

# *The "Humanization" of Landscape and the "Imaginary Body" of Man in Northern Song Landscape Paintings --The Pine Tree as a Path of Interpretation*

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**Abstract.** This paper takes the pine tree in Northern Song landscape painting as the core research object, based on the social and cultural foundation, the influence of painting technique innovation and rational spirit, and combining the style characteristics of the Northern Landscape School and the Southern Landscape School, it builds the analytical framework of the pine tree as the symbolic aesthetic object of humanized landscape and the carrier of the human virtual body and spirit. Through analyzing the visual interaction mechanism of the pine tree's natural attributes with rocks, clouds, water, grass and trees, and exploring the deep connection between its spatial location and the four seasons scene, we explain the role of the pine tree in the aesthetic of the "Three Distances" to promote the extension of perspectives. From the perspective of embodied aesthetics, it reveals the path by which the pine tree guides the viewer to sublimate from physical perception to spiritual transcendence, and ultimately demonstrates the aesthetic way by which the humanized landscape and human embodiment in Northern Song landscapes generate each other. The pine tree is the core hub connecting the spatial construction, physical perception and aesthetic spirit of Northern Song landscape painting, with irreplaceable structural value and archetypal significance.

**Keywords:** Pine tree, Northern Song Dynasty, landscape, Chinese aesthetics, Aesthetic mechanism

## **1. Introduction**

The realistic channel reflects the adaptive transformation of the pine tree as the core symbol of oriental aesthetics in different cultural contexts, and also confirms the profound influence of Chinese landscape painting techniques and spatial concepts of the pine tree on East Asian art traditions. The development of landscape painting in the Northern Song Dynasty, a peak in Chinese painting, was driven by multiple factors: the dominance of the scholarly class in the cultural field under the state policy of emphasizing literature over the military, and the rational spirit of "grasping the material things" that drove landscape painting from resemblance to the "writing of God". Jing Hao, Guan Tong, Li Cheng, Fan Kuan and other painters laid down the panoramic landscape paradigm, the maturity of the chapping and ink method for the diversification of styles to provide technical

support; the theory of the unity of man and nature permeates the artistic creation, so that landscape painting becomes a metaphor for the order of the universe and the character of the scholar. In this context, the Northern Song Dynasty landscape painting formed a north-south divide: the northern landscape school represented by Li Cheng, Fan Kuan, painting the majestic mountains and rivers, heavy texture; southern landscape school to Dong Yuan, Ju Ran as the ancestor of the exhibition of Jiangnan hills, warm and graceful, soft ink and ink and ethereal mood. Both of them connect nature and humanity with the spirit of realism.

Maturity of the Northern Song pine technique was built on a deep historical accumulation. Wu Hong's study of a fragment of a Tang dynasty silk painting unearthed in Mutougou, Turpan, in his *Study of Grave Archaeology and the History of Painting*, shows that the top edge of the fragment is painted with a vigorous old pine tree, painted in pure ink and published for the first time in 1915 in the Kagawa Moshi edited *Archaeological Illustrations of the Western Regions*, No. 46 [1]. The style of the pine is extremely unusual, and is reminiscent of the pines painted by Zhang Can in Zhu Jingxuan's *Record of Famous Paintings of the Tang Dynasty*: they are proud of the smoke and haze, with a strong influence over the wind and rain, and they have the shape of a dolomite tree, with the appearance of scales and chaffing, and are painted in a random manner. In his study of landscape painting in the Sui and Tang dynasties, the British scholar Sullivan cited this fragment as an important basis for determining 9th-century ink paintings. According to the remaining markings on the painting, these pine trees were originally part of the background of Buddhist painting streamers, and the main image is the second venerable monk of the sixteen luohans, Kanojavajra. The pine tree paintings show the robust brushwork used by the artist in depicting the figures, providing material for thinking about the style of Wu Daozi's school of painting in the Tang Dynasty. This archaeological discovery shows that the Tang Dynasty painters have explored the spirit of the pine tree in the ink and brushwork, and the robust brushwork has laid the technical foundation for the Northern Song Dynasty's tradition of writing God.

This tradition of technique is also reflected in cross-cultural exchanges. In his analysis of Hiroshige Ando's *Yoshiwara: Zuo Fuji in The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art*, Su Liwen points out that in this set of paintings, Western influences have been completely melted and absorbed without any sense of imposition. Hiroshige Ando not only fully masters perspective and perspective space reduction in painting, but also utilizes curved pine trees to create realistic passages in the enclosed space, which is unprecedented in Japanese art, yet the overall effect of the picture is undoubtedly Japanese in character [2]. This cross-cultural phenomenon reflects the adaptive transformation of the pine tree as a core symbol of oriental aesthetics in different cultural contexts, and at the same time confirms the far-reaching influence of the pine tree technique and spatial concepts in Chinese landscape painting on East Asian art traditions [3].

Current research has basically covered the broader perspectives of landscape painting in the Northern Song Dynasty, such as garden art characteristics, poetic expression, the use of botanical landscapes and the evolution of painting techniques. Scholars such as Geng Fei and Zhang Xuan have pointed out that the Song Dynasty was the peak of the development of Chinese landscape painting, and that the changes in the image of the pine tree reflected the advancement of painting techniques, the deepening of the painter's observation of nature, and the change in aesthetic styles of the times. Jiang Jinshi's study shows that pine trees were often characterized by longevity and resilience in Song Dynasty paintings, reflecting the philosophical thoughts of the literati on nature and life at that time. Tian Peipei and Liang Jinpeng extended their symbolism to the field of landscape gardening, arguing that the pine tree carries the sentiments of the literati. Zhang Xuan and Xu Mengmeng note the use of various techniques such as chapping and pointing to make the image

of the pine tree vivid and realistic, reflecting the innovation of the techniques of the times. Shi Jinwang and Hu Lingling believe that the value of the pine tree lies in the pursuit of natural beauty, the embodiment of the spirit of art and deep cultural connotations behind it.

The answer to this question needs to be explored in the historical lineage of Northern Song landscape painting. The image of pine trees in the Northern Song Dynasty has undergone an evolution from realism to spiritual symbolism. Early painters such as Li Cheng and Fan Kuan focused on the natural form of the pine tree and pursued the spirit of realism. Guo Xi systematically summarized the painting method of the pine tree in *Linquan Gaozhi*, and put forward the observation method of "pine bark like scales, pine leaves save needles". The changes in the image of pine trees during this period reflect the depth of the painter's observation of nature.

During the Southern Song Dynasty, Ma Yuan and Xia Gui's "Scenes from the Edge" further simplified the form of pine trees and strengthened the expression of spirit. Hunan Naito pointed out that Ma Yuan's family lineage was originally a family of painting academies in the Northern Song Dynasty, and in the Northern Song Dynasty, there was Ma Ben, whose descendant was Ma Xingzu, whose sons were Ma Gongxian and Ma Shirong, and Ma Yuan was Ma Shirong's son, and Ma Yuan's son was Ma Lin. It is said that Ma Yuan's paintings are the remaining mountains and water, and he prefers the scenery in the corners, so he is called "Ma Yijiao". He painted trees with curved branches, so much so that later the gardener called the method of tying up pine trees the "Ma Yuan method". This technical innovation shows that the painter has elevated the pine tree from the description of natural forms to the practical level of gardening art, realizing the two-way interaction between art and life.

At the same time, the pine tree in the Northern Song landscape painting carries rich cultural symbolism. From the perspective of Confucianism, the pine tree's characteristic of not withering in cold years makes it a symbol of gentleman's character. From the perspective of Taoism and seclusion culture, the pine tree symbolizes longevity and transcendence. Under the influence of Science/Neo-Confucianism, the pine tree is endowed with the connotation of "Divine Principle" and becomes the embodiment of cosmic order. These symbolic meanings make the pine tree go beyond the purely natural objects and become the carrier of the projection of the spiritual world of the scholars.

Shi Shouqian's analysis of Shen Zhou's *Hibiscus under the Pine* reveals the complexity of the pine tree's symbolism [4]. The painting is simple, with the hibiscus in the center and half a pine tree on the right. Hibiscus originally meant richness, but also implied transience because it bloomed in late autumn; the pine tree was originally a symbol of a gentleman and hermit. In the poem, the artist himself refers to himself as a lonely pine tree, and uses the old hibiscus in the fall to send expectations for the imperial examinations. This case shows that the pine tree in the context of Ming literati paintings already carries complex connotations of the imperial examinations and hermitage, showing a double turn of secularization and personalization.

This symbolic tradition can be traced back to the philosophical positioning of the pine tree in the Northern Song Dynasty. Shi Shouqian quoted Huang Gongwang's "Writing Landscape Know-how" as saying, "The pine tree does not see its roots, which is a metaphor for the gentleman in the wild; the mixed trees are a metaphor for the villain's lofty intentions [5]." This statement establishes the dual structure of the pine tree symbolism: the pine tree does not see the roots is the omission of the technical level, but also the spiritual level of the metaphor - the gentleman hidden in the wilderness, the roots of the deep but not publicized. In contrast, the seasonal blossoming and waning of the miscellaneous trees symbolizes the petty man's ambition.

A letter from the artist included by Gao Juhan further reveals the personalized turn of the pine tree symbol: "..... also ordered to make two pines for the longevity of a friend ..... so that the

pavilion straight up, that is, as a symbol of the recipient of the painting of noble sentiments! ..... to write a picture for someone, in fact, to write for himself [6]." This letter reveals how the painter transformed the cold and ancient posture of the pine tree into a carrier of personal identity - realizing the unity of other's expectation and self-expression.

As far as systematic painting techniques are concerned, Northern Song painters formed a systematic expression method in pine tree techniques. Pine trunk technique includes scale chapping, cross method, etc.; pine needle technique is divided into saving needles, sparse needles, etc., emphasizing the gathering and dispersion and the sense of space. Color, more ink rendering in the north, the south both green and green. These innovations in technique provide support for the diversified expression of the image of the pine tree.

Shi Shouqian, in his examination of Wen Zhengming's Pine Shade Gao Shi, pointed out that the poems inscribed on Wen's paintings were not an isolated case. In fact, other poems in his collected works, which deal with the theme of contrasting city dwellings and forest springs, are all related to folding fans. The formation of this theme shows that the pine tree, as a visual symbol of the contrast between city residence and forest and spring, was highly typified in the folding fan paintings of the Ming dynasty, and became a standard configuration for the literati to express their out-of-this-world sentiments.

Shi Shouqian's analysis of Zhou Chen's Shanzhai Hakkai further reveals that the pine tree technique had a dramatic function in narrative landscapes. The overlapping and twisting branches of the large pine trees and the crisscrossing of rocks in the painting add a layer of drama to the scene, which is aptly echoed by the meandering calm of the distant mountains. This example shows that Ming painters had already elevated the pine tree from a mere spatial element to a means of regulating the rhythm of the narrative.

## 2. The generation of mood under the interaction between the natural attributes of pine trees and the scenery

The natural attributes of the pine tree - form, classification, and color - form a complex visual interaction with the surrounding scenery such as rocks, clouds and water, grass and trees, together shaping the figurative scene and abstract mood of the picture.

### 2.1 Visual interaction of morphology and classification

Northern Song landscape painting on the observation of the pine tree to achieve "exhaustive" realm, this observation method has a profound philosophical basis. Jing Hao "brushwork record" provides the most direct documentary evidence. Jing Hao recorded his experience of observing pine trees in Honggu, Taihang Mountains: "..... into the big rock ..... all ancient pines. The only one around the big one, the skin old pale moss, Xiang scales multiply the air, coiled gnarled potential, want to attach the cloud Han ..... where tens of thousands of books, such as its true."

This account reveals the three levels of Jing Hao observation of the pine tree: first of all, it is surprised at the difference, followed by all over the appreciation, and finally "where tens of thousands of books, such as its true" - through repeated sketching to grasp the essence of the pine tree. This "tens of thousands of books" sketching process is the specific practice of Epistemology of Materialism. Only by exhausting the millions of forms of pine trees - the twisted shape of coiled roots, the stack of forests, and the loyalty of solitude - can we grasp their "reason" and "qi".

Northern Song landscape painting both realistic and realistic. Different varieties of pines present different moods: the Yellow Mountain Pine contains ancient simplicity and toughness; the oil pine

highlights the strong vitality; the horsetail pine injected into the dynamic and ethereal atmosphere. Li Cheng establishes the "crab claw" branching method to convey a melancholy mood, while Fan Kuan uses heavy ink colors and raindrop chapping to express the strong mountains and dense forests, creating a subdued and ancient effect.

Pine branches are interspersed in the picture in a cross, parallel and radial way, forming a subtle echo with the rocks. Sharp and dry axe chops in the expression of the hard texture of the rocks and stones at the same time, and the pine tree branches and trunks interspersed to form a strong visual impact, strengthening the rhythm of the picture. Soft and long Pima chapped and pine branches parallel or radial interspersed, complementing each other to create a harmonious and unified atmosphere. The technique of Guo Xi's pine trees is very unique. He used the cloud-like shape of the scrolling chapped with the boulders on the coiled growth of the pine tree, to achieve the visual effect of "stone as clouds moving. The interlocking and twisting branches of the pine tree and the rock form a dramatic tension, which echoes the meandering and peacefulness of the distant mountains. He presents both the evergreen pine in the foreground and the withered pine in the background, forming a contrast between wither and glory and presenting a complete life cycle pattern. This innovation elevated the pine tree from a mere spatial element to a symbol of time and life.

During the Southern Song period, this technique evolved into a simplified, symbolic style. Analyzing paintings passed down to Sun Junze, Ban Zonghua points out that Southern Song painters developed a more streamlined presentation based on the techniques inherited from the Northern Song [7]. The pine trees form a dialectical relationship with the clouds and water and the white space, contrasting reality and falsehood. Analyzing Ni Zan's paintings, Zhu Liangzhi describes, "We see this kind of realm in Ni Yunlin's paintings ..... This painting has fewer moist brushes and more dry brushes ..... introduces the remote realm of emptiness [8]." Ni Zan pushes the aesthetics of contrasting reality and emptiness of the Northern Song Dynasty to the extreme, constructing a "sense of penetrating emptiness" through the "reality" of dense pine needles against the "emptiness" of white clouds.

The use of color is an important means for the pine tree to participate in shaping the mood. In Wang Ximeng's "Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains" and other green landscapes, the warm green color of the pine tree echoes with the mountains, displaying royal aesthetics and grand vitality. In ink and wash landscapes, the inked pines are presented in contrasting shades of light and dark. Painters often use thick ink to outline the branches and trunks, and light ink to render the needles and leaves, creating a strong black and white dialog with the blankness of the water surface, reinforcing the simple and ethereal mood, and embodying the literati's comprehension of the nature's essence and the pursuit of spiritual freedom.

### **3. The theory and meaning: the humanization of landscape and the virtual body of the human generation of each other**

#### **3.1 The position of pine in the Northern Song representatives' theory of painting "four kinds" and "three distant"**

The spatial position of pine trees in Northern Song landscape paintings is a key link between natural scenes, the viewer's state of mind and physical perception.

Guo Xi puts forward the theory of the four seasons of landscape in *Linquan Gaozhi*, which is "Spring mountains are light and elegant like a smile, summer mountains are verdant like a drop, autumn mountains are clear and clean like makeup, and winter mountains are bleak and sleepy". This theory is not only a description of the natural landscape, but also a projection of human

emotions on nature. As one of the three friends of the year, the evergreen character of the pine tree has a special structural significance in the depiction of the four seasons.

Guo Xi's "Three Distant Methods"-high, deep, and flat-is the most important spatial theory in the history of Chinese landscape painting. It embodies the dynamic spatial concept of "Tourist View". The philosophical basis of this theory can be traced back to the aesthetic principle of "a thousand miles at hand" in Zong Bing's Preface to Painting Landscapes. In the Three Distances method, the pine tree plays a key role in guiding the viewer's perspective from the intimate to the profound and sublime.

When describing Li Cheng's paintings, James Elkins pointed out that the branches of the pine trees in the paintings are like gnarled dragons spanning the sky, guiding the viewer's gaze upward until the sky, thus completing the psychological transition from the affinity of the flat view to the sublime view of the upward view [9]. This composition transforms the verticality of physical space into the sublimity of spiritual experience.

The spatial relationship between mountain peaks and pine trees in Northern Song landscape paintings reflects the logic of sophisticated composition. In the paintings in the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art, the bottom of the mountain peaks stops at the top of the tallest pine tree, and the mountain and the pine tree are obviously conceived in an up-and-down position. However, in *Reading the Tablet*, the shape of the mountain peak extends to the right side of the pine tree, and the mountain and the pine tree are intertwined. This reflects different ideas of spatial construction: superposition emphasizes hierarchy, and interweaving emphasizes organic integration.

In works such as Li Tang's *Ten Thousand Gullies and Pine Winds*, the pine trees in the near view are like natural steps, inviting the viewer's gaze to climb upward; the pine trees in the middle view are rooted in the cliffs, with strong branches and trunks, echoing the vertical chapping of the rocks; and in the far view, the pine trees stand on top of the peaks, with only the tops showing. This layout guides the profound sublimation from affinity to sublime. The affinity of the pine in the near view conveys a sense of security, while the loneliness of the pine in the far view evokes a sense of reverence for the order of the universe and the great Tao of heaven and earth.

### 3.2 The pine tree and the body: a path from physical to spiritual transcendence in aestheticogenesis

The theory of form and spirit was deepened in the Northern Song Dynasty. Early theories emphasized the importance of resembling objects, and Northern Song painters put forward the higher requirements of "writing God" on this basis. Gu Kaizhi's "writing God in form" was mainly aimed at figure painting, but Northern Song painters expanded it to include landscapes, flowers and birds.

Zhang Shaokang, in his *Essays on the Aesthetics of Classical Literature and Art*, quotes Su Shi's poem "Ouyang Shaoshi Ordered the Fugue of the Screen Stored", which analyzes: "The cold winds laid down the true form, and the carving and painting began to believe that the sky has its own work [10]." Su Shi pointed out that the pine tree in the painting not only looks real, but also conveys the spirit of the lone pine - unyielding and lonely.

From the perspective of embodied aesthetics, the pine tree is a medium that activates the viewer's physical perception.

**Physical empathy:** In Li Tang's *Ten Thousand Gullies of Pines*, the upright trunk in the foreground serves as a visual bridge. The viewer will unconsciously straighten his or her back and adjust his or her breathing when gazing at it, imitating the posture of the pine tree. This physical imitation is the physiological basis of the aesthetic experience. The reproduction of chapped bark

(rough bark), such as axe-chopped bark, activates the tactile memory of the viewer's fingertips through visual flux, turning the body from passive spectator to active participant.

**Sensory extension:** When the anchor point of the body is established, the form of the pine tree further triggers the five senses. In Xu Daoning's *Cold Forest in Snowy Landscape*, the details of the pine branches bent but not broken by the snow not only present visual tension, but also trigger the viewer's auditory associations - the snowflakes rustling and the cold wind whimpering, prompting the body to subconsciously tighten its shoulders in order to protect itself from the imagined cold.

**Spiritual sublimation:** When the body is deeply involved in the shape and environment of the pine tree, the cultural significance carried by the pine tree pushes the perceptual activity to be sublimated into spiritual transcendence. The natural characteristics of the pine tree (evergreen and independent) correspond to the Confucian character of the gentleman. The viewer imitates the upright body movement of the pine tree, which is subconsciously transformed into moral consciousness. The unyielding nature of the pine is perceived as resilience at the physical level and understood as the unyielding nature of man at the spiritual level.

The timelessness of the pine tree, especially when contrasted with deciduous trees, triggers the body's awareness of time. When the viewer gazes at an ancient pine tree, such as the one in *Areolite Pingyuan*, he or she will deeply perceive the transience of his or her own life. This experience of the passage of time, triggered by physical perception, gives rise to the desire to transcend finite life and pursue immortality. This longing eventually completes the ultimate leap from physical perception to spiritual freedom.

#### 4. Conclusion

The pine tree is the core intermediary connecting the dialectical relationship of "pine tree - landscape - man". Through the pine tree, the humanization of nature and the naturalization of man can realize unity, and finally form the dialectical pattern of mutual generation of humanized landscape and the virtual body of man.

The so-called humanization of landscape, that is, the painter injects subjective emotions and personality ideals into the pine tree form, so that the landscape becomes an extension of human spirit due to the personalization of the pine tree. In this process, the pine tree becomes a figurative projection of the scholar's spirit.

Correspondingly, the viewer realizes the virtualization of man in the process of appreciation. This disembodiment is the temporary dissolution and transcendence of the social and utilitarian self (bureaucratic and patriarchal identity) in the aesthetic experience. Through the penetrating nature of the pine tree - penetrating the utilitarian distractions - the viewer enters the aesthetic state of forgetting oneself. At this point, one looks at the pine tree from a pragmatic perspective and perceives its spiritual symbolic meaning. The physicality of human being is temporarily virtualized into an abstract existence that is in harmony with the spirit of nature. Just as Zong Bing said in "Clarifying the mind and savoring the image", man can be free from the spirit in the view of the pine, dissolve the boundary of self, and become a part of the landscape.

This process is rooted in the deep philosophical foundation of Taoism. Lao Zi's idea of "to the extreme of emptiness, to keep the tranquility" and Zhuang Zi's idea of "white is born in the empty room" and "only the Taoist set of emptiness" provide the ontological basis for the physicalization of emptiness. The aesthetic subject's quiet mind is the prerequisite for the realization of the virtual body. The achievement of this state of mind relies on the unique viewing mechanism of landscape painting: first, the "clarification of mind and taste of image" advocated by Zong Bing; second, the shifting of the landscape provided by scattered perspective, which allows the viewer's mind to roam

freely in the picture, realizing the "mind wandering outside the world"; third, the white space in the picture (e.g., Ma Yuan's white space in the picture), which is the basis for the ontology of vaporous body. Third, the white space in the picture (such as Ma Yuan's corner and Xia Gui's half) constitutes an ethereal realm, a field where "only the Tao is set in the void".

To sum up, man and landscape realize the dialectical relationship of mutual generation in art. The pine tree is not only a humanized carrier for people to give meaning, but also an imaginary channel for people to dissolve themselves. The painter projects his spirit on the landscape through the pine tree, realizing the humanization of nature; the viewer dissolves his secular identity through the pine tree, realizing the naturalization of man. Both of them support each other in the cycle of creation and appreciation, and finally reach the aesthetic realm of the unity of heaven and man. Landscape is rich in spiritual temperature due to humanization, and human is integrated into the natural order due to virtualization, and the pine tree is the core pivot of this dialectical process.

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