

Landscape Paintings in the Age of Transformation

- A comparison between Caspar David Friedrich and Dai Xi

Back in the year 1814, an oil painting *the Chasseur in the Forest* (Fig.1) by Caspar David Friedrich was on display at one of the nationalist art shows in Germany to celebrate the expulsion of Napoleon Army (Droling Kindersley, 1999). While in the same century of Far East Asia, Dai Xi served as an officialdom for the Late Qing Emperor and active a Literati well-known for landscape paintings in his leisure time. The painting *Autumn Mountains after the Rain* (Fig.2) was finished in 1857, during the period when the Second Opium War struck the country and accelerated the fall of Qing dynasty.

Both as landscape painters and active in their ages of transformations, Friedrich and Dai Xi created artworks in close relation to art trends in their local districts as well as the changes in the political world. However, art traditions in Europe and China hardly had communications before the 20th century and they were belonging to two distinct systems, especially for landscape paintings, that held very high position in Chinese Literati Painting, but never became the mainstream in European Art (Droling Kindersley, 1999). In this essay, the two landscape painters and their artworks are compared from perspectives of characteristics of the two artists and their works, the changing art climates and the influence from the political transformations in their own countries.



Fig. 1, Caspar David Friedrich, *the Chasseur in the Forest*
ca. 1814, Oil on Canvas, Private collection

In the center of *the Chasseur in the Forest* (Fig.1), a lost traveler halts at the entrance of the woods in a cloudy day. Only his back faces the viewer and the dark silhouette forms a strong contrast with the snowy ground. The central figure stands out and attracts viewer's attention immediately. A black raven stops at the tree stump in the front, as if singing a death song. The whole atmosphere is mystic and transmits a sense of desperation. Typical of Friedrich's landscape paintings, the black silhouettes induce viewers to gaze at the nature as if they were the figure standing in the painting. The minute scale of the character, the rendering of death scene and the depiction of sublime nature are all particular conceits by Friedrich to convey the artist's message that human is insignificant in front of nature's power.

On the other hand, there is no heavy feelings in Dai Xi's *Autumn Mountains after the Rain* (Fig.2). Path into the mountain starts with an open entrance that allows viewers tracing it further with layers of trees and rocks into the



Fig.2, Dai Xi, *Autumn Mountain after Rain*, ca.1857,
Ink on Paper, Private Collection

background. A pavilion lays halfway up the hill, it is a turning point for the path in the mountains, as well as a chance for viewers' moving eyes to rest. Fogs separate the front hills and back mountains, and within the blank space viewers' imagination lead them to wander around and experience the nature. Scripts at the top left tells the story that Dai Xi was not able to visit the mountain because the rain had been lasting for a long time, nevertheless, the yearn for rambling in nature was so strong that he even smelled the clouds in his room and heard the spring in the dream, therefore he painted *Autumn Mountains after the Rain* in order to get rid of the unhappiness. The artist illustrated the remote wild scenery in a sentimental mood, yet painting the landscape gives him a care-free interim and nature is where he seeks for relief.

For Friedrich's paintings, it is not an exception to have such a solitary figure with the mystic surrounding as *the Chasseur in the Forest*. *The Monk at the Sea* (Fig.3), for example, also placed a minute silhouette of a figure with his back towards the viewers and revealed the sense of transcendence by rendering an unfathomable scene in the endless sky and sea in front of the shore. However, the infinities of nature and the unpredictability of man's fate perceived from Friedrich's painting are not meant to bring viewers into a deadly despair, but to endow the painting with the power of religion, that gives people hope and a spiritual experience (Koerner, 1990). Another example is *Easter Morning* (Fig.4), painted in 1828 and demonstrates a similarity in composition with *the Chasseur in the Forest* (Fig.1), where three central figures stand in the center of a path and look at its vanishing end in the distant mountains. Trees along the path are so tall that almost reach out to the heaven, embodied by the morning sun hanging in the upper sky that appears to give hope to the three people halting on the road.



Fig.3, Caspar David Friedrich, *the Monk by the Sea*
ca. 1808-10, Oil on Canvas, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin



Fig.4, Caspar David Friedrich, *Easter Morning*,
ca. 1828-35, Oil on Canvas, Museo Thyssen-
Bornemisza, Madrid

With the aim to evoke the Christianity belief, Friedrich's painting deals with the relationship between human, nature and God. Apart from the solitary figure which can be observed in the painting *the Chasseur in the Forest* (Fig.1), Gothic ruins, barren lands and dead trees were often used by Friedrich to isolate viewers from reality and convey the feelings of melancholy. Demonstrated by the three paintings discussed before, the idealized nature carries symbolic religious meanings, immerses the viewers to contemplate in its supremacy and bridges the gap between man's mind and God.

Different from Friedrich, Dai Xi didn't hide any religious messages for viewers to interpret, whereas landscape painting was the way for the Literati to build the noble

character recognizable in ancient Chinese philosophy and enhance the understanding of Dao, the rule of Nature. As he wrote in one of his books,

As Dong Po said, the lofty spirit has to be embodied in the ridge of the mountain, and the woods has to be slim and unbending, therefore the painting shall have its own character (Dai, Ti Hua Ou Lu, 1928).

“同東坡云清寒入山骨，草木盡堅瘦，要自具一種氣像。”

Dai Xi borrowed the opinion of Su Shi, the pioneer for Literati tradition in Northern Song who had influenced later generations for more than one thousand years. Dai Xi is one of his followers and has quoted lots of Dong Po's sayings in his book. Here the words prevail the idea that subjects in the painting are endowed with man's characters and the painting is an echo of painter's personality. Unlike Friedrich's landscape painting where the power of nature is overwhelming to transcend human, Dai Xi's painting represents his own character and seeks an integration of human and nature.

More than embodying characters of the painter, another characteristic of Literati painting that's hardly found in the European tradition is called "Qi Yun", resonance of spirit revealed from a painting, that originates from the art theory in "Six Principles of Chinese Painting" by Xie He. Dating back to the 5th century in Nan Chao, it has been seen as an essential criterion to evaluate a painting (Sirén, 1936). As Dai Xi wrote,

The use of brush and ink is more than the scenes depicted in the painting, while resonance of the spirit is greater than the practice of brush and ink. Therefore, the real painting exists beyond the appearance of scenes and the usage of brush and ink (Dai, Xi Ku Zhai Hua Xu, 1972).

“筆墨在境像之外，氣韻又在筆墨之外，然則境像筆墨之外當別有畫在。”

Whereas "Qi Yun" is spontaneous and mysterious, it is not obtained by skills or purposeful practice, but out of a sudden realization and inner impetus from the painter (Sirén, 1936). In the script of *Autumn Mountains after the Rain* (Fig.2), Dai Xi mentioned that he started the painting all of a sudden and finished almost instantaneously. As a result, the activity of painting is motivated by painter's inner emotion and the quality of painting relies more on mental status of the painter rather than his skills. In contrast to Friedrich's paintings that consider the participation of audience, convey symbolic meaning and create religious experience, Dai Xi takes painting process as the journey for self relief and cultivation, where the relationship between man and nature is drawn closer instead of estranged.

Despite the sharp distinction in the artistic characteristics between Friedrich and Dai Xi, it was in the surrounding intellectual groups and culture climate in Europe and China in the 19th century that they built the artistic visions, developed their own styles and became one of the representatives of their era.

Landscape painting appeared as a particular genre of Chinese painting in the 5th century and has been one of the most important subjects since the rise of Literati tradition in Northern Song (Sirén, 1936). On the contrary, landscape was never a main subject matter in western

art tradition and didn't exist as an independent genre until the 16th century, when Flemish painters started to paint nature on canvas and not to treat it as background of the historical or biblical themes (Droling Kindersley, 1999).

In the early landscape paintings in Europe, mythical scenes, country scenery, secular life were the common subjects, while the representation of nature didn't come to the focus until the 18th century. Before finding his passion in landscape paintings, Friedrich went to Copenhagen Academy to study drawings, watercolors and sketches in his youth time. There he was introduced to the poems by Klopstock, Northern Renaissance, English Literature, etc. that emerged him in the rich culture atmosphere in the embryonic stage of Romantics in Northern Europe. During his stay at the Dresden Academy, Friedrich was enlightened by landscape painters such as Adrian Zingg and Johann Philipp Veith, and he frequent visited the countryside near Dresden, where he studied rocks, plants and ruin sites in nature (Siegel, 1978). Later in his visit to Rügen island, Friedrich was influenced by the poet Kosegarten and he started to perceive nature as a means for man to communicate with God. He said "I must be one with my clouds and rocks, in order to succeed in being what I am. I need nature in order to communicate with nature" (Droling Kindersley, 1999). From Friedrich's experience in his early years, it can be seen that his time in the Academy introduced him to different groups of intellectuals and built the fundamental artistic skills and vision, his visit to the natural sites especially the island of Rügen helped him establish his own philosophy system to understand nature. All of these anticipated his further development in landscape paintings.

However, Dai Xi didn't develop his artistic sense in such a professional way as Friedrich. As Literati and officialdom, Dai Xi painted in his leisure time and never used it to make a living. His way of learning is based on imitations from the past masters, which is commonly accepted to as an orthodox approach to learn and improve painting by Literati groups. Dai Xi's imitation and comments on others' paintings shows that he has taken with references from painters from different dynasties such as Ju Ran, Mi Fei in Song Dynasty, Huang Gongwang in Yuan Dynasty, Ni Zan in Ming Dynasty and "The Four Wang" in early Qing Dynasty (Zhou, 2001). Especially he appreciates a lot Ni Zan's paintings as he wrote,

Yun Lin was the talented painter who got the essence from both the Northern and Southern schools, and abandoned their shortcomings. (Dai, Ti Hua Ou Lu, 1928)

“雲林寥寥數筆盡取南北宗之精華而遺其糟粕。”

Northern and Southern schools are the classification for landscape paintings put forward by Dong Qi Chang in Ming Dynasty that distinguishes painters such as Li Tang, Ma Yuan who are mostly professional painters in the court, from Literati painters such as Ju Ran, Mi Fei for whom impetus and philosophical thinking are more important than the meticulous depiction in a painting (Sirén, 1936). Though the theory from Dong Qi Chang was influential and the styles he mentioned were well-established at that time, Dai Xi didn't follow the dichotomy to limit his styles and constrained the source of learning within one or two groups of painters. Instead he was very insightful when looking at the past masters. He wrote,

The conceit to paint clouds and mountains didn't originate from Mi Fei's tradition and there are more than one forms for these subjects. It's the wrong attitude to imitate without thinking (Dai, Xi Ku Zhai Hua Xu, 1972).

“雲山不始於米氏亦北苑一種也，膠柱鼓瑟未足言畫。”

Also in one of his paintings he wrote in the scripts,

One should learn the thoughts from the ancient people, but should never follow them blindly (Dai, Xi Ku Zhai Hua Xu, 1972).

“同師古人固當師其意未可刻舟求劍也”

Dai Xi were inspired from various groups of the old masters, held critical views in terms of imitation and built his own style combining tradition with his contemporary thoughts.

With their own system of learning and thinking, Friedrich had two academic experience in Copenhagen and Dresden, developed his painting language under the influence of contemporary thoughts in Northern Europe, while Dai Xi learnt from painting masters in the history across more than one thousand years in China and formed his personal style with a strong emphasis on the tradition. The innovation of Friedrich's art was founded on his thoughts about nature and the visualization in his landscape paintings, whereas the breakthrough in Dai Xi's painting was not a result of any avant-garde concept or thought, but out of a comprehensive understanding of the tradition and critical inherit from the past masters.

With the principles of learning and fundamental visions in early years, the two landscape painters built more developed styles and stood out among their contemporaries under the changing culture climate of both Europe and China back to the 19th century, that in Germany Romantic Movement had influenced every cultural activity, and in the Late Qing society the trend of Kao Zheng had added new insights for various intellectual groups across China.

In the age of Romanticism, the subjective experience and inner emotions were the common taste among all genres of arts, Friedrich was one of the first landscape painters who was able to visualize the religious experience and embody the affective yet equivocal sentiments in his artworks. In this movement, antiquarianism as a means to revive German culture became a popular study among intellectuals. This trend also influenced Friedrich especially in his use of Gothic architecture and derelict scenes in his paintings, as can be seen from *Abbey Among Oak Trees* (Fig.5), the painting he produced around 1810 with a Gothic Church door. He was one of the illustrators among antiquarian participants who traced the local things back to Roman Empire Age and preserved the past via illustrations (Reusch, 1999). During Friedrich's visit to the island Rügen, he produced the sepia drawing *Eastern Coast of Rügen Island with Shepherd* (Fig.6) in which the depiction of the immense space seemed to anticipate his future development in applying the mystic atmosphere in landscape paintings such as *the Monk by the Sea* (Fig.3).

Under the trend of Kao Zheng movement in Qing Dynasty, Dai Xi was an ancient scripts researcher and a follower for scholars Han Yu and Ou Yangxiu in Classical Prose Movement in Tang and Song Dynasty. Dai Xi has interpreted Han Yu's work "Si Jian", studied and recompiled "Shang Shu", the ancient book to record events and literatures back to around 5th B.C (Mei, 2016). The rigorous research into ancient scripts had led to the unadorned and artless style



Fig.5, Caspar David Friedrich, *Abbey Among Oak Trees*,
ca. 1810, Oil on Canvas, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin



Fig.6, Caspar David Friedrich, *Eastern Coast of Rügen Island with Shepherd*,
ca. 1805-6, Sepia Drawings, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



Fig.8, Dai Xi, *Landscape of Jing Zhi Tai*, Ink on Paper, Private Collection

in Dai Xi's paintings, that is recognized as a high character among Literati groups in Qing Dynasty by whom clumsiness and plainness were greatly appreciated in artworks.

Meanwhile, more diverse groups of painters appeared from north to south in the country and the boundary of professional painters and Literati painters became ambivalent with the rise of art market (Wan, Bing Fei Shuai Luo De Bai Nian, 2005). Dai Xi had lived in different places and built relationships with various circles of painters. He was active in Beijing during his officialdom in Halin Academy in the court where the tradition of Literati painting was still the majority. Besides, he spent most of his life in Hangzhou, his hometown that had more leisure life and very different art atmosphere from the political center Beijing. In Hangzhou, Dai Xi was active around West Lake, built friendships with "Zhe" school poets who favored sentimental and graceful representation of nature. Moreover, during the two Opium Wars he was appointed as Vice Minister of the War and spent a few years in Guangdong. There he was influenced by the "Lingnan" school painters who were more realistic and concerning, cared masses suffered in the war (Mei, 2016). In dialogue with multiple art groups across the country, Dai Xi built a hybrid vision, therefore he was able to paint the plain yet inviting scenes like *Returning Birds in the Autumn Woods* (Fig.7), as well as complex landscape scrolls in a large scale such as *Landscape of Jing Zhi Tai* (Fig.8).

The changing culture climate, especially the pursuit of antiquity in their own countries had inspired Friedrich and Dai Xi to apply ancient subjects such as architecture in Europe, old literatures and stone carvings in China. Apart from that, both Germany and China were undergoing political unrest during the 19th century and the patriotic activities of the two artists presented very different attitudes towards painting activities and their civil life.

Since Napoleon's rise in 1802, most European countries suffered from his army's invasion including German. With strong anti-Napoleonic and patriotic feelings, Friedrich was among the intellectual circles of republican nationalists. The painting *the Chasseur in the Woods* (Fig.1) was one of patriotic paintings Friedrich used to express his political views. It is believed that the central character is a Napoleonic soldier and the death song by the raven anticipates the defeat of the French army (Droling Kindersley, 1999). Paintings with such political metaphor spoke for the artists and their political groups back in war time in Europe. Special shows were designed



Fig.7, Dai Xi, *Returning Birds in the Autumn Woods*, Ink on Paper, Private Collection

for patriotic artworks, thereafter the ideas behind them were spread out and had real impact on the political situation.

On the contrast, it is not possible that to use artworks as promotion tools for political views in China due to Speech Crime, the rule established for political control by the Imperial Family. In the circumstance of Opium Wars and Taiping Rebellion in Qing Dynasty, Dai Xi took the position as Vice Minister of the War and devoted himself to protecting the territory. As a nationalist and faithful follower of moral principles in Chinese tradition, Dai Xi committed suicide when the army of Taiping Rebellion occupied Hangzhou (Mei, 2016). He considered the commission from the court even higher than his life, whereas such patriotic sense was hardly revealed in his landscape paintings, but examined by his impulsive action. His loyalty to the court and the heroic death proved his high character that was seen as a remarkable feature embodied in his paintings. As he put in *Autumn Mountains after the Rain*, the brush and ink is where he can rest and seek for relief from worries in reality, perhaps he also uses the painting activity to forget the concerns for his country.

Both as landscape painters and active in the same century, Friedrich in Germany painted to evoke the divine power from nature and affect the audience with his inner emotions embodied in the painting, while Dai Xi in China painted for self-cultivation and sought for the untroubled moments. Friedrich learnt painting through Academies, developed insights from the surrounding culture groups and built a life long career as a painter. Dai Xi learnt from the past painting masters, built relationships from various groups of painters, developed a hybrid language of painting, and served for the Imperial Family as an officialdom besides his Literati identity. They both experienced the cultural and political transformations in their ages, where Romantic Movement took place, Napoleon rose to power in Europe, Kao Zheng became a trend among Chinese intellectuals and Opium Wars and Taiping Rebellion struck the ruling of the Emperor. Landscape painting continues to be a significant genre after the 19th century and has witnessed remarkable changes of art traditions both in the west and east. At this moment in our modern life, the two paintings in the 19th century lead us to have the dialogue with the past, enter the compound world of art, culture and politics under the brushes of Friedrich in Germany and Dai Xi in China.

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