebrates imperial power through a deliberate portrayal of natural and social hierarchies. Connecting the painting to the reforms of the early Xining era (1068-1077) under Emperor Shenzong, Alfreda Murck writes, “*Early Spring* is an elegant metaphor for the success of the New Policies. It depicts a dynamic, harmonious society and an ideal socio-political hierarchy. Court literary conventions prompt one to read in the composition a declaration that nature is flourishing in the warmth of spring just as the body politic is thriving under the beneficent, well-managed rule of the emperor.”

We take the idea that natural order reflects a social and political order expressed in Guo Xi’s treatise, quoted above, to be true for landscapes from the Northern Song in general.

In this light, we can see how the sinuous, dragon-like mountain formation in *Early Spring* represents the imperial body of Shenzong himself, “a great lord glorious on his throne.” To interpret landscape as a form of imperial portraiture is indeed resonant with Fan Kuan’s *Traveling Among Streams and Mountains* 綠山行旅, painted around 1000 CE (Figure 3). In Fan Kuan’s painting, the central mountain—the “host peak” in Guo Xi’s terminology—is flanked by two smaller “guest peaks” in its service. The tiny mule train passing under the auspices of the awesome mountain suggests the insignificance

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4 Murck (2000): 36

5 Caron Smith (1990): 283, quoting Alexander Soper’s idea, notes that tripartite compositions were familiar in Buddhist and Daoist iconography and lent further resonance to this secular pattern.
of human activity in the presence of ever-enduring nature (Figure 4). Wen C. Fong has compared directly Traveling Among Streams and Mountains to the portrait of Emperor Taizu, founder of the Song Dynasty (Figure 5). Both paintings, he argues, embody “the Neo-Confucian vision of a hierarchically ordered and moral universe.” Fong also observes that Fan Kuan’s three peaks echo the corollary triad of figures in a formal portrait of Empress Dowager Cao, wife of Renzong, the fourth Emperor of the Song Dynasty (Figure 6). She appears in the center, on a larger scale than the two flanking attendants.6

Fan Kuan painted many decades before Guo Xi. If we are to understand the developing role of landscape as a medium of political expression during the Northern Song, we must ask how imperial metaphors described in Lofty Message might apply to Fan Kuan. We know that Fan Kuan was a hermit, and that he was devoted to living in the mountains, first near Luoyang, and finally near Mounts Zhongnan and Taihua. The size of Traveling Among Streams and Mountains indicates that it may have been designed for a large hall, but we do not know if Fan ever served at court, or if his paintings ever served a public purpose. The figures in Fan Kuan’s painting also present us with ambiguities—quite unlike those in Early Spring. We know figures carry interpretive significance in landscape, but the travelers here—beasts of burden, their drivers, and a nearly invisible monk—seem to pass through the scene with barely a glance at the grandiosity before them. Do these figures suggest detachment, a core eremitic sentiment? Or are the human figures humbled and intimidated by the awesome expression of nature before them? Additionally, such spare vistas may not be the austere, majestic natural scenes they appear to be, but rather the result of rapid deforestation and industrial growth. We should bear this warning in mind in accepting Fan Kuan’s painting as representation of the sovereign.7

Fan Kuan’s Traveling Among Streams and Mountains and Guo Xi’s Early Spring are two of our most reliable surviving ink landscapes because they are clearly attached to their painterly authorship in the written record. Both paintings prove the great heights that landscapists achieved in the Northern Song and clearly demonstrate the range of representational means available to master painters of the northern tradition to evoke monumental majesty if not to invoke imperial power as well. By inserting this caveat for Fan Kuan, I do not mean that we need resist understanding his production in imperial terms. Rather it is to highlight Guo Xi’s justifications for the power of his medium as distinct to the late-eleventh century political context. That is to say, such interpretations of landscape may well have been convention early in the Northern Song, such as during the period of Fan Kuan’s activity, but it is Guo Xi who presents it directly as the means to his emperor’s political ends.

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6 Wen C. Fong and James Watt (1996): 144-45
7 This unusual reading of depictions of the northern landscape as a nature denuded by the need for fuel is that of the geographer Tuan Yi-fu (1969): Introduction and 130-31
Figure 3: Fan Kuan 范寛 (d. after 1023), *Traveling Among Streams and Mountains* (Xishan xinglu tu 雲山行旅圖), signed. Hanging scroll, ink and light colors on silk, 206.3 x 103.3 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei
Figure 4: Fan Kuan, *Traveling Among Streams and Mountains*, detail
In the late tenth to eleventh century, high-ranking scholar-officials chose landscape murals according to their tastes. This was probably a common practice by the mid-eleventh century, when bureaucrats would commission landscapes for the provincial municipal buildings in which they served. These public halls, however, differed from halls in the Imperial City where the emperor’s most intimate advisors conducted the business of state. As background to investigating landscape painting in this imperial context during the Northern Song, we will touch on its origins as subject and genre. The early ink-monochrome began as an aesthetic alternative to the brilliant polychrome palates used for elysian scenes in aristocratic settings. Painterly lineages based on ink techniques and their subjects in geographic representation were related to the emergence of social class as an element of critical discourse on landscape. By looking at these histories, we can better understand how scholars and aristocrats claimed them as sources of cultural legitimacy in the Northern Song.

Some landscape tropes and earlier significances of the ink-monochrome

The foundational texts of Chinese philosophy and religion declare contemplation of nature as the activity of sages. The Analects records Confucius as having approved of landscape appreciation as a model activity in the pithy expression, “The wise find pleasure in water;
the virtuous find pleasure in hills.” 子曰：知者樂水，仁者樂山。8 The same recommendation is proffered to the Marquis of Lu 魯侯 in the Zhuangzi to take the “uninhabited wilderness” 無人之野 as his cognitive object “…to cleanse your heart, to put away your desires, and to enjoy yourself where you will be without the presence of any one” 洒心去欲，而遊於無人之野。9 The familiar Daoist ethos of comprehending the Way through inner self-cultivation underlies this position. The Marquis is advised, in face of impending calamity, individual communion with nature will induce an inner tranquility that will enable his travel to a utopian place untouched by the institutions of cultural norms.

Thus in an engagement with landscape we find not only evidence of the wisdom and virtue of Confucian worthies, but also of Daoist reclusion as spiritual retreat and withdrawal from the pressures and conventions of ordinary life. From the earliest times, pictorial representations of towering peaks, deep forests, or distant views from on high, draw upon these philosophical tropes of the subject for their significances.

What is landscape painting for?

The first theoretical discussion on the contemplation of represented landscape in the medium of painting, “Introduction to Painting Landscape” (Hua shanshui xu 畫山水序) by Zong Bing 宗炳 (375-443), treats these associations as persistent truths. Zong Bing’s writings offer us insight into the instrumentality of landscape painting as a form of “landscape Daoism” or “landscape Buddhism” in Six Dynasties thought, where a religious appreciation of nature began to occur regularly through the interface of the literary and visual arts.10 Citing both of the above quotations from the Analects and Zhuangzi in his essay, Zong Bing underlines the importance of two concepts: that the sages of antiquity were ultimate models for the purification of the mind, and that the spirit was stimulated in solitary, contemplative refuge in a natural setting. They frame his argument that landscape painting is valuable because it can be an effective substitute for actual scenery; it had

8 The Analects 論語 6:21, translated Legge (1879-1885) 1:102
10 Characterized by Bush (1983): 132-33, after Nakamura Shigeo 中村茂夫, Chūgoku garon no tenkai: Shin To Sō Gen hen 中國畫論展開：晉唐宋元篇 [The Development of Chinese Painting Theory: Works from the Jin, Tang, Song and Yuan] (Kyōto: Nakayama Bunkadō, 1965). Decades of research on Zong Bing’s crucial but difficult essay has focused on identifying the literary roots and religious context(s) of the text as the basis for translating its language and central themes. Scholars debated the extent to which this treatise, even though it cites the Confucian classics, is indebted to Neo-Daoist ontologies and/or to the Buddhist world-view. Acker (1954-74) classifies Zong Bing’s essay as exemplifying a Daoist approach to landscape painting, as does Xu Fuguan (1966): 240-41, whereas Japanese scholarship has tended toward reading the text in relationship to Zong’s Buddhist writings and the teachings of Huiyuan 慧遠 (344-416/7) at Mount Lu.
potential to induce an aesthetic response akin to an experience of nature, as if one was actually a mountaineer in the wilderness.

Zong Bing sees vast landscapes and views from on high as metaphors for the sage-mind. He conceives of landscapes as objects on which one’s mind might “temporarily lodge” to arouse the “spirit” (shen 神) or “spiritual intelligence” (ling 靈) and thus to identify with the mental state achieved by adepts. Practically speaking, pictorial representations make it possible for one to purify the heart and contemplate the Dao from one's bed or while physically infirm, which Zong Bing gave as his own reason for taking up painting landscape.\textsuperscript{11} However, pictures are effective as meditative aids in this way only when a “correspondence” (lei 雷) of “correct proportions” is skillfully achieved—“correct” in a sense similar to getting the forms of Buddhist images “right.” When this standard is met, Zong argues, then a viewer of a painted landscape can savor phenomena in the same ways as worthies of the past. An image makes accessible their attainments by promoting a state of detached appreciation, reflecting diminished worldly concerns and an expanded perspective in contemplation of grottoed peaks, cloudy forests, dark valleys remote and ethereal.\textsuperscript{12}

The dominant polychrome court tradition and nascent ink use in landscapes

The first artist recorded as having treated landscape as an independent subject is the Eastern Jin figure-painter “Tiger-head” Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之 (b. ca. 344, d. ca. 406).\textsuperscript{13} However, the religeoaesthetics of Zong Bing provides the earliest and most direct description of one fifth-century tradition of landscape painting as both the focus of eremitic contemplation and as devotional act.\textsuperscript{14} We have not recovered what these pictures actually looked like: landscape painting’s formative period is known mainly

\begin{itemize}
\item [\textsuperscript{12}] Munakata (1976) adds that Zong Bing is not arguing for the efficacy of all landscape represented pictorially but sacred mountains particularly. Elsewhere, he discusses the ambiguous term lei in the sense of ganlei 感類, something like “sympathetic response according to objects of like-essence.”
\item [\textsuperscript{13}] One text about landscape as an early subject is “Record on Painting Cloud Terrace Mountain” 畫雲臺山記, in Zhang Yanyuan LDMHJ 5, trans. Bush and Shih (1985): 34-35 and Sullivan (1962) Bibliography E. The mid-ninth century critic, Zhang Yanyuan 張彦遠 (ca. 815-after 875), whose insight we rely on for all aspects of Tang painting, attributes its authorship to Gu Kaizhi. This painting of Cloud Terrace Mountain is of the dwelling place of divinities and immortals: towering cliffs in cinnabar-red against azure skies, piled purple boulders, Daoist adepts deep in debate, a dancing phoenix, a white tiger. It seems to reflect a Tang understanding of an earlier landscape tradition.
\item [\textsuperscript{14}] Tang Dynasty texts record fifth-century landscape painting traditions in the east coastal region, practiced by the Dai family of Buddhist sculptors and painters of Zhejiang and by the Zong family in the Jiangling/Mount Lu area, the most well known being Zong Bing.
\end{itemize}
through the lens of later texts and through impressions from images that feature landscape elements as pictorial background, preserved at the Dunhuang caves, on tomb walls, and in works attributed to Gu Kaizhi.\textsuperscript{15}

By the Tang Dynasty, landscape painting was well established as a genre and it achieved great prominence in an imperial context. This distinction is usually ascribed to the aristocrats General Li Sixun 李思訓 (651-716) and his son “Little General Li” Zhaodao 李昭道 (active ca. 670-730). Father and son worked with a rich blue-green and gold palate and displayed their paradise scenes as murals or as multi-paneled screens in palace halls. In the Tianbao 天寶 era (742-755), Li Sixun created a wall painting 殿壁 and screen 拱障 for the Datong Palace Hall 大同殿 in the south-west quadrant of the Imperial City at Luoyang, and these were greatly appreciated by Emperor Minghuang (r. 712-756).\textsuperscript{16}  

River Boats and Pavilions 江帆樓閣圖 (Figure 7) is our only surviving attribution to Li Sixun, though it is probably a Song Dynasty copy of a lost Tang screen. Nevertheless, this scroll preserves the meticulous ink outline and heavy color manner said to reflect the Li school of landscape, and it gives us a sense of the original composition and how it might have been viewed.\textsuperscript{17} These aristocratic landscapes not only added to the opulence of palace halls but also metamorphosized space into otherworldly lands populated by fantastic jewel-like mountains.

\textsuperscript{15} For example, the landscape elements of the mountain and tiger scene in the British Museum collection Admonitions scroll attributed to Gu Kaizhi. The scene is referenced by many authors inShane McCausland ed., Gu Kaizhi and the Admonitions Scroll (2003), such as by Chen Baozhen, “The Admonitions Scroll in the British Museum: New Light on the Text-Image Relationships, Painting Style and Dating Problem,” 127 and 131. Chen suggests that the composition still primarily reflects Han Dynasty schemas for depicting mountains.

\textsuperscript{16} Zhu Jingxuan, Tangchao minghua lu 5, SHQS 1: 165, translated Soper (1958): 214

\textsuperscript{17} Fu Xinian 傅熹年 (1978): 51, argues that River Boats and Pavilions in the Taipei National Palace Museum collection was once one panel in a four-panel screen since it is compositionally identical to the final section of Spring Outing 游春圖, a handscroll attributed to the Sui Dynasty master Zhan Ziqian 展子虔 (ca. 550-ca. 604). I follow Fu for the dating and format of these attributions.
A focus on ink in painting began when the principal landscapists of the Tang Dynasty court created brilliant, polychromatic paradisiacal scenes for display using precious materials. The eighth-century history of landscapes in ink is enigmatic, however. Some textual characterizations and later recensions of paintings loosely attributed to the luminaries of Tang art provide us with only hints about these beginnings. Wu Daozi 吳道子 (active ca. 710-760), a professional mural painter known for his dramatic line-work, specialized in Buddhist figural subjects, though he sometimes also made landscapes with strange rocks and rushing torrents. His ink drawings were said to be so spectacular that others refrained from completing them with color as intended. Wang Wei 王維 (699-759) and his cohort of scholar-painters were known for their landscapes and “tree and rock” scenes on temple and office walls. According to Munakata Kiyohiko, Wang Wei’s ink work signals the genre’s transition from line to ink at an early stage, and that ink techniques involving wash and texture came into favor at a time when painting with line-centered brushwork—like in Wu Daozi’s and the Li Generals’ art—was dominant. Though

Figure 7: Attributed to Li Sixun 李思訓 (651-716), River Boats and Pavilions (Jiangfan louge tu 江帆楼閣圖), detail. Handscroll, ink and color on silk, 101.9 x 54.7 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei
we can no longer be sure that Wang Wei himself painted with ink alone, admirers soon regarded him as a pioneer of the ink-monochrome style. He became an especially important archetype when painters began to purposefully develop ways to apply graded ink-wash in order to model surfaces.  

### Ink-monochrome landscape as genre and its regional styles

Ink-monochrome landscapes flourished in the ninth and tenth centuries, some decades after nascent uses of ink-wash for painting. The use of graded wash and the scholarly “trees and rocks” subject were now defining features of this genre. By the tenth-century, painters developed formalized systems of modeling by combining graded wash with layered texture-strokes. These techniques produced, with more naturalism than ever before, the pitted surfaces of weathered rock, the softness of moss and soil or roughness in the bark of hoary tree trunks. Inspired by the natural world, painters evoked atmospheric conditions such as the changing tonalities of reflected light or the glow of mists and fog. Scholars have proposed the combination of ink-wash with the brushwork technique of ink texture-strokes (cunfa 髹法) as a defining characteristic of tenth-century landscape.  

The Five Dynasties period of the tenth-century arouses much controversy in modern scholarship, but there is no doubt that this was when painters living in different regions began to depict local geographies in ways that would later be deemed schools of landscape painting, defined by their contrasting uses of ink and texture. Dong Yuan 董源 (d. ca. 949), who served the Southern Tang court after the fall of the Tang as a minor official, and his monk-follower Juran 巨然 (active ca. 960-980), who later served the Northern Song court, were founders of the Southern landscape mode. In their lineage were all painters who would depict areas “south of the river,” the Jiangnan, with broad applications of ink wash for moist, mild atmospheric effects. The professional Academy artist Zhao Gan 趙干 (second half of 10th century) also painted Jiangnan scenery in ink and like Dong Yuan, served at the Southern Tang court. Later literati critics would, however, not include Zhao Gan in the southern school lineage, for his art was based on a different formal tradition. According to the Xuanhe Painting Catalog, Zhao Gan specialized in realistic, everyday scenes of life on boats and in fishing villages that enabled a kind of rustic

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18 These distinctions are from Munakata (1965): 72-80 and 81-88, on Wu Daozi’s “unintentional monochromes” and “intentional” ones by Wang Wei, Zheng Qian 鄭虔, and Bi Hong 毕宏, such as their baisha 画花 panel paintings at the Ci’en Temple 慈恩寺, ca. 750 CE, in Zhang Yanyuan LDMHJ 3, transl. Acker 260. Munakata cites the “Elephant Riders in a Valley” plectrum guard preserved in the Shōsōin 正倉院 as the most sophisticated Tang Dynasty example of modeling landscape forms using a combination of graded ink and graded color.

19 E.g. Sullivan (1980): 155
voyeurism. A viewer is “right there on the river” even as he is “amidst the wind and dust of the capital.”

Of the tenth-century masters who created heroic mountainscapes in the Northern landscape tradition, the Confucian scholar Jing Hao (ca. 870-ca. 930) is the only one to leave us with an essay on his theory of landscape. Jing Hao served as an officer, but after the fall of the Tang, retired to a valley near Mount Taihang. He may have taught painting there, and was known to have accepted commissions to paint landscapes, pines, and rocks for monasteries. Reevaluating eighth-century painting against contemporary artistic concerns, Jing Hao judged Wang Wei superior to Wu Daozi. His opinion corroborates our understanding about the use of ink as a major critical issue in the tenth-century. It also presages the concerns of Northern Song critics who would also express a clear preference for the ink-technique of the scholar, Wang Wei, over that of the professional painter, Wu Daozi.

Ink landscapes’ hermetic connotations: Wang Wei and Li Cheng as paragons

Landscapes made in ink alone began as an alternative aesthetic to those with a courtly polychrome palate in the eighth-century. However, by the tenth century, this technical development was held up by critics like Jing Hao as the basis of a new ideal: the ink-monochrome as a scholar’s genre of painting. Class values became intertwined with ink-monochrome’s subjects and techniques, and the social background of its practitioners, an increasingly important strategy for art critics in categorizing painters and evaluating their contributions.

As a scholar’s vehicle, ink landscape and the “tree and rock” subject were the means for expressing hermetic sentiments. There is no more famous example of the virtue of hermetic practices in pictorial form than Wang Wei’s mural of his private garden retreat, Wangchuan Villa (Wangchuan tu). He complemented this with a set of quatrains titled “Wangchuan Collection” (Wangchuan ji), one for each site on his estate. These twin accomplishments in painting and poetry became core cultural models for all later literati, as would Wang’s experiences. He pursued an official career in government, lived through banishment and then forced service. He retreated to his estate intermittently in retirement, during which time he devoted himself to poetry, music, painting, and religion. In the Northern Song, Su Shi and his circle acclaimed Wang Wei as one of the greatest poets in history and elevated him to the highest possible position in the history of Chinese painting.

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20 XHHP 11. See Hay (1972) for Zhao Gan’s “Along the River during Winter’s First Snow” in relationship to different fishermen narratives in the Chinese literary tradition: “moral,” literary,” and “genre.”

For them, Wang Wei was the paragon of scholars in his art and his life, ideals to uphold if not to attain. 22

The main varieties of Chinese eremitism that held prominence from at least the Han Dynasty onwards centrally featured conceptions of withdrawal, and the treatment of ermites held real political consequences for rulers. Retreat from society in Confucian moralism took the form of resolute refusal to take public office and serve in a (corrupt) government, whereas Daoist commitments to living in seclusion were more often related to religious goals or for sheltering from warfare. 23 Landscape tropes in literature and in the visual arts were especially germane during times of political strife. During such times, ideals of meditative solitude and common brotherhood were evoked in elegant representations of nature, works like Wang Wei’s poetic and painted images of Wangchuan. Rustic country dwellers such as woodgatherers and fishermen played instructive roles in words and images, helping readers grasp truths from their unassuming lifestyles. Enduring windswept plains through cold winters and battering rains, the integrity of these elementals is revealed in the harshness of their surroundings and in their ability to claim their circumstances as ordinary. As metaphors for scholars holding to their principles even under duress, eremitic topographies are easily politically charged.

For the Song aristocracy to take up ink landscape as part of their own identity—given its technical roots and class origins—therefore requires questioning. Just as scholars took Wang Wei as model, the Northern Song court upheld an earlier paragon of ink landscape painting as the originator of a mainstream style: the tenth-century master Li Cheng 李成 (919-67). Li Cheng was universally admired for his moving landscapes and the refinement of his “tree and rock” paintings. According to eleventh and early-twelfth century records, his paintings of misty groves and level-distance views were done with “needle-point brush and exquisitely sparing ink technique.” Temples and villas were displayed against peaks and ridges, and snowy scenes of winter forests brightened by white skies. His trees showed signs of “cutting and pruning to allude to gentlemen in retirement.” 24 How did these images appeal as courtly subjects?

Richard Barnhart recognizes Li Cheng as the creator of archetypal landscape images evoking the idea of endurance and survival in harsh winters. It is certainly true that landscape paintings importuned philosophical and meditative contemplation as already touted by Zong Bing and widely recognized by the eleventh-century. They allowed one to experience the wilderness without having to be there, and would have appealed to aristocratic viewers whose movements were restricted to the capital region. But the subjects of wintry trees and pine gentlemen were, like fishermen and woodcutters, by this

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22 Changing critical evaluations of the contribution of Wang Wei and his influence on Northern Song scholars is summarized by Harrist (1998): 68-78.
23 See Vervoorn (1990), for the socio-political circumstances that gave rise to early eremitic forms from the Warring States to the Han Dynasty. See Powers (1991) for political expressions in pictorial forms during the Han.
24 For descriptions of Li Cheng’s art, see: Guo Ruoxu THJWZ 1; Liu Daochun, Shengchao minghua ping 2; Deng Chun, Huaji 9; Mi Fu, Huashi.
time long-established metaphors for recluses and scholars defying the conventions of established values and institutions. They are to be distinguished from genre depictions of the everyday lives of fisherfolk such as those by the Southern Tang painter Zhao Gan earlier mentioned, who did not receive this investment in the Song Dynasty.\(^{25}\) Even given the eremitic implications of his landscape imagery, the court nevertheless adopted Li Cheng to serve as an elite ancestor to a landscape tradition it supported. Indeed, it promoted Li Cheng’s style as one of the Song Dynasty’s greatest cultural achievements.

We have defined the rise of the ink-monochrome genre in terms of technical developments, representational aims, and primary themes, and also noted the backgrounds of some early ink-monochrome landscape painters—scholar or scholarly, professional by vocation or professional by need. Northern Song writers evaluated this past by selecting model painters and traditions in order to express their taste and also to distinguish their class cultures according to classical basis. Social position was as important as techniques and subjects for the literati critics in who they chose as artistic paragons. Emperors, empresses, and eunuchs also appreciated ink-monochromes, but with different criteria and distinct motivations for doing so. The task ahead is to identify occasions where this genre became desirable in court context and consequently adapted to imperial purposes. Our readings of Song ink landscapes as natural representations of imperial power can then be reexamined as a convention established in a process.

No doubt ink-monochrome landscapes were greatly varied in their significations but the concept of eremitic and political withdrawal was a key implication, one in potential conflict with imperial purposes. Martin Powers described the genre as “a site for negotiating cultural hegemony” in his interpretation of landscape painting’s appropriation by the Song Dynasty court against its anti-aristocratic roots.\(^{26}\) Formulating the shi-class and aristocratic-class as competitive groups certainly raises our sensitivity to the cultural dynamics at court as complex expressions of social and political power. However, in order to begin unraveling the intricacies of landscape painting’s role in such a cultural history, it is important to bracket presuppositions about literati dominance in the late Northern Song culture wars for it obscures the very kinds of the negotiations we want to locate. By interrogating the autonomy of scholar-officials and their tastes when they are articulated within imperial space and against its prerogatives, we can better understand how ink monochrome landscapes in the Li Cheng lineage became, in Richard Barnhart’s words, “synonymous with the Song government and the self-image of the imperial court.”\(^{27}\)

\(^{25}\) For more on the metaphor of wintry trees as recluses see Hartman (1993): esp. 137-44. For wintry trees as painting subject see Li Lincan (1969b) and the exhibition catalog by Barnhart (1972). For Travelers in a Wintry Forest in the Metropolitan Museum attributed to Li Cheng and the poetic iconography of the donkey-rider, see Sturman (1995)

\(^{26}\) Powers (1998), esp. 18-21

\(^{27}\) Barnhart (1999): esp. 20-23. The Li Cheng style became especially significant after the Mongol conquest as an essential aspect of loyalist community, culture, and identity. He argues that paintings in Li Cheng’s style became “embodiments of the form of exile, hardship and loss” suffered by surviving Song loyalists.