

# A Thousand Miles of Streams and Mountains

## Daoist Self-Cultivation in a Song Landscape Painting<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*A Thousand Miles of Streams and Mountains* (*Qianli jiangshan tu* 千里江山圖) is the name of a famous 12-meter-long landscape painting of the Northern Song dynasty. It was painted in 1113 by a 17-year-old prodigy, Wang Ximeng 王希孟, under Emperor Huizong's 徽宗 (r. 1101-1125) supervision, an accomplished painter and a Daoist initiate himself. In this paper I argue that the handscroll depicts a story of Daoist self-cultivation, from lay-life, initiation, receiving training, to eventually attaining Dao (becoming immortal) and the afterlife as an immortal. This story is depicted in both the iconographic details of the figures, buildings, paths, bridges and other elements, guiding the viewer through the landscape, and the composition of the handscroll, mirroring the development of the story by means of the particular placement and the form of the landscape. Because of his close involvement, the landscape painting offers a unique and amazing insight into Huizong's personal views on what constitutes a Daoist and Daoist self-cultivation, if not his ideas on Daoist landscape painting in the Song dynasty.

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## A Handscroll Painting Like a Movie

*A Thousand Miles of Streams and Mountains* is an extremely long handscroll painting in the sumptuous blue-and-green landscape style, measuring 1191.5 cm in length and 51 cm in height (Fig. 1).

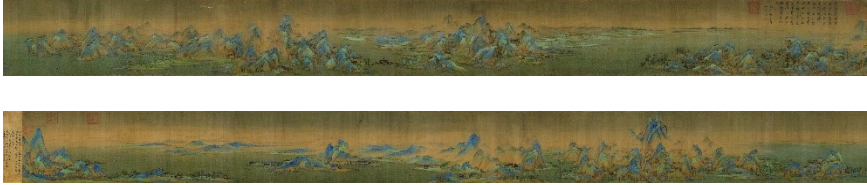


Fig. 1. Wang Ximeng 王希孟, *A Thousand Miles of Streams and Rivers* 千里江山圖, ink and color on silk, 51 x 1191.5 cm, dated 1113, Beijing Palace Museum.

Kept in the collection of the Palace Museum in Beijing, it has been well-known but hardly studied until recently. Its exhibition at the Palace Museum in 2017, as well as subsequent symposia and the publication of a series of articles in academic journals and on WeChat, has brought the painting to the attention of both the scholarly world and the general public.<sup>2</sup> Despite all the publications and media attention, its exposure in the West has thus far been negligible, where in the past ten years only few studies on landscape painting have appeared.

Because of the exhibition, research on the scroll in China has been extensive in the past few years. The Chinese studies offer detailed investigations of its blue-and-green painting style, its date of 1113, its painter Wang Ximeng (1096-1119), its colophon by the Northern Song chancellor Cai Jing 蔡京 (1047-1126), its seals and collecting history, and its material

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<sup>2</sup> The first symposium in October 2017 was organized by the Palace Museum, in which I participated, and the second in May 2018 was held at Peking University. Over two dozen articles and WeChat publications have appeared in the period shortly before and after these symposia. For reasons of space, I will not list these and instead refer the reader to Yu Hui's (2020) study, which serves as a synopsis of the most important views and evidences concerning the Wang Ximeng scroll. No studies have appeared in the West, to my knowledge. It is shortly discussed in Barnhart (2002, 124-5) as an example of the green-and-blue painting style.

aspects such as the silk and the color pigments used. They provide a fairly reliable insight into the painting's production and historical background. Much of this research pertains to questions of authenticity and does not address the subject-matter of the painting itself, what it represents and why it was painted. Rather, it focuses on whether it was painted from life (*xieshi* 寫實) and if it depicts a specific topographical scenery or not (Yu Hui 2020, ch. 7).

Landscape paintings, both in East and West, are not usually considered in terms of meaning, symbolism, or iconography, let alone as a narrative sequence. This is however exactly what I argue here: Wang Ximeng's work depicts a story of Daoist self-cultivation, from lay life through initiation and training to attaining Dao and engaging in life thereafter. This story, I argue, is reflected in both the layout and shape of the landscape as well as in its details of figures and buildings.

An important key to understanding this story of Daoist self-cultivation is offered by reconstructing the method how a Chinese person in the Song dynasty would view a handscroll painting. Whereas people today would usually view a handscroll painting in a museum display case or as a photograph in a book, often in sections, the traditional method was to unroll the handscroll from right to left, the same as the traditional Chinese way of reading a scroll of text. A handscroll was stored rolled up in a bundle, and in order to view it, it was slowly unrolled in stages, scene by scene, by the left hand and rolled up by the right. The surface on which such a large and heavy scroll was watched probably was a desk, thus sliding the scroll over the desk when unrolling and rolling up at the same time. This was probably also how it was painted, assuming there was no twelve-meter-long desk.

The result is a moving, linear sequence from right to left, akin to viewing a movie today. A good painter, then, similar to a good director, would start with a concept or idea, in classical Chinese texts called *huayi* 畫意, the "idea of the painting,"<sup>3</sup> that serves as a central theme binding

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<sup>3</sup> For Guo Ruoxu's 郭若虛 (ca. 1080) and Han Zhuo's 韓拙 (fl. 1095-1125) theories on *yi* as a preconceived plan on painting, see Bush and Shih 1985, 97, 182-3. For a modern reinterpretation of the importance of *yi* for the study of Chinese painting, see Shih 2010. The present study has greatly benefited from my studies with Prof.

the composition and its scenes together, again similar to a movie. The viewing and designing process, that is, are complementary. Retracing the viewing process helps to understand the designing process.

In the case of *A Thousand Miles of Streams and Rivers*, the main tools at the disposal of the painter to create a compelling landscape design, guiding the viewer from beginning to end, are landscape structure and pictorial elements. Investigating these two aspects in the viewing process illuminates how Wang Ximeng designed his painting and composed his narrative of Daoist cultivation. To mimic the viewing process of unrolling the handscroll, I recommend the use of a high-resolution, digital or online image of the handscroll.<sup>4</sup> The images provided in this article are for illustration purposes only.

## Landscape Structure



Fig. 2. Structural diagram of Wang Ximeng's landscape painting.

The structure of the painting contains several important characteristics (Fig. 2). First of all, it has three levels—foreground, middle ground, and background—laid out from front to back, that create the depth and “perspective” (in the Western sense) of the painting. They are fully integrated in the viewing process. The three levels are a standard spatial and structural device in Chinese painting, when painters were used to stack the mountains in horizontal layers behind each other and which were divid-

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Shih Shou-chien at the National Taiwan University during my time as his post-doc researcher, 2008-2010.

<sup>4</sup> The Beijing Palace Museum website offers an open access image: <https://en.dpm.org.cn/dyx.html?path=/tilegenerator/dest/files/image/8831/2009/2121/img0065.xml>. Another Chinese website has the same image but requires a WeChat login: <http://g2.lfbc.net/view/SUHA/608a61a4aa7c385c8d9435d4>. Various high-resolution images (TIFF, ca. 1.4 GB) of the painting can be found on the internet by including the search terms “千里江山圖, TIFF, 下載.”

ed only by water or misty bands encircling the foot of the mountain, but without a ground plane connecting the three levels (Fong 1971).

In Wang Ximeng's work, the three levels are clearly divided and occupy their own specific landscape spaces. Foreground: two foreground mountains occupy the very beginning and very end of the scroll. Middle ground: a series of five mountains (1-5), each separated by water (A-X-Y-Z-B) and each having its own high, central peak, occupy the middle ground as well as the full middle section of the handscroll. Background: a wide, flat plane spans almost the entire background of the scroll from right to left. The result is a convincing illusion of space suggesting in a height of only half a meter of painting surface a depth of hundreds of miles of landscape scenery. In addition, the specific placement of the mountain scenes on the three levels facilitates the viewing process from right to left: the foreground mountain in the beginning is the starting point, the five mountains in the middle ground form the tableau for the narrative scenes that oscillate back and forth between foreground and background but basically remain in the middle, and the whole sequence ends again with the foreground mountain at the end of the scroll.

Another characteristic are the diagonal lines (A-B) of the opening and ending waterways. Together they create a triangular shape, framing the five middle-ground mountains and placing them center-stage. Perhaps more importantly, the diagonal lines greatly enhance the sense of depth and perspective of the landscape scenery. Because of the contrast between the foreground mountains and the distant background plane at the opening and ending of the handscroll, the distance between the foreground scenes and the diagonally receding background seems even greater. A structural device possibly first used in the Wang Ximeng scroll and copied in many later Southern Song, Jin, and Yuan landscape paintings, it pre-figured the characteristic "one-corner" style.

Curiously, the center of the imagined triangle is not at the center of the handscroll (X), as one perhaps might expect. The first three mountains (1-3) move each gradually closer to the bottom border of the handscroll, and to the viewer, while the last two mountains (4-5) gradually fade back from the bottom border. The visual center of the triangular shape is therefore not at the center but between the third and fourth mountain (Y) at about two-thirds of the handscroll. In the viewing process, the structural device of the middle ground mountains moving clos-

er to the foreground (actually becoming also foreground mountains) creates an increasing tension between painting and viewer, drawing the viewer closer and virtually into to the landscape scenery.

A third important characteristic of the Wang Ximeng scroll is its symmetry and patterned structure. The two foreground mountains in the beginning and end, the two contrasting diagonal lines (A-B), and the middle ground mountains all form part of the painting's symmetry. A closer look at the location of the mountain peaks (1-5) and the location of the waterways between them (X-Y-Z), reveals that the painting symmetrically consists of two halves mirrored around line X. Even though the right half has only two mountains (1-2) and the left half has three mountains (3-5), the position of the two vertical waterways (Y-Z), as well as the width of the total landmass they occupy in the design are astonishingly even, thus counterbalancing the unevenness in the number of mountains.

A repetition of specific landscape forms offsets the symmetry. The first three mountains (1-3) have each a gradually higher central peak, while the last two mountains (4-5) again gradually diminish in height. All five mountains have a building nested on the right side at the foot of the central peak. Its locations fcontmove from front to back (1-3) and to the front again (4-5), mirroring the changing heights of the central peaks. The structural relationship between central peak and building is a standard format often employed in Northern Song landscape painting compositions, especially in hanging scroll formats. Its adoption in the Wang Ximeng scroll suggests that the long horizontal format of the handscroll was in its most basic form conceived as a series of hanging scroll paintings of central peaks placed after another.

Another conspicuous pattern and entirely symmetrical is the positioning of the waterways from diagonal (A) to small vertical (Y), to big vertical (X) and again to small vertical (Z) and diagonal (B). The waterways demarcate the middle ground mountain landscape, creating five central peaks lodged on five islands or headlands. Their evenly spaced placement, moreover, creates a rhythm and constancy in the viewing process by alternating the busy and tumultuous landscape scenery with open water vistas that, while unrolling the handscroll, provide moments of rest.

A fourth and highly remarkable characteristic of the handscroll is its large, flat background plane. Landscape painting in the Northern Song up to that point would depict a foreground scene and a central peak in one or more layers in the middle ground that usually masquerade the background, while sometimes leaving a small vista open. Regardless the composition, the background is not an active part of the scenery. With the exception of some distant, hazy mountain ranges, no figures, buildings, or roads are depicted behind the central peak. The background in these compositions denotes perspective and remote distance.

The Wang Ximeng scroll forms does not follow this rule. I am not aware of any later examples, either. The background plane, as already indicated, extends from the far right to the far left of the handscrolls (parallel to diagonal lines A and B), spanning almost the entire scroll. It has hazy mountains and misty hills in the far distance but, when one looks closely, also tiny homes, roads, figures, and even a pagoda (near the center of the scroll, X). Because of these active scenes, suggesting people and life, the background plane becomes an integral part of the scroll and viewing process. However, the background plane and its scenes, almost for the entire viewing process, are obstructed by the central peaks and mountain ranges in the middle ground. There are no visible roads to connect this with the background, except for one single place.

A fifth and final characteristic of the handscroll is its climax. A climax is usually not associated with landscape painting, but with novels, theatre, and movies. Yet, considering that the landscape design of the handscroll is intricately linked to the viewing process, with one scene following another from right to left—rather than being viewed completely rolled out, as in museum displays or books—the sequence of images works like a narrative and builds up to a climax.

Where is this climax located in the handscroll and, moreover, what does a "pictorial climax" look like? Our above discussion has already revealed a certain pattern in the shapes and locations of the mountains. The central peaks increase (1-3) and then decrease in height (4-5). Similarly, we have seen that the riverbank at the feet of the mountains move gradually closer to the foreground, touch the bottom of the handscroll and then move back again to the middle ground, also at the same location between the third and fourth central peak. It also coincides with waterway Y in our diagram, and this spot should indicate our climax point.

If we take the other compositional characteristics into consideration, we discover that exactly at this point, and only at this point, the viewer is able to reach the background plane, connecting foreground, middle ground and background through one ground plane, which is possibly the earliest example in of this technical feat (Fig. 3).<sup>5</sup>

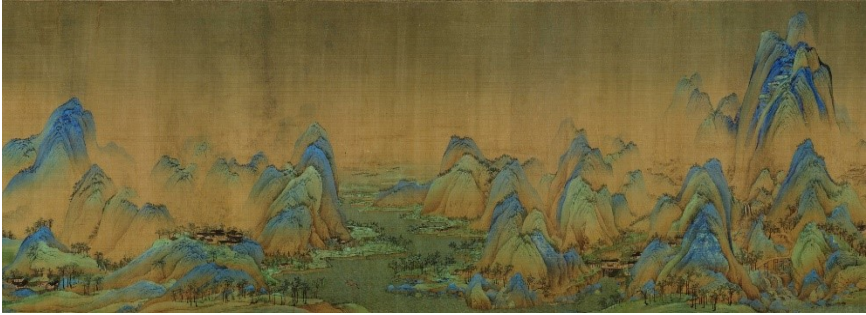


Fig. 3. The climax point in the handscroll with the continuous ground plane connecting foreground, middle ground, and background.

Seen from the viewing process, which travels horizontally, this is the only place in the handscroll where the horizontal and vertical planes connect! Its shape is also very peculiar and resembles a gate or portal. Two steep cliffs face each other on opposite sides of the river (Y). It is as if the entire composition converges to this point and the two mountain ranges (like two dragons?) come together at this gate-shaped formation.

Research on Heavenly Court paintings (*chaoyuan tu* 朝元圖) and Daoist ritual suggests that this particular rock formation signaling the climax of the composition is the Gate of Heaven, in Daoist ritual texts called *tianmen* 天門 or *que* 闕 (Gesterkamp 2011, ch. 3; 2013).

Going back to ideas of sacred geography of pre-Han times, the Gate of Heaven is traditionally located in the northwest (or sometimes, west) and associated with Mt. Kunlun; it forms the *axis mundi* which connects earth to heaven. The Gate of Heaven is the entrance to the Heavenly Court, which is imagined to be located above Mt. Kunlun (Gesterkamp 2017; 2021a).

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<sup>5</sup> This accomplishment has usually been placed in the Yuan period, the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Fong 1971).



This concept of the Gate of Heaven and a visualized ritual journey has been the central focus of Daoist ritual since its beginnings in the second century, and consequently has also been integrated into the layout of the Daoist altar (Fig. 4). Usually, a gate in the northwest on the second tier of the three-tiered altar indicates this Gate of Heaven. It forms a pair

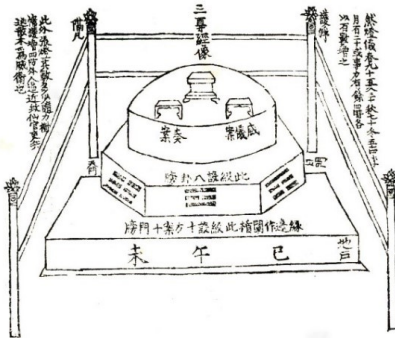


Fig. 4. Daoist altar, 11<sup>th</sup> century. The Chinese characters for the Gate of Heaven 天門 and Earth's Door 地戶 are written in the northwestern and southeastern corners. *Daomen dingzhi* 道門定制 (DZ 1124), 8.30a-b.

with the Earth's Door (*dihu* 地戶), located in the in the southeast; together they create a NW-SE axis. During the ritual, the priest enters the altar on the first tier (ground floor) in the south via the Royal Gate (*dumen* 都門). He then moves to the southwest corner to enter the second tier through the Earth's Door and circles to the northwest where he enters the third tier through the Gate of Heaven and reaches the summit. The climax of the ritual journey is the presentation of the petition (*shangzhang* 上章, *jinbiao* 進表) in the northwestern direction of the Gate of Heaven. After this, the priest exits the altar, going back via the same route (Gesterkamp 2011, 154-5).

This same altar layout and cosmological directions is incorporated in the wall paintings of the Yongle gong 永樂宮 (Palace of Eternal Joy) and other similar wall paintings. In the Yongle gong murals, the Great Emperor of August Heaven symbolizes the Gate of Heaven. He is depicted on the northwestern wall in a dark black-blue robe, the symbolic color of the north and heaven, seated on a throne and receiving in front of him a bowing Daoist priest, visualizing in the wall paintings the presentation of the petition taking place during the actual ritual performance in the temple hall (Fig. 5a-b).

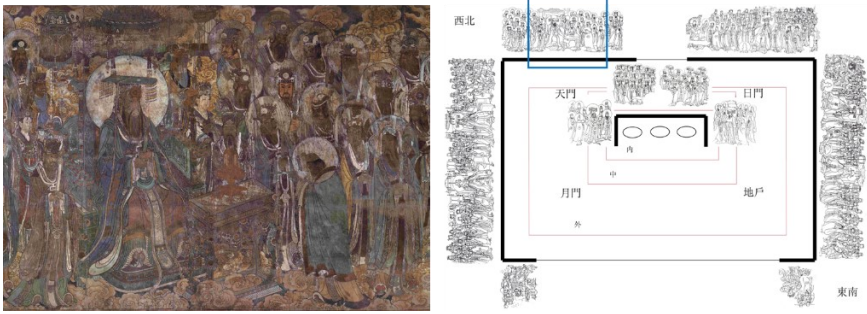


Fig. 5a-b. Detail of the Great Emperor of August Heaven and its location on the northwestern wall symbolizing the Gate of Heaven in the Heavenly Court paintings of the Yongle gong, Ruicheng, Shanxi, 1325.

The same kind of cosmological directions and idea of ritual journey pertains to the Wang Ximeng scroll. Apparently, the wall paintings were viewed in a three-dimensional sense and not simply as a two-dimensional pictorial canvas. The deity figures, in their positions and locations in the wall painting, corresponded to the directions of the compass and their cosmological symbolism. In the same way, directions in the Wang Ximeng scroll represent a three-dimensional landscape. Since the Gate of Heaven lies in the northwest, in the space between north and west, it should lie at approximately two-thirds or three-quarters from the right in the handscroll. Alternatively, one may imagine a line from the southeast to the northwest corner, and the Gate of Heaven should be located somewhere halfway on the northwestern part (Fig. 6). As can be seen, the Gate of Heaven in the handscroll (Fig. 4 above) corresponds perfectly to this cosmological scheme.

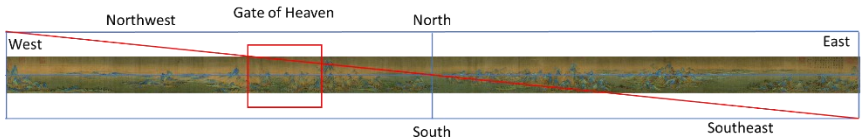


Fig. 6. Diagram with the visualization of the compass directions and the location of the Gate of Heaven in the Wang Ximeng scroll.

The compositional and viewing sequence of the handscroll follows the same ritual progression as the ritual executed on the Daoist altar. It

begins in the southeast corner, reaches its climax at the Gate of Heaven (Y), and then returns to the southwest corner in the foreground. Perhaps this means that the viewing process is considered a type of ritual journey?

One may object to this theory that the overlap between the gate-like rock formation and the compass directions is a simple coincidence. However, two contemporaneous Song landscape paintings with, interestingly, almost identical compositions of five mountains in a long handscroll connected by a winding path suggest that the Wang Ximeng follows a standard model (or perhaps better, schemata) commonly applied, and understood as such, in the Song period.



Fig. 7a-b. The Gate of Heaven (a) in the anonymous *Streams and Mountains without End* 江山無盡圖, ink and slight color on silk, 35.1 x 213 cm, ca. 1100, Cleveland Museum of Art.

The first is *Streams and Mountains without End* (*Xishan wujin tu* 溪山無盡圖), now in the Cleveland Museum of Art. By an anonymous painter, it is dated to around 1100, that is, close to the Wang Ximeng scroll (Lee and Fong 1967; Ho 1980: 35-36; Chou and Chung 2015, 34-43) (Fig. 7b).<sup>6</sup>

Although not obvious at first sight, Susan Bush has demonstrated that the landscape actually contains five separate mountains, each one differentiated from the other by style and form (1987). A gate-like rock formation is visible between the third and fourth mountain (Fig. 7a), drawing the viewer into the background distance. When viewed as a

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<sup>6</sup> For an online, scrollable version of the Cleveland *Streams and Mountains without End* see <http://g2.litfc.net/view/SUHA/608a6c0ae11ca96100860171> (WeChat login).

representation of three-dimensional space, it is located at about two-thirds from the right and in a northwestern direction.

The second is Zhao Fei's 趙芾 (12<sup>th</sup> c.) *Ten Thousand Miles of Streams and Mountains* (*Jiangshan wanly tu* 江山萬里圖), presently in the Beijing Palace Museum collection (Li 2011) (Fig. 8b).<sup>7</sup> It, too, has five mountains but they are envisioned as five separate islands floating in a vast ocean. The 10-meter-long handscroll is close in length to the Wang Ximeng scroll. However, it is less opulent, using only black ink and not green-and-blue mineral pigments, and it is painted on paper, not silk. A gate-like structure rises in the background at about three-quarters of the scroll in a northwestern direction (Fig. 8a). Here it is however located between the fourth and fifth mountain-isle.



Fig. 8a-b. The Gate of Heaven (a) in Zhao Fei's 趙芾 (12<sup>th</sup> cent.), *Ten Thousand Miles of Streams and Mountains* 江山萬里圖, 45.1 x 992.5 cm, ink on paper, Beijing Palace Museum.

The overlap in structure and sacred geography suggests a relationship between the three landscape handscrolls. It seems that the painters were aware of the other works and used them as their model. Zhao Fei's landscape may well follow the Wang Ximeng scroll; the relationship with the Cleveland scroll is harder to pinpoint, but it was portably also created by painters who worked in Huizong's academy. A landscape design with five mountains and a Gate of Heaven appears to have been a particular prevalent theme in the mid-Song dynasty, first at Huizong's court and possibly at the Southern Song court as well. It was, therefore, deliberately made with a particular design and idea (*yi* 意) in mind rather than the result of a random act or happy coincidence.

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<sup>7</sup> For an online, scrollable version of Zhao Fei's painting, see <http://g2.ltfc.net/view/SUHA/608a6c0ae11ca961008601b4> (WeChat login).

Many of the structural characteristics of the Wang Ximeng scroll can also be observed in its pictorial details, similarly suggesting that they were part of one integrated design.

## Pictorial Elements

Whereas the structure of the landscape provides the framework and general division of empty and full space in the Wang Ximeng scroll, pictorial elements provide the details filling out the framework and enlivening the pictorial space. Both guide the viewer through the painting.

Distributed among the peaks, valleys, lakes, and riverbanks is a wealth of elements, that infuse the landscape with the bustle of everyday life on and next to the water and in the mountains, and guide the viewer from one small detail to the other as he or she unrolls the scrolls from right to left. In this ostensible jumble of houses, figures, bridges, waterfalls, roads, trees, and rocks there is rhyme and reason, I argue. The mountain shapes and the overall structure of the landscape, their placement and particular variety and choices are deliberate, point the viewer with each step and each new scene into the direction of the narrative, that is, the story expressed in the handscroll.

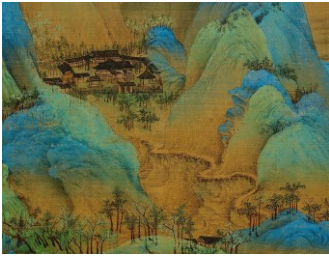
Within the vast number of pictorial elements, we can distinguish four main types: paths, figures, buildings, and natural elements. I will not illustrate every detail with images, as we will encounter these four types of elements in the discussion on the self-cultivation story in the next section below. For the best viewing experience however, the viewer is advised to use a scrollable high-resolution image of the handscroll.

**1) Paths.** The landscape contains basically only two sorts of paths, one in a horizontal direction, following the direction of unrolling the handscroll, and the other in a vertical direction, splitting from the main horizontal path and leading up into the mountains.



Fig. 9. Detail of a horizontal path following the riverbank.

The horizontal path serves to connect all the pictorial elements in the handscroll, and generally follows the riverbank at the foot of the mountains (Fig. 9). The vertical paths are viewed in a static position and thus indicate an important scene in the viewing process, causing the viewer to pause the unrolling for that moment. Almost all paths lead to a building



or structure, indicating a place of importance to the narrative (Fig. 10, on left). Most curiously, there are also a few paths leading deep into the mountains, essentially to nowhere. These observations suggest that elements not positioned on a path are of lesser importance in the design and only play a supportive role in the narrative.

**2) Figures.** The Wang Ximeng scroll is crowded with figures. They travel the roads, dwell in buildings, and man the fishing and other boats. They are so tiny that hardly any distinction in gender, wardrobe, or social status can be made. The majority of figures seem to be male. In some cases, a figure appears with a servant-boy carrying a lute, a trope in Chinese landscape painting (Fig. 11, on right). Their colors are limited to light blue, purple or pink (previously red?), yellow, light green and white. In the overall green-blue and brown colored mountains and blue waters, they are tiny specks of bright colors, and thus noticeable.



The figures are engaged in various activities: fishing, talking, walking, or looking at distant waters or mountains. Figures also appear in small groups interacting with each other. Those stand out from other figures, suggesting an important development in the narrative. Because a figure in yellow is usually part of the main interaction, occupies the center of attention, and appears from the beginning to the end of the scroll, this yellow figure may well be the protagonist of the narrative.

The figures, in their tiny, colorful garb, guide the viewer through the scroll. The viewer can randomly observe them and their hustle and

bustle in all possible places, imaginatively participating in their actions. However, the presence of a continuous horizontal path will necessarily give prevalence to figures proceeding on this path. When a leading figure in yellow emerges, because of its repetition, the viewer can readily identify with him in his journey through the scroll.

**3) Buildings.** An immense number of buildings can be seen in the Wang Ximeng scroll. Buildings come in all shapes and sizes, from little shags to grand, storied palace halls. Clustered together they become small fishing hamlets, villages, or an entire palace city shrouded in the mountain mists (Fig. 12).



Fig. 12. Detail of storied palace buildings.



Fig. 13. Detail of a tiered altar.

It is possible to distinguish eleven structures in the handscroll, including house, villa, monastery, palace, altar (Fig. 13), hut, pavilion, watermill, pagoda, bridge, and boat. This rich variety offers a great opportunity for the study of Northern Song architecture (Fu 1979).

**4) Natural Elements.** Besides mountains and water, the landscape contains different natural elements, including rocks, trees, grottoes, and waterfalls of different sizes (Fig. 14, on left). Most only play a figurative role, constituting the background against which the story evolves, but some elements, such as waterfalls and grottoes, take a more prominent place in the narrative.



The pictorial elements mirror the structure of the landscape in many aspects, similarly using repetition to create patterns, and changes in forms and shapes to indicate a climax. In the landscape structure, the first three mountain peaks signal the rise toward a climax, indicated by the gate-like rock formation between the third and fourth peak, which provides access to the background plane. At the same

time, it also connects the three levels of foreground, middle ground, and background. From the fourth peak on, the landscape structure begins to decline.

The accompanying pictorial elements show a similar pattern of rise and decline. Most conspicuous are the houses nested at the right foot of the central peak. The first peak has a mountain villa; the second, a monastery; the third, a palace city; the fourth, another mountain villa; and the fifth, a small lodge near the water. Their location also mirrors the height of these peaks, moving from the front of the mountain deep into the mountains and back to the front of the central peak again.

The waterfalls play a similar role, flowing from the central peak to the foreground, as do the mountain paths that lead to nowhere, disappearing into the background mists of the peaks. Neither waterfalls nor mountain paths to nowhere are present at the fourth and fifth peaks, which means after the climax. A similar case could be made for the bridges, which appear in various shapes from the first to the third mountain, even crossing the river between the first and second mountain peak (Fig. 15). No bridges appear in the fourth and fifth mountains.



Fig. 15. Detail of a bridge crossing the river between the first and second peaks.

The paths and figures are used to connect the buildings and natural elements. The horizontal path and its figures connect the foreground mountains and the five mountains on the middle ground as well as all the main pictorial elements on them. On each central peak, a mountain path separates from the main trail and leads up to a building where again figures are seen interacting. Alternatively, various actions are suggested by the presence of buildings, e. g., an altar, and certain natural elements, such as a grotto.



At the Gate of Heaven between the third and fourth peak, the path follows the meandering river into the background distance, indicating that at this place the distant background plane cannot only be seen but also be reached. The background is integrated into the active space of the landscape, containing houses, a pagoda, and roads. This suggests that the background plane also plays a major part in the narrative development. Curiously, roads or figures do not appear in the background plane before the fifth peak. The only exception seems to be the path leading through the Gate of Heaven, but no figures are seen there. Since the horizontal path splits at the fifth mountain peak, it suggests a split in the narrative as well, providing two optional or simultaneous endings.

In order to understand the interrelationship between the various pictorial elements, we will have to actually "travel" (*you* 遊 in Chinese, a central term in Daoist philosophy) the landscape, beginning from the right to the left. Again, because the possibilities to provide adequate illustration of all the details are limited, the reader is advised to use a digital high-resolution image and scroll from right to left and zoom in and out to imitate the viewing experience. The images provided are only intended to illustrate the most important scenes.

## Daoist Self-Cultivation

The different scenes or stages that can be distinguished in the viewing process from right to left create a complete story of Daoist self-cultivation. The narrative sequence follows the rise to and decline from a climax, as witnessed in the structure of the landscape and in its pictorial elements. The story evolves from the opening scene with the foreground mountain, moves on to the first three mountain peaks in the middle ground, then reaches the background plane. From there, via the two mountains in the middle ground, it returns to the closing scene with another foreground mountain. At the same time, it continues on the background plane by means of the path splitting in two directions at the fifth peak. The viewer thus moves from right to left in the handscroll, slowly unrolling scene by scene, and traveling all three planes (foreground, middle ground, and background).

This narrative sequence which guides the viewer through landscape structure and pictorial scenes constitutes one continuous story. The story

introduces a protagonist (the figure in yellow) leaving the common world of lay life and entering Dao. He receives training and eventually attains Dao, represented by his entering the Gate of Heaven and reaching the background plane (i.e., the climax). After that, he returns to the ordinary world and also—simultaneously it seems—reaches the beyond.

It is possible to distinguish fourteen scenes in this narrative sequence, beginning with the right foreground scene and following the path to the left as the story unfolds.

### 1. Lay Life in the Mundane World (*renjian* 人間)

The opening scene in the foreground is a display of mundane life in local the villages and villas (Fig. 16). Figures dwell in the buildings, walk the roads and, on the far left on the riverbank, gaze over the watery expanse.

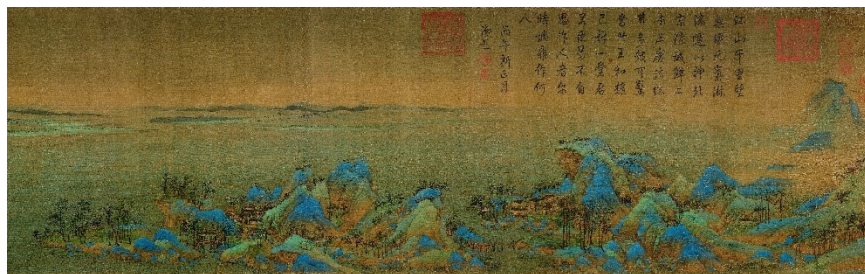


Fig. 16. Foreground opening scene.

The horizontal path emerges on the far right, taking the viewer past the first homes, across some small bridges, all the way to the pier or dock on the left, waiting for the ferry to cross you over to the other side. A small figure in yellow can be spotted inside the first villa on the right. He may be a wealthy official or scholar living a life of comfort and pleasure in the hills of the countryside. This opening scene should represent lay-life in the mundane world. A figure in yellow can be seen staring over the water on the far left, from where the high mountains in the distance can be seen, indicating his desire to start his journey of self-cultivation.

### 2. Entering the Mountains (*rushan* 入山)

The protagonist must cross the water on one of the boats moored outside the fishing village to reach the first mountain peak (Fig. 18). One boat covered with a lattice frame carries a figure in yellow, the protagonist.

Sitting opposite of him is a figure in blue, who must be his servant. From that point on the shore, a path re-appears, inviting the viewer to continue left and walk up the planked road (*zhandao* 棧道) leading to a mountain villa (see Fig. 10 above). Here the figure in yellow is seated in a cross-shaped central building.



Fig. 17. The first mountain peak and its scenery.

He has taken up a life of reclusion (*yinju* 隱居) by entering the mountains and leaving behind him the mundane world, the first step in the handscroll's story of self-cultivation.

### 3. Watching the Waterfall (*guan pubu* 觀瀑布)

Below the mountain villa at the foot of the mountain and without a visible path, the figure in yellow sits on the riverbank next to a waterfall. Opposite are two other figures, while his servant stands at a respectful distance (Fig. 18, on right). We can indeed follow the stream of the waterfall all the way up to the mountain, appearing and disappearing between its rugged cliffs, suggesting a source somewhere high on top, behind or beyond the mountain.



The scene is reminiscent of poems and paintings on the theme of watching the waterfall, the archetype of which is probably a poem by the famous Tang poet and Daoist master Li Bai 李白 (701-762). It describes

the waterfall at Mt. Lu 廬山 (Jiangxi) as the source of the Milky Way streaming from the Golden Portal (*jinque* 金闕, i.e., the Gate of Heaven) to earth.<sup>8</sup> In these poems and paintings, the waterfall is a metaphor for Dao (*Daode jing* 4, 8, 42, 78). A similar experience is suggested in the handscroll scene, where the protagonist watches the waterfall and wonders about its source, invisible and forever flowing. His companions may suggest this source is called Dao.

#### 4. Seeking a Master, Asking for Dao (*baishi* 拜師/ *wendao* 問道)

Starting his quest for Dao, the seeker follows the path that first leads back to the villa on the mountain, then around it across a small bridge over the waterfall, and back again to the foot of the mountain, past a line of trees, when a new estate emerges. Slightly above it is a pavilion where



a figure in yellow on the left bows to someone in light green on the right (Fig. 19, on left). This format is usually called “asking for Dao”: a master (positioned on the honorable left, the viewer’s right) receives a person (always on the right, the viewer’s left) inquiring about Dao and asking to be accepted as his disciple).

This scene depicts the protagonist seeking instruction from a Daoist master requesting to be initiated into Dao and being accepted as his disciple. Interestingly, another figure in light green is standing in the doorway of the estate. Usually, the wife is depicted in this position, traditionally assumed not to leave the house. She may be worried about her husband leaving (*chujia* 出家) home to become a Daoist monk.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The poem is titled “A Mt. Lu Song Sent to the Palace Censor Empty-Boat Lu” (*Lushan yao ji Lu shiyu Xuzhou* 廬山謠寄廬侍御虛舟). For a translation, see Elling O Eide’s translation in Minford and Lao 2002, 733-35.

<sup>9</sup> Alternatively, the figure may depict the servant, but the blue pigment used is not the same as in other depictions of the servant.

### 5. Crossing the Bridge (*guoqiao* 過橋)

Continuing on the path to the left, there is a bifurcation. One path leads up to a small mansion and eventually up into the mountains to nowhere. This is the first "road to nowhere," an indication that at this stage the source of the waterfall, the symbol of Dao, cannot be reached yet. The second path leads westward to a majestic bridge (see Fig. 15 above). It is an opulent, complex structure of three levels with a hip-and-gable roof in four directions and topped by central tower pavilion (Fu 1979, 54). The figure in yellow is seen conversating on the central deck. The bridge is also symbolical in the context of the narrative, as it connects the first and the second mountain-island, gloriously heralding a new stage in the story of self-cultivation.

### 6. Entering the Monastery to Receive Precepts or Registers (*ruguan shou jie/lu* 入觀受戒/錄)

Focusing on the second mountain-island, the viewer is led deeper into the mountains, to a large compound above a waterfall (Fig. 20). It comprises a square, three-tiered altar on the left (see Fig. 13) and a round, thatched hut on the far right. This makes it compound a monastery. The

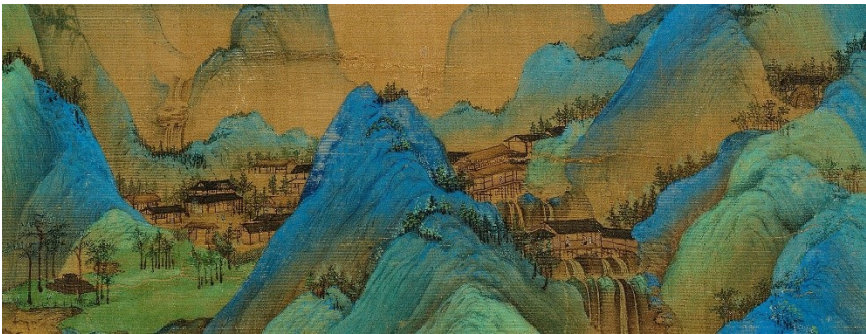


Fig. 20. Monastery with an ordination altar and a meditation hut.

figure in yellow appears variously: welcomed in the building above the waterfall, then seated in the hut, and finally on his way to the altar. He receives precepts or registers in formal ordination, in the safe and supervised surroundings of a monastery.

The thatched hut is a meditation hut or oratory (*jingshi* 靜室), traditionally referred to as a "round enclosure" (*huandu* 環堵) or "straw

thatched hut” (*maoci* 茅茨). It was an integral part of the layout of a Daoist monastery in the Song and Yuan periods (Goossaert 1999; Gesterkamp 2011, 44; Chen 2013). The altar is used to perform ordinations and other rituals. Its location on top of a precipice is reminiscent of an initiation story in the *Shenxian zhuan* 神仙傳 (Biographies of Divine Immortals): Zhang Ling 张陵, the founder of the Heavenly Master order, tested the faith of his disciples by jumping from a cliff on Cloud Terrace Mountain (Yuntai shan 雲台山), eventually only accepting the two who followed him (Campany 2002, 353-4). Our protagonist has become an ordained Daoist monk or priest and learnt how to meditate.

### 7. Meditating in a Grotto-Heaven (*dongtian* 洞天)

Remaining in the safe confines of the monastery is not the final stage; rather, the path continues. Going beyond the monastery, it splits again. One segment leads up to the mountains, this time even higher and deeper, but it is still a “road to nowhere.” Our protagonist is still not considered ready. At the foot of the mountain, the other path leads through a bamboo grove to a shielded and fenced set of buildings (Fig. 21). It consists of a few simple buildings and a conspicuous, large thatched hut, the same as seen at the monastery. The buildings and hut are set in front of a dark entrance below a large, overhanging rock: a grotto.



Here the figure in yellow refines his meditation skills, for which he has selected a so-called grotto-heaven, a sacred site known for its auspicious natural surroundings and resources (or *fengshui* 風水), and the home of previous masters and immortals, and therefore particularly suitable for self-cultivation (Gesterkamp 2017). He is not entirely alone; rather, his servant in blue is visible as well as another figure in white, possibly a disciple. The protagonist, this suggests, has become a master.

### 8. Crossing the Water (*quodu* 過渡)

After the grotto-heaven scene, the path meanders for an extremely long stretch across riverbanks, around mountains, and past villages. Eventually the path stops on top of a stooped cliff looking out over a vast wa-

terway and the background plane in the far distance (as well as a tiny pagoda). The yellow figure and his blue servant sitting on a protruding deck in the fishing harbor and later in a boat below the cliff.

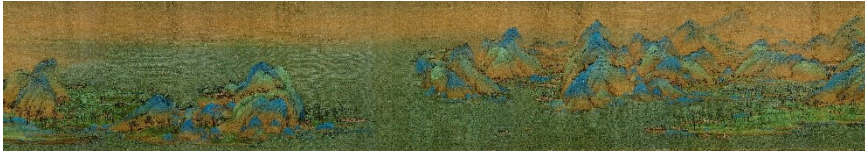


Fig. 22. Crossing the water between the second and fourth mountain-islands.

Because the path continues on the west bank of the waterway, it seems likely that he is about to take a boat to cross the water. Again, the goal is not to meditate in an isolated hut in the high mountains, but being able to put practice Dao in the mundane world. This means activating various skills in service of the people (healing, rituals, etc.) and earn merit. Finally, the background plane, the destination of the journey, becomes visible. The protagonist is able to “cross the water” and reach the other shore, this time without the help of a convenient bridge.

### 9. Entering the Capital (*jinjing* 進京)

After having reached the third isle, the path continues to meander across the riverbanks. No villages appear, only some small homes, probably indicating that the protagonist enjoys a secluded life among the people. Before reaching the highest peak however, we again see a “road to nowhere.” The road to the background plane and the source is still blocked. The next road into the mountains, however, leads to a large complex of palace buildings, high up in the mountains at the foot of the large central peak enshrouded by mist (see Fig. 12 above). Such a number of large, storied buildings can only be found in the capital, and this place may therefore indicate that the protagonist is invited to court, possibly because of his merit resulting from his good deeds practiced among the common people. He becomes a court Daoist.

### 10. The Waterwheel (*heche* 河車)

Although becoming a court Daoist may seem a great accomplishment, the journey continues. Following the path further west, the path appears to come at a dead end (Fig. 24). No track appears either in front or be-

hind the mountain. The figure in yellow and his servant stand below an overhanging waterfall. Because a path with figures appears on the left and the figure in yellow appears again inside the hollow, one may assume that he entered a secret passage below the waterfall, which also shows the shade of a grotto. The waterwheel is curious, best known from Northern Song art and associated with architectural painting (*jiehua* 界畫, “ruler-lined painting”) (Liu 2002).<sup>10</sup>

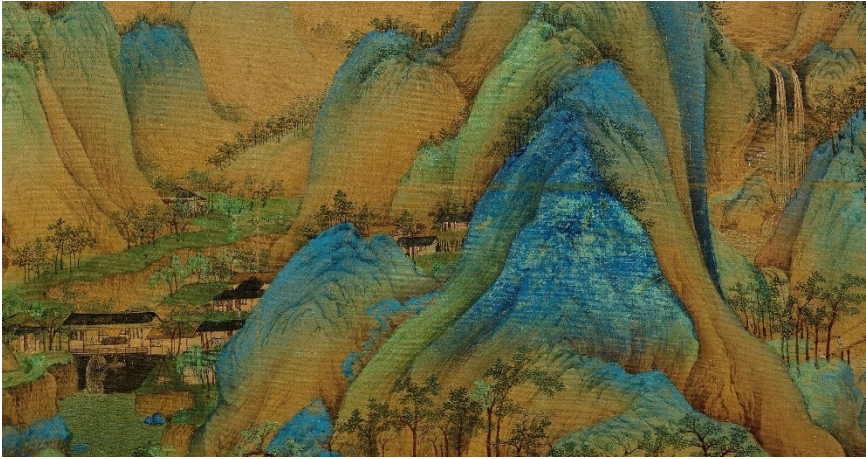


Fig. 24. Waterwheel and secret passage.

On a deeper level, it relates to Daoist internal alchemy (*neidan* 內丹), where it indicates the circular transportation of energies through the body (Despeux 1994, 46-48, 151; Baldrian-Hussein 2004, 208-10). The process begins at the kidneys (where energy is transformed from essence or water) and moves through the Tail Gate (*weilü* 尾閭) point at the bottom of the spinal column to rise up to the top of the head (Mt. Kunlun 崑崙山) and down again to the lower elixir field (*dantian* 丹田). The cycle repeats, up and down, creating a yin-yang cycle until vital energy is refined to form the Yang Spirit (*yangshen* 陽神), that is, the immortal spirit body.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The “river wheel” is also depicted in the well-known “Inner Landscape Diagram” (*Neijing tu* 內經圖) stele image of the White Cloud Monastery in Beijing but dated much later to the Qing dynasty.

<sup>11</sup> This interpretation is based on the *Xishan qunxian huizhen ji* 西山群會真記 (DZ 246) of the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century (Gesterkamp 2021b). Because of the close affiliation



The perpetual, cyclical motion is beautifully represented by the ever-turning wheel of the watermill. In this interpretation, the grotto passage also makes sense: it represents the Tail Gate where energy is transformed for the first time. In the sequence, it is aptly followed by the waterwheel, shown in the painting as moving the energy flow. The large, central peak in the background, moreover, may well symbolize Mt. Kunlun, or the head. Interestingly, within the viewing sequence, the self-cultivation narrative marks here an inward turn, from the outer world to the interior of the body. It is an important prelude to the next scene, which we have identified as the climax of the narrative.

### 11. Gate of Heaven (*tianmen* 天門) & Great Peace/Flat (*taiping* 太平)



The path rounds a final, small hill in the foreground, and a new vista on the background plane opens. A small river flows between two high cliffs, the Gate of Heaven, and disappears in the distant mists (Fig. 25, on left). A riverbank path follows the meandering river on the right as well as on the left.

This indicates that the figure in yellow, seen first between the trees at the first turn and then even smaller in the hamlet at the second turn of the river, travels all the way to the background plane, and returns via the path on the other side of the river, where again small figures are seen. The gate-shaped like rocks or mountains on both sides of the river represent, I believe, the Gate of Heaven. This also perfectly fits the narrative sequence. The Gate of Heaven is located above (here, after) Mt. Kunlun. After achieving the endless circulation of energy within the body, symbolized by the waterwheel scene, the immortal or spirit body is formed. It can then leave the body and become divine or immortal (*chengshen/xian* 成神/仙).

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of Huizong's court with Maoshan, and this text's origins in the Nanjing area close to Maoshan, this handscroll may suggest that within a few decades this text's *neidan* tradition was practiced there and thus transmitted to Huizong.

In the Wang Ximeng scroll, this state of “immortality” is shown as a flat plane. Why? Most likely it is because the ideal state and paradisaical realm are conceived in Daoism as much as in traditional China as being flat. Since ancient times, classical texts have called this state Great Peace, a term that literally means “great flat.” The *locus classicus* in Daoism is the *Duren jing* 度人經 (Scripture of Salvation): “The land of the whole country became remote and flat, of one level and without high or low. The earth was all made of green jasper without any other colors. . . . The country was in peace and the people prospered, enjoying Great Peace.”<sup>12</sup> The text was Huizong’s favorite Daoist work, the most important text in Daoist ritual at the time. As such it was placed first in the Ming Daoist Canon (Strickmann 1978). It is, therefore, most likely that the new appearance of what I call an actively integrated background plane was based on Daoist conceptions of paradise and in particular the *Duren jing*. Because of the association of the flat plane with Great Peace, a state of the empire, the handscroll may also assume a strong imperial and political overtone, symbolizing peace in the Song empire.

## 12. Leaving the Mountains (*chushan* 出山)



Fig. 26. Fourth and fifth mountain peaks.

After the climax of the Gate of Heaven scene, the following two mountains, the fourth and fifth, show again a decrease in size and a main mountain building moving closer to the foreground and diminishing in size. The horizontal path is no longer frantically meandering along the riverbank. After leaving the fourth mountain villa, it passes a few homes but no figure in yellow seems to have taken up residence in there. It is

<sup>12</sup> 一國地土，山川林木，緬平一等，無復高下，土皆做碧玉，無有異色。國安民豐，欣樂太平。 *Lingbao wuliang duren shangping miaojing* 靈寶無量度人上品妙經 DZ 1: 1a, 3a. Cf. Bokenkamp 1997, 374-438.

not until the fifth mountain village, in a home on the water border, that we see a figure in yellow sitting. This part should designate a next phase in the self-cultivation narrative of the protagonist. After attaining Dao or immortality, he "leaves the mountain" (*chushan* 出山).

### 13. Returning to the Mundane World (*renjian* 人間)



Fig. 27. Foreground closing scene.

However, an oddity occurs. "Leaving the mountains" means returning to live in the mundane world; matching this, the path continues to a fishing village on the left of the fifth mountain-isle. Via shuttling boats, it connects with the path on the foreground mountain, i.e., the ordinary world. From the foreground riverbank and line of trees, the path leads past a few homes, to a curious building perched on the top of a hill.

At the foot of the hill, the figure in yellow is first greeted by another person (see Fig. 11 above), then seen entering a building at the gate. The building is empty besides something that might be a chair or an altar table, suggesting that it might be a small shrine but it certainly does not seem to be a residence. The path continues behind it, then splits, one segment moving to the foreground bridge, where a figure in yellow is seated on a boat. The other leads to the background ending at a small mountain home, where the figure in yellow appears again. This should be the endpoint of the handscroll and the viewing process. But this is not the case.

### 14. Being Perfected (*zhenren* 真人)

Just before the fifth mountain, the path splits into two different directions. One trail leads to foreground closing scene, while the other continues in the distant background. Hardly visible behind the peak, when the viewer has unrolled the scroll to the last tip of the fifth mountain-island, a bridge appears in the remote distance over which some miniscule figures have crossed. The viewer may easily have missed this indistinct background path at first glance, rather focusing on the foreground scene:

he or she must roll back to discover its origin. Further along the background path, another group of tiny figures appears, including one dressed in yellow. They are on their way to the vaguely visible group of buildings behind the small, green hill.



Fig. 28. Final background plane and path.

How to make sense of this background scene? Because the background plane is associated with Great Peace and attaining Dao or immortality, this background scene would necessarily indicate the life of the protagonist in the beyond. Having created his immortal body, he has become a perfected or immortal. Because both the return to the mundane world and the life in the beyond take simultaneously place in the visual space of the handscroll and in its viewing process, the double narrative suggests that the protagonist is living in the mundane world, while at the same time he is spiritually present in the beyond, a world of peace and harmony. If so, the shrine on the foreground scene may be a possible symbolical reference to his new divine state. Alternatively, the double narrative may represent a choice between living in the mundane world or remaining in the beyond.<sup>13</sup> In any case, the story of the self-cultivation process as well as the viewing process have finally been completed, the protagonist no longer simply lives in the mundane world but has become one with Dao.

## Huizong and Daoist Landscapes

At the end of the long scroll, a colophon by Emperor Huizong's chancellor Cai Jing 蔡京 (1047-1126) provides important information about its

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<sup>13</sup> This alternative however contains a logical contradiction. Because achieving immortality in this case would equal suicide, this interpretation defies the purpose of the self-cultivation narrative.

production:<sup>14</sup>Conferred on the eighth day of the fourth leap lunar month of the third year of the Zhenghe reign-period (April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1113).

Seventeen-year-old [Wang] Ximeng was first a student at the Painting Academy and then got appointed to the Archives of Documents and Letters of the Imperial Palace. Multiple times, he presented his paintings [to Emperor Huizong], but these were not yet very accomplished.

Recognizing his teachable nature, His Majesty thereupon began instructing him, and personally transmitted to him His methods [of painting].

In less than half a year, [Wang Ximeng] would then submit the present painting. His Majesty valued it highly, and then, upon conferring it to me, his servant [Cai] Jing, He said that only the virtuous men of the Empire [such as Wang Ximeng and Cai Jing] were able to achieve this [result, by being able to learn from Huizong's instructions].<sup>15</sup>

The colophon reveals several important points. First of all, there is no indication that Wang Ximeng ever had the surname Wang. Nor does the handscroll bear a title. Both name and title appear for the first time in late Ming sources and are now used for the sake of convenience.

Second, even though Wang Ximeng is credited with painting the handscroll, Cai Jing makes it clear that he followed the instructions of the emperor, who himself was an accomplished painter (Ebrey 2008). Beyond this, Huizong was an ordained Daoist who studied with a Shangqing master from Maoshan from early childhood (Gyss-Vermande 1995; Ebrey 2014). Also, it seems rather preposterous that a 17-year-old would devise a narrative of Daoist self-cultivation and create an intricate landscape design and elements illustrating it, it seems likely that both design and narrative are entirely Huizong's, and that the handscroll therefore should reflect his intentions.

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<sup>14</sup> Research on the creases in the silk by Yu Hui (2020) of the Palace Museum demonstrates that the inscription was originally placed in front of the handscroll. It may also have been longer, possibly missing a few columns in front. Cai Jing's declining status in later dynasties may have accounted for the displacement and truncation. It also demonstrates that the inscription is original to the scroll and not a later addition.

<sup>15</sup> 政和三年閏四月八日賜。希孟年十八歲，昔在畫學為生徒，召入禁中文書庫，數以畫獻，未甚工。上知其性可教，遂誨諭之，親授其法，不逾半年，乃以此畫進。上嘉之，因以賜臣京，謂天下士在作之而已。

As the handscroll, therefore, quite possibly represents the emperor's ideas on Daoism and Daoist self-cultivation, it offers unique insights into the beliefs and thoughts of the ruler and his court. Beyond that, it also reveals current ideas on Daoist landscape painting. The close relationship between Daoist ritual, altar space, temple art, and landscape painting, as well as the existence of other paintings showing similar content and conceptualization, suggest that the scroll does not represent the invention of a new genre or theme of Chinese landscape painting, but elaborated on an existing tradition, albeit hitherto unrecognized. The concept and iconography of the Gate of Heaven, the spatial arrangement of the landscape according to the principles of Daoist sacred geography and cosmology, as well as the perceived ritual journey through this landscape appear to be the defining elements or characteristics of this Daoist landscape tradition.

Huizong's close involvement in the conceptualization of the handscroll also might be the reason for its strong imperial overtones, besides telling a story of Daoist self-cultivation. The landscape depicted is not "just" a landscape and a background for a Daoist narrative, but it depicts the Song empire. Two elements point in this direction. One is the conspicuous depiction of five central peaks, which refer in the imperial context to the five sacred peaks or marchmounts (*wuyue* 五嶽), located in the five directions and defining the totality of the Chinese empire. The other is the depiction of the palace city near the central peak, identifiable as Mount Song. Because the Song capital Bianliang 汴梁 (present-day Kaifeng 開封) is located close to Mount Song in Henan, the palace city in the handscroll becomes a metaphor for the capital: it can be identified as such in the narrative as well.

The entire landscape, then, is also a metaphor for the empire. In that sense, the personal journey and self-cultivation process of the protagonist similarly becomes a metaphor for achieving Great Peace enjoyed by all the people (as stated in the *Duren jing*). The sacred geography of China is shared by both Daoism and the imperial court, transforming the Wang Ximeng scroll into a representation of the sacred Song empire. Obviously, the work can be read and interpreted on different levels, from landscape structure through narrative scenes to imperial symbolism.

Another point is the handscroll's function: its extreme length is unusual for a landscape painting at the time, as much as its colorful blue-and-green landscape—even though it is often seen in paintings depicting fairy lands and Daoist paradises. In addition, its highly symmetric structure is odd, as if the painting's two halves are mirrored.

One possible explanation for these strange elements is that the handscroll was intended as a design (*yangben* 樣本) for a mural in a palace building. A Chinese hall would have doors in the front and rear walls, and murals would divide over the east and west walls while meeting on the north wall—similar to a Heavenly Court painting. The large waterway in the exact center of the handscroll could mark the door-space of the rear wall. Also similar to a Heavenly Court painting (Gesterkamp 2011), the Gate of Heaven would in this arrangement be located on the northwest wall, its appropriate cosmological direction.

It is possible to prove this hypothesis by means of its measurements. For one, there are the measurements of the Wu Zongyuan 吳宗元 scroll (580 x 44.3 cm), now in a private collection in China and representing a black-and-white design for an east wall. For another, there is the general width of one bay (3.5 m), as found in the traditional layout of the Three Purities Hall at the Yongle gong 永樂宮 (Palace of Eternal Joy, completed 1260, murals completed in 1325). In addition, there is the practice of architects and painters to make models on a one-tenth scale. Based on these three indications, in my work on Heavenly Court painting, I was able to transfer the scale of the Yongle gong murals to the design of the Wu Zongyuan scroll, and demonstrate that the latter was designed for a thirteen-bay hall (unlike the Three Purities Hall, which is seven bays wide). A thirteen-bay building is the largest possible, a major edifice of imperial proportions, most likely reserved for buildings within the imperial palace (Gesterkamp 2011, 224-27).<sup>16</sup>

The Wu Zongyuan scroll only depicts one side, the eastern part, and measures 580 centimeters in length. Moreover, because the opening sec-

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<sup>16</sup> The Three Purities Hall is seven bays wide and four bays deep, with five bays of folding doors in front and one-bay doors in the rear. The imagined palace hall would have been thirteen bays wide, with nine bays in front and nine in the rear, plus eight or nine bays on the east and west. This leaves sixteen or seventeen bays for wall paintings.

tion is slightly damaged, it may originally have been slightly longer. A design for both east and west parts would have measured slightly over 1160 centimeters. The Wang Ximeng scroll has a length of 1191.1 centimeters, which is extremely close to the Wu Zongyuan scroll. The small discrepancy can be explained by the variability in bay-width. I therefore surmise that the Wang Ximeng scroll was designed for a palatial hall of thirteen bays.<sup>17</sup> It remains unclear whether such a wall painting was ever executed, but it must have been a magnificent sight to behold.

## Concluding Remarks

This study has shown that Wang Ximeng's "Thousand Miles of Streams and Mountains," now in the Palace Museum, Beijing, depicts a story of Daoist self-cultivation. The viewer follows a figure in yellow, the protagonist of the story, as he leaves behind the mundane world, enters the mountains, and passes through the various stages of Daoist self-cultivation. Eventually he reaches the climax of attaining Dao or immortality, after which he slowly returns to the mundane world while remaining also in the immortal realm.

Most ingeniously, the story is closely mirrored in the structure of the landscape, guiding the viewer through the scroll, moving from right to left, from foreground through middle ground to gradually reach the background—the climax—followed by a return to the foreground of the handscroll. The narrative appears to be modelled after the ritual journey of a priest performed on a Daoist altar, in which the climax is represented by entering the Gate of Heaven. A similar gate-like structure appears in the Wang Ximeng scroll near the climax of the narrative as well in two other contemporaneous handscrolls with similar compositions.

The handscroll most probably functioned as a design for a wall painting in a thirteen-bay palace hall, the largest type of hall in Chinese architecture and only found at the capital. This function would also fit its

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<sup>17</sup> For an example of Daoist wall painting in Song court halls prior to Huizong's reign, see Jang 1992. The function of a mural design may explain the many perceived "errors" in the execution of the Wang Ximeng scroll, especially concerning the application of the pigments, which at several places overlap. On designs and their application in the mural production process, see Gesterkamp 2011, ch. 4.



double layer of meaning of depicting the five sacred peaks as they represent the Song sacred empire and its message of Great Peace. Most interestingly, Cai Jing's colophon makes it clear that, even though the handscroll was executed by the prodigy-child Wang Ximeng, Emperor Huizong guided and instructed him. Considering the emperor's accomplishments as a painter and Daoist initiate, such a complicated narrative and composition may well have been conceived by himself, which means that the handscroll depicts his ideas on Daoism and landscape painting.

Here however lies a jarring problem. Daoism has thus far been interpreted in the (post-Song) division of a monastic, meditative tradition, exemplified by the Quanzhen 全真 (Complete Perfection) order on the one hand, and a ritualistic tradition embedded in local cults, exemplified by the Tianshidao 天師道 (Way of the Heavenly Master). The Northern Song ideal of Daoist self-cultivation fits neither model, and although a monastic stage and seclusion in the mountains are included, the majority of the cultivation process is practiced among people beyond the monastery. Also, the final goal is to return to the ordinary world, not to live in seclusion. Similarly, there is no indication of the performance of elaborate rituals, deity statues, or local cults. Huizong's ideals of Daoism, and therefore of the Northern Song, may need further study.

So do modern academic ideas on Chinese landscape painting. Not only are iconography and narrative sequences not generally associated with landscape painting, Daoist landscape painting is virtually a non-existent subject in Chinese art history, let alone a tradition in Chinese painting with its own iconography, painting styles, themes, and subject-matter. This study, imperfect as it is, can hopefully draw some attention to this topic, and perhaps ignite further discussion and study.

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