

Wang Wei's and Su Shi's Conceptions of "Painting within Poetry"

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When he inscribed Wang Wei's 王維 (699–759) poem "In the Hill" ("Shanzhong" 山中) on a lost painting titled *Picture of the Misty and Rainy Indigo Field* (*Lantian yanyu tu* 藍田煙雨圖), the poet/artist Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101) established Wang as an iconic figure whose poetry and painting embody an ideal conflation of the two media. Two celebrated dicta—"painting within poetry" ("shi zhong you hua" 詩中有畫) and "poetry within painting" ("hua zhong you shi" 畫中有詩)—summarize this ideal. This essay discusses the relationship between Wang Wei's poem and Su Shi's adaptation.

The conflation of poetry and painting was an ideal that dominated Chinese poetic and artistic developments for more than a thousand years. A famous painting inscription established this ideal. The illustrious poet and artist Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101) composed this inscription for a painting titled *Picture of the Misty and Rainy Indigo Field* (*Lantian yanyu tu* 藍田煙雨圖), allegedly painted by the famous Tang poet Wang Wei 王維 (699–759), whose style name was Mojie 摩詰. This inscription established Wang's work as the embodiment of this ideal. This legendary inscription reads:

I savor Mojie's paintings within poems.
I view Mojie's poems within paintings.
The poem says:

At Indigo Field, the white rocks protrude.
On the jade river, the red leaves are sparse.
No rain falls on the mountain trails, but
The green grass wets one's attire.

This is Mojie's poem. Some say it is not his but forged by some dilettante
and passed off as Mojie's lost poem.

味摩詰之詩，詩中有畫。
觀摩詰之畫，畫中有詩。

詩曰：

藍田白石出，
玉川紅葉稀。
山路元無雨，
空翠濕人衣。

此摩詰之詩，或曰非也。好事者以補摩詰之遺。(Su 2011, 250)

This inscription inaugurates the ideas of “painting within poetry” (“shi zhong you hua” 詩中有畫) and “poetry within painting” (“hua zhong you shi” 畫中有詩) as poetic and artistic ideals.¹ Having conceived this twin ideal, Wang is considered the founder of the literati school of painting—the Southern School that conceives amateurism as the epitome of Chinese art—though there is no extant painting by him. They additionally initiate the literati ideal of simultaneously excelling at poetry and painting.

However, Su's version of Wang's poem differs from the poem included in Wang's poetry anthology.² Titled “In the Hill” (“Shanzhong” 山中), Wang's poem reads:

¹The idea that Wang Wei embodies this ideal is again reiterated in Su's poem “After the Rhyme of Huang Tingjian's Inscription on Li Gonglin's Painting of Wang Wei” (“Ciyun Huang Luzhi shu Boshi hua Wang Mojie” 次韻黃魯直書伯時畫王摩詰). Huang Tingjian's inscription is lost, while Su's poem is included in his anthology:

Who was once Tao Yuanming
Is now Wei Yingwu.
Wishing for Wang Wei
One must seek him in his five-word poems.
The poet and painter
Perfumes the spring and autumn with orchids and chrysanthemums.
I am afraid he is both
And divided his identities to achieve enlightenment.

前身陶彭澤
後身韋蘇州
欲覓王右丞
還向五字求
詩人與畫手
蘭菊芳春秋
又恐兩皆是
分身來入流 (Su 2001, 30.1499–1500)

²This poem is not included in the original anthology of Wang Wei's work. It is included in the “Additional List” (“Waibian” 外編) that included forty-seven other

On Bramble Brook the white rocks protrude.
 The red leaves are sparse in the cold.
 No rain falls on the mountain trails, but
 The green grass wets one's attire.³

poems (Wang 1962, 208–19). These poems were not included in the *Complete Anthology of Tang Poetry* (*Quan Tangshi* 全唐詩), compiled by Peng Dingqiu et al. in the Qing dynasty.

³Various translators have translated the poem. Wai-lim Yip:

In the Bramble Stream, white stones stick out.
 Cold weather: red leaves are sparse.
 No rain along the mountain path.
 Skyward greenery wets one's clothes. (Wang 1972, 85)

G.W. Robinson:

White rocks jutting from Ching stream
 The weather's cold, red leaves few
 No rain at all on the paths on the hills
 Clothes are wet with blue air. (Wang 1973, 86)

Shan Chou:

In Ching Brook white stones jut out,
 The sky is cold, red leaves thinning.
 On the mountain path, there had been no rain,
 The cloudless blue, clothes are dampened. (Chou 1982, 118–19)

Tony Barnstone, Willis Barnstone, and Xu Haixin:

White Stones glow in Chaste Tree River.
 With the cold sky, red leaves thin out.
 No rain on the mountain path
 yet greenness drops on my clothes. (Wang 1989, 79)

Taylor Stoehr:

White rocks break the surface of Bramble Brook,
 red leaves flutter in the cold wind.
 No trace of rain on the mountain path
 but the bushes will give you a soaking. (Stoehr 2007, 12)

Robinson misunderstands the Chinese term “kongcui” 空翠 (which literally means “empty green”) as “blue air” in the last line. The term is more accurately rendered as “green grass” or “green leaves.” As Wang indicates, the leaves have turned red and only a few remain; hence the term “kongcui” must indicate grass. Robinson proposes that this poem is very characteristic of Wang Wei, which affirms Su Shi's “weighty opinion” that this poem was by Wang (Wang 1973, 86).

荊溪白石出，
天寒紅葉稀。
山路元無雨，
空翠濕人衣。(Wang 1962, 211)

The differences seem minute, but their implications are significant. This essay discusses the variant paintings implicit in the two poems and how they reflect the variant artistic ideals of Wang and Su.

Wang Wei's Kinetic Image versus Su Shi's Static Image

Su limits his revision to the first two lines of Wang's poem, making two changes. He shifts the location from Bramble Brook (Jingxi 荊溪) to Indigo Field (Lantian 藍田), and he sheds the allusion to the "cold" (*tianhan* 天寒) in favor of the allusion to "jade river" (*yuchuan* 玉川). Such shifts are easily dismissed as minor, which explains the absence of scholarly investigation into the rationale of these changes. The differences are indeed minute, but their implications are significant. Su's revision attempts to challenge the technically sophisticated monumental landscape tradition that had dominated since the birth of Chinese landscape painting, an agenda entirely absent in Wang's poem.

Wang's lines inscribe a kinetic image, while Su's inscribe a static image. In Wang's description, Bramble Brook is shallow enough that the white rocks protrude. Its flowing water is therefore neither smooth nor transparent. Bramble Brook conjures the image of white-water rapids, while Su's "jade river" suggests translucent solidity rather than splashing torrents. His river is petrous or even petrified.

Wang's poem implies the season of late fall or early winter. The "cold" establishes the season sensually, while the image of the sparse leaves suggests it visually. Su, on the other hand, restricts himself to visual suggestion. He maintains the image of sparse red leaves, but reassigns the implication of "coldness" to the frozen river, as connoted by jade's icy and translucent qualities. The image of the "jade river" sets the season in frozen winter and accentuates the seasonal characteristic of stillness. Rather than appealing directly to human senses, the "coldness" in Su's image is metaphorized by the frozen stillness of jade and white rocks. In Su's version of the poem, the subjective sensual feelings (cold) are implicit in the objective images (leaves, jade), which is the defining dynamic of painting. Unlike poetry, painting cannot simply *name* the subjective element; it must suggest it through the medium of the poetic

image. In Wang's poem, on the other hand, subjective sensual feelings (cold) are not implicit, but explicitly stated facts of the objective environment. Wang's image ("The red leaves are sparse in the cold") incorporates both the subjective sensation (cold) and the objective details of nature (red leaves) and places these on the same ontological plane (the leaves are *in* the cold), thereby metaphorizing their relation and fundamental unity. In this regard, Wang's poem is less painterly than Su's adaption; it states what Su implies.

Su made minimal but necessary changes to Wang's poem in order to emphasize the stasis of the scene, which consists of white rocks and a frozen river lined with black boughs bearing a few dots of red leaves against an indigo background. It is a simple image. Were it to be painted, it would not require the kind of polished technique in which the painters of the Northern School specialized, yet it embodies a poetry that realizes the Daoist aesthetic ideal—"the greatest beauty lies in no form" ("da xiang wu xing" 大象無形). This simple image not only places Wang on a pedestal as the founding father of the literati tradition that prizes the amateurish artistic ideal (at least as quietly revised by Su himself), but also challenges the majestic style of landscape painting practiced by the professional painters. Su's adaptation of Wang's poem echoes the simplicity of Mi Fu's 米芾 (1051–1108) landscape painting, as exemplified by a work like *The Auspicious Pines on the Spring Mountains* (*Chunshan ruisong* 春山瑞松, fig. 1). By revising Wang's poem, Su laid the theoretical foundation for the simplicity of Mi's landscape painting and inaugurated an ideal that dominated the later development of Chinese art.

Su's characterization of Wang's landscape painting style also influenced later forgers attempting to work in what they thought was Wang's defining manner. For example, the painting titled *Snow along the Yantzi River* (*Changjiang jixue tu* 長江積雪圖), implausibly attributed to Wang, exemplifies not Wang's landscape painting style,

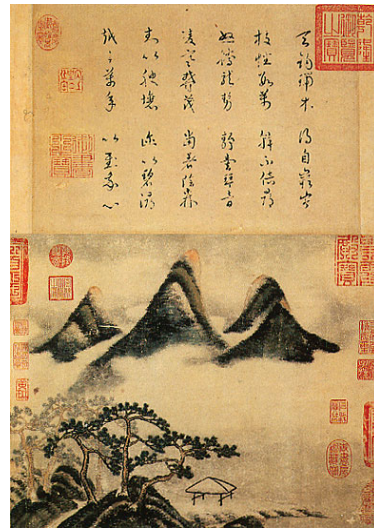


FIGURE 1 Mi Fu 米芾(1051–1108). *Chunshan ruisong* 春山瑞松 (*The Auspicious Pines on the Spring Mountains*). Color ink on silk, 35x44.1 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

but Su's *notion* of Wang's style (fig. 2).⁴ The painting's snowscape recalls the "white rocks" of the Indigo Field, its frozen river recalls the "jade river," and its sparse trees lining the river bank recall the sparse red leaves. The painting focuses on the poetic atmosphere of the snowscape but attempts nothing like sophisticated technique. The painting aims to metaphorize the sense of "cold" rather than make a spectacle of its own brush work. This work summarizes the perception of Wang's landscape style as defined by Su.



FIGURE 2

Attributed to
Wang Wei 王維
(699–759).
Partials of
*Picture of Snow
along the Yangtze
River*
(*Changjiang jixue
tu* 長江積雪圖).

Wang Wei's Daoist Painting within his Poetry

Wang's poem, unlike Su's static image, inscribes a kinetic scene by no means easy to picture. After depicting a cold and barren landscape along Bramble Brook, Wang emphasizes in the third line that "no rain falls on the mountain trails," which seems to intensify the barren impression. The accentuated barrenness, however, is immediately contradicted by the fourth line ("the green grass wets one's attire"). The dryness of the trail requires the reader to question the source of the moisture that "wets one's attire." An astute reader finds the answer in the first two lines. The moisture must originate from Bramble Brook, which produces splashes when its flowing water clashes with the protruding rocks. The dry mountain trails suggest that the splashed water constantly irrigates the green grass, which maintains the unusual lushness even in the cold weather that denudes the trees of their red leaves. The green grass further contradicts the natural brown color that defines the season of late fall and early winter. Through the word "green" (*cui* 翠), Wang draws the three inanimate objects—river, stone, and grass—into an

⁴Wang Wei, of course, was famous for painting snowscapes. Chapter 10 of the renowned painting catalogue *Paintings Recorded in the Xuanhe Reign* (*Xuanhe huapu* 宣和畫譜) records twenty such paintings. Wang has been credited as the first Chinese painter to paint snowscapes.

inseparable organic unit: the rocks produce the splashes that in turn wet the grass. This corner of nature forms a self-sufficient and balanced unit that requires no further assistance or interference.

This ideal of self-sufficiency clearly expresses the Daoist's philosophy of politics and life. This natural corner of river, rock, and grass realizes the Daoist utopia, which rejects any human interposition and disruption, politically as well as socially. Wang conceives nature in this utopian light. The intrusion of the human in this self-balanced natural utopia is a nuisance: the wet clothes suggest the comeuppance of anyone fooled by the dryness of the trail. Human presence adds nothing to this natural balance. Indeed, the visitor deprives the grass of at least some of its necessary irrigation. Being integrated fully into the rhythm of the nature, the grass stays forever green and lush regardless of seasonal changes, while the human interloper cannot be fully and comfortably integrated into this self-sufficient and balanced system. Nature, in the Daoist philosophy, does not differentiate, nurturing everything equally, including both grass and human; the fault is not natural, but human, insofar as people remain insensitive to the natural pattern, as it were unwilling to be nurtured by a fully willing natural order. Just so, the white egret in Wang's poem "Ruan Family Rapids" ("Luan jia lai" 樂家瀨) triumphs over the human in its capacity to integrate itself fully into the rhythm of an analogous self-sufficient, balanced, and exuberant natural system.⁵

Wang's vision of human encroachment on nature is well represented in Shen Zhou's poem titled "Painting Inscription" ("Tihua" 題畫). Shen's second line derives almost verbatim from Wang's last line, and further incorporates the "cold" in Wang's second line:

Walking the length of the rugged, ten-thousand-bend roads,
I'm cold as all the green leaves of the mountain wet my attire.
The pine wind and the ravine water make natural tunes,
No need to play the zither that I've brought along.

⁵The poem reads:

Wind sounds in the autumn rain
Water drones when rushing down the rocks
The jumping waves splash each other
Prompting an alarmed white egret to plunge repeatedly.

颯颯秋雨中，
淺淺石溜瀉。
跳波自相濺，
白鷺驚複下。(Wang 1962, 193)

行盡崎嶇路萬盤，
滿山空翠濕衣寒。
松風澗水天然調，
抱得琴來不用彈。(Bian 1997, 45)

In addition to the discomfort of coldness, Shen invests the long trudge with a sense of labor, which hardship is further accentuated by the burden of a zither (*guqin* 古琴). The coldness and physical exertion suggest hardship and futility, which in a sense disrupt the harmony of nature. Shen demonstrates his understanding of Wang's philosophy by progressing from labor and discomfort to the enjoyment of nature's harmonious music. He finally realizes he suffers because he fails to integrate himself into the rhythm of nature. He thus abandons his original intention to play his zither, recognizing that nature is already filled with music, and allows himself to enter into the nature's rhythm. Nature thus rids him of his discomfort. In both Wang's and Shen's poems, nature is a selfless and self-sufficient utopian entity, as propounded by Daoist philosophy.

By shifting locale from Bramble Brook to Indigo Field and using the image of the jade river to convey that otherwise unmentioned coldness, Su sacrifices the paradoxes and contradictions that Wang employed to indicate and concretize his philosophy. Su merely wants to conjure a clear and simple picture to illustrate his ideal of conflated artistic media. Su attempts to present a painting governed by the Daoist aesthetic ideal, while Wang presents an image that expounds the Daoist philosophy of life.

How Might Wang Wei's Poem Be Painted?

Wang's poem requires a highly trained and skillful artist to visualize it. This painting would be particularly difficult to depict as this seemingly unimportant corner of the nature is kinetic and every object is equally important and connected in a balanced organic whole. The paradox of the "cold" and the green grass is particularly challenging. Is the season winter or spring? Should the painter employ brown or green? Furthermore, the artist must simultaneously convey the implicit movement and rhythm of Wang's poem, establish the philosophical interrelation of the image's various elements, and somehow suggest that humans are interlopers, somehow unincorporated in nature's organic unity.

Zhang Daqian 張大千 (1899–1983), one of the twentieth-century's most technically accomplished and celebrated painters, repeatedly took up the challenge of rendering Wang Wei's poem visually. Zhang chose

the final two lines of “In the Hill” as his inspiration. Three landscapes, painted in 1962, 1975, and 1977, bear the lines “No rain falls on the mountain trail, but / The green grass wets one’s attire.” All three paintings depart from Su’s revisionist notion of Wang’s painting style. Zhang employs the ancient monumental landscape style that Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555–1636) dubbed Northern or professional. The 1962 painting conforms completely to this tradition (fig. 3), while the 1975 and 1977 paintings (figs. 4–5) are executed in Zhang’s innovative *pomo* 潑墨 or ink-spilling style, which involves emptying copious amounts of green and blue colored ink onto the paper and creating a landscape out of the naturally and adventitiously formed shape. This painting technique embodies the Daoist philosophy of *ziran* 自然 (“self-so”) or “follow its own course.” Despite their different techniques, all three paintings emphasize the moist greenness of the grass. The moist green mountain becomes the main theme and towers over both the trail, upon which two insignificant figures tread, and the brook placed far below.



FIGURE 3 Zhang Daqian 張大千 (1899–1983). *Misty Green in the Empty Mountain* (*Kongshan lancui* 空山嵐翠). Auctioned by Christie’s, Hongkong in 2007.



FIGURE 4 Zhang Daqian 張大千 (1899–1983). 1975. *Green Leaves on the Mountain Trail* (*Shanlu kongcui* 山路空翠圖). Color ink on paper, 54x96 cm. Private Collection. Auctioned by Poly Auction in Hong Kong in 2012.



FIGURE 5 Zhang Daqian 張大千 (1899–1983). 1977. *No Rain on the Mountain Trail* (*Shan lu yuan wu yu* 山路元無雨). Color ink on paper, 185x75 cm. Private collection, Korea.

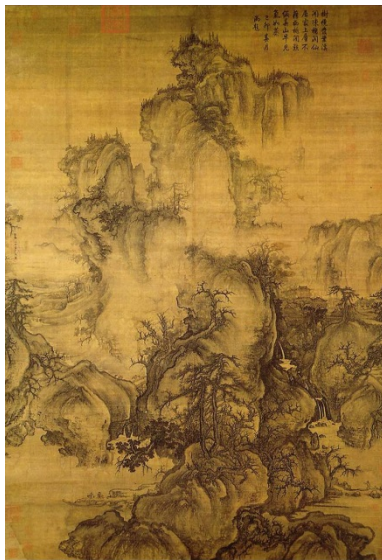
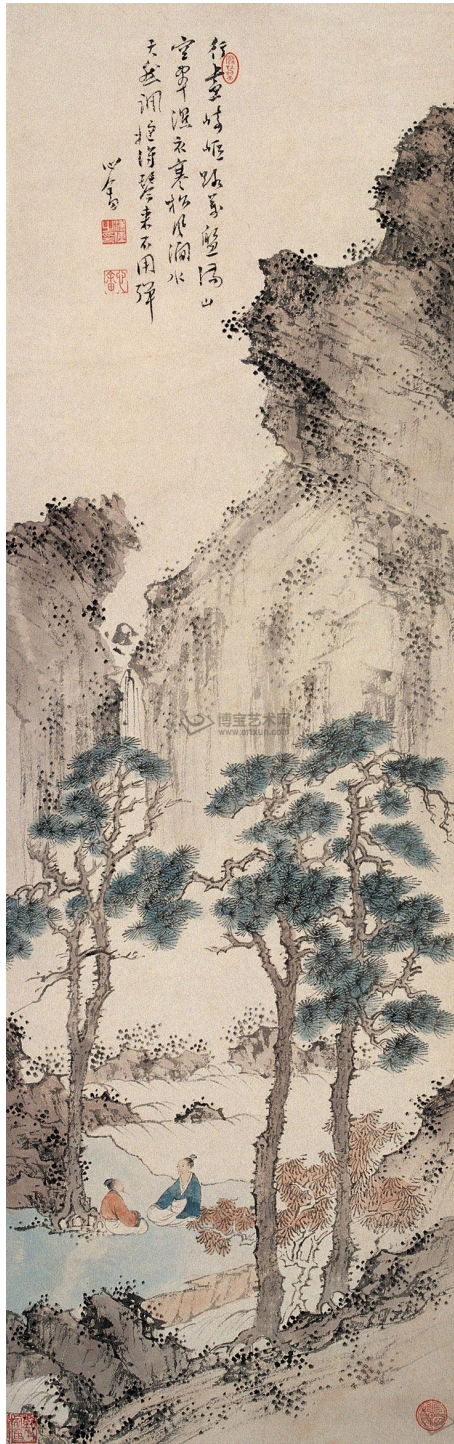


FIGURE 6 Guo Xi 郭熙 (c. 1020–c. 1080). *Early Spring* (*Zaochun* 早春). Ink on silk, 159.3x108.1 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

The greenness of the landscape, departing from the poem, bears no organic relation to the brook. The exuberant and rolling green mountain suggested by the washes of ink soaking through the paper represents the life force itself and seems to require no external source to substantiate its energy. The energy contained inside the mountain recalls Guo Xi's 郭熙 (c. 1020s–c. 1080s) monumental painting *Early Spring* (*Zaochun* 早春), which depicts the landscape awakening in the early spring (fig. 6). In Wang's vision all things are bound in a relational logic defined in natural terms, while in Zhang's visual interpretation the green mountain is the god-like source of life that nurtures all things, both natural and human, within its domain. Zhang's vision of nature replicates perfectly the Daoist vision of a nature that does not differentiate and nurtures everything equally. He pays no heed to the brook that moistens the mountain, considering the mountain entirely self-sufficient.

FIGURE 7 Pu Xinyu 溥心畬 (1896–1963). *Picture of Green Grass Wets Human Wears* (*Kongcui shiyi tu* 空翠濕衣圖).



The painter Pu Xinyu 溥心畬 (1896–1963) visualizes Shen's Wang-inspired utopian vision in a painting he inscribed with the words of Shen's poem (fig. 7). The painting's title, *Picture of Green Grass Wets One's Attire* (*Kongcui shiyi tu* 空翠濕衣圖), derives from both Wang's and Shen's poems. Pu pictures rocks protruding from the brook and the splashing water, which echoes the music of the brook in Shen's poem and the white rocks protruding from the Bramble Brook in Wang's poem. The black dots representing splashes are rendered in the style of *yudiancun* 雨點皴—the "raindrop texture" used to depict moist vegetation and ground. Pu employs this texture along the bank and also on the peaks to visualize Shen's second line ("I'm cold as all the green leaves of the mountain wet my attire"), while the analogy between the water drops and moistened vegetation clearly alludes to Wang's poem. Both Shen and Pu allude to Wang's poem rather than Su's adaptation. In Pu's image, two scholars sit on the green grass by the brook among a moistened landscape. They are not bothered by their wet clothes but converse happily amid a utopian natural scene. Pu created a Daoist painting that perfectly inscribes Wang and Shen's artistic vision.

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