

# Song Dynasty Landscape Painting

by Sophia

## WHAT'S COVERED

Song dynasty landscape paintings are known for basic traits such as shifting perspective. In this lesson, you will explore examples of Buddhist art and architecture from China. In doing so, you will learn about the influences on art from this time period. Specifically, this lesson covers:

1. Time Period and Location: Song Dynasty Landscape Painting
2. Neo-Confucianism
3. Landscape Painting
  - 3a. *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams*
  - 3b. *Fishing on a Mountain Stream*
  - 3c. *Walking on Path in Spring*

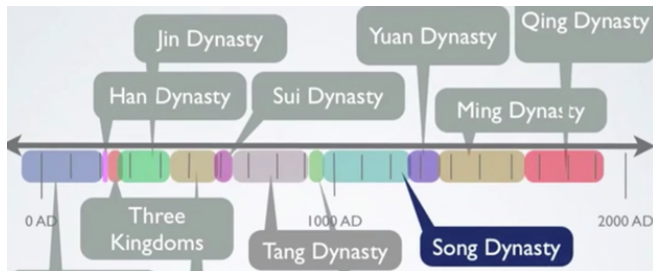
## ★ BIG IDEA

Neo-Confucianism was an important philosophical influence on northern Song landscape painting.

## 1. Time Period and Location: Song Dynasty Landscape Painting

China was ruled by a succession of dynasties throughout the Common Era. The Common Era was the period of time from 0 CE to the early 20th century. This lesson covers the Song dynasty, which was weak militarily but extremely progressive technologically, politically, and philosophically. During this time, the Chinese began using paper banknotes, recorded the formula for gunpowder and made many weapons that used it, and had a gross domestic product that was three times larger than Europe's. The artwork that we'll be looking at all comes from Song dynasty China.

The timeline below highlights many of the dynasties that ruled during the Common Era. Notice that the Song dynasty, covered in this lesson, is blue.



## 2. Neo-Confucianism

**Confucianism** dates back to the 6th and 5th centuries BCE. It is more of a philosophy or school of thought than a religion since it emphasizes social order and the importance of family and interpersonal relationships over belief in a spiritual or supernatural being. While Confucius was revered as an important spiritual leader, he was never worshipped as a god. During the Song dynasty (960–1279), scholar-officials became an influential social class in China. Song emperors held intellectuals in high esteem, and by taking an imperial examination, people could move up in social level and hold government positions. Writing poetry and painting scrolls were leisure activities for scholar-officials. They greatly influenced the arts and culture of Song dynasty China, particularly through their revival of Confucianism, known as **neo-Confucianism**, which emphasized self-cultivation as the way to an improved society. At this time, Buddhism had fallen out of favor as a religion, and scholar-officials promoted neo-Confucianism as an alternative.



Portrait of Confucius

Another pastime of scholar-officials involved taking long walks in nature as part of a meditative practice. They would then return to their homes and create scroll paintings that were not accurate depictions of specific locations, but rather evoked abstract concepts. For instance, the ideas of *li* and *ji* are fundamental aspects of neo-Confucianism. *Li* is viewed as an underlying reason and order to nature, or connection between nature and living beings, while *ji* is spirit, that is, life energy or life force. These concepts influenced the way that landscape painters created their images and depicted nature in their artwork. Artists of this time sought to represent the idea of nature rather than specific places.

#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### Confucianism

A belief system based on the teachings of Confucius that emphasizes love and respect for human beings, the value of learning, and the value of family, including ancestors.

##### Neo-Confucianism

A moral and ethical Chinese philosophy that revived Confucianism but added influences from Daoism and Buddhism and emphasized the importance of nature and a sense of spiritual connection with nature.

##### Li (Idea)

The underlying reason and order of nature, as seen in its living forms.

##### Ji (Spirit)

Life energy or life force.

## 3. Landscape Painting

The Chinese landscape painting of the Song dynasty is different than landscape paintings we see in, for example, 15th- or 16th-century Italy. Chinese landscape paintings do not depict specific places, but ideas of features within nature.

Below is an example of a painting that is not an image of a specific mountain scene, like a photograph; rather, this piece of work evokes the idea or sense of the concept of a mountain scene. It also makes use of **shifting perspective**. This means that instead of one-point perspective, which uses a single vanishing point, this painting involves a

series of different viewpoints that lead the eye through the composition. The foreground, middle ground, and background are all distinct. The artist creates a sense of depth and distance by making the mountains in the background appear to be enveloped in mist.



Chinese landscape painting

Shifting perspective is a way of visually moving the viewer through the painting in a number of directions. This is done by having no fixed vanishing point like there is in linear perspective. Rather, objects appear closer and farther away, detailed or less detailed, depending on the way the artist is intending to pull the viewer through the landscape. It's a different way of viewing a painting than what is typical in Western landscape paintings and arguably a more organic way of looking at the landscape.

The use of shifting perspective was better suited to the scrolls on which these Chinese landscapes are painted. The painting wasn't intended to be framed but rather to be viewed by opening the scroll a little at a time. This type of landscape painting is known as *shan shui*, or mountains and rivers. It involves using a brush to paint in black ink instead of a variety of colors. It involves a strict set of rules regarding the flow of paths and arrangement of elements in the composition. For this reason, it is often connected to the idea of **feng shui** in landscape design.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Shifting Perspective**

A characteristic of traditional Chinese paintings as a way to break time and space.

##### **Feng Shui**

A Chinese practice in which elements of space are arranged in a way that maximizes the flow of energy.

### **3a. *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams***

The scroll below is about 7 feet tall when fully extended. It was meant to be displayed by hanging it for short periods of time. Its size meant that the mountains are taller than a typical viewer, giving some sense of how this landscape might dwarf the viewer if it were real. The artist, Fan Kuan, spent a lot of time in nature learning about changes in

atmosphere and how they affect the appearance of the landscape.



Fan Kuan

*Travelers Among Mountains and Streams*

1000–1020 CE

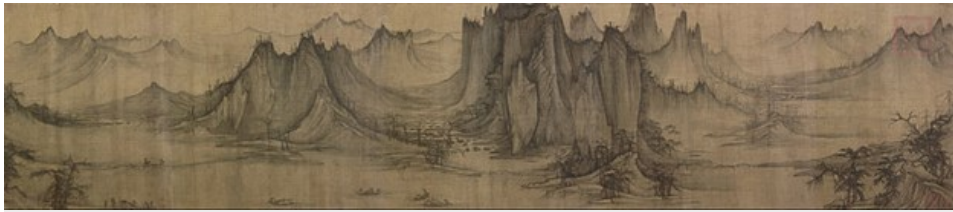
Ink on silk

Even though the title references the travelers, nature is obviously the subject of this painting, dominating the scroll and relegating the travelers to tiny figures that are almost hidden within the painting. Again, there isn't a single vanishing point in this example but rather a use of shifting perspective to visually move you across the width of the landscape.

### **3b. *Fishing on a Mountain Stream***

The image below gives you a better idea of the use of shifting perspective.





Xu Daoning  
*Fishing on a Mountain Stream*  
 1049 CE  
 Ink on silk

Unlike the previous scroll, this scroll is horizontal. It is a handscroll and was meant to be viewed by opening it in different sections. The artist, Xu Daoning, was known for his skill in using washes, or thin layers of watery ink, to create visual effects. The mountains create dramatic curving swoops in the distance, with the fishermen in a series of tiny boats in the foreground.

The Song dynasty was divided into two periods: The Northern Song (960–1127) and the Southern Song (1127–1279), depending on the location of the capital. Artists and scholar-officials during the Northern Song were interested in large, sweeping changes in society, and their choice of subject matter reflects this. The Southern Song intellectuals were more interested in smaller, focused change.

### 3c. *Walking on Path in Spring*



Ma Yuan  
*Walking on Path in Spring*  
 1190–1279

This painting by Ma Yuan is an excellent example of the Southern Song style. Notice how the scale is much more intimate. Instead of mountains that dwarf human figures, we can see the two people in this scene quite easily. The scholar-official is gazing out at nature, which fades away into the distance, while a child carries a musical instrument, a zither. Most of the composition occurs in one corner of the image, making it a good example of asymmetry. The open space balances the weeping willow tree and people in the lower left corner. The poem in the upper right corner also creates balance. It reads: “The wild flowers dance when brushed by my sleeves. Reclusive birds make no sound as they shun the presence of people.” It was written by the emperor of China at the time and describes this scene almost perfectly.



#### SUMMARY

Landscape paintings in the Song dynasty were interesting in their depiction of nature. In this lesson, you learned about the **time period and location of Song dynasty landscape paintings**. It is important to understand that **neo-Confucianism** played a role in artwork and architecture during this dynasty. Artists of this time sought to represent the idea of nature rather than specific places.

Chinese **landscape paintings** do not depict specific places, but ideas of features within nature. In this lesson, you explored these examples of Chinese landscape painting:

- *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams*

- *Fishing on a Mountain Stream*
- *Walking on Path in Spring*



## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Confucianism**

A belief system based on the teachings of Confucius that emphasizes love and respect for human beings, the value of learning, and the value of family, including ancestors.

### **Feng Shui**

A Chinese practice in which elements of space are arranged in a way that maximizes the flow of energy.

### **Ji (Spirit)**

Life energy or life force.

### **Li (Idea)**

The underlying reason and order of nature, as seen in its living forms.

### **Neo-Confucianism**

A moral and ethical Chinese philosophy that revived Confucianism but added influences from Daoism and Buddhism and emphasized the importance of nature and a sense of spiritual connection with nature.

### **Shifting Perspective**

A characteristic of traditional Chinese paintings as a way to break time and space.