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Three Distances in *Linquan Gaozhi*

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Abstract. *Linquan Gaozhi* (《林泉高致》) was completed during the North Song period, a period of full development in Chinese landscape painting. As a comprehensive work, this book encompasses various aspects of painting techniques, appreciation criteria, and artistic concepts. The concept of the “Three Distances” proposed in this book not only became an important resource in the history of painting and art criticism but also continues to play a significant role in reshaping theoretical interpretation and inspiring artistic creation among contemporary scholars and artists. By historically tracing and reconstructing the spatial arrangement of the “Three Distances (三远),” the interconnections and operational environment of these distances are revealed. In the visual language of landscape painting, we seek to understand the motivation of Guo Xi as a painter and his self-recognition as a literatus. Guo Xi’s dual identity brings out the complex personality of Song literati, which maintains a balance between responsibility within the world and the pursuit of essential Dao in a typical articulation.

Keywords. Three Distances, *Linquan Gaozhi*, Guo Xi, Chinese landscape painting.

Introduction

In the course of the development of Chinese landscape painting, the achievements of the

North Song period are remarkable, both in terms of artistic practice and theoretical reflection. The painters of this period inherited the painting styles of Jing Hao (荆浩), Guan Tong (关仝), Li Cheng (李成), and Fan Kuan (范宽), and explored new possibilities in landscape representation through the practice of imitating and emulating ancient works. The painting academies established during this time provided them with abundant learning resources and systematic training. Equally noteworthy is the widespread interest and active participation in painting by the literati class represented by Ouyang Xiu (欧阳修), Su Shi (苏轼), and Mi Fu (米芾). These phenomena together demonstrate the vigorous development of the painting profession in North Song society and have had profound influences on subsequent generations. *Linquan Gaozhi* (《林泉高致》), completed in the mid-North Song period, embodies the aesthetic judgment and spiritual personality of literati in this era. In particular, the concept of the “Three Distances,” including “high-distance” (高远), “deep-distance” (深远), and “flat-distance” (平远)

proposed in the painting, has garnered attention and found application in different periods and from different perspectives. The discussion of its connotations allows us to gain insight into both the superficial and profound aspects of literati painting, shedding light on the psychological constructs within the vision of literati. We will proceed by analyzing the paintings, exploring the identity of the painters, and examining the historical background of these texts. Subsequently, we will uncover the stratum consisting of the perception of the “Three Distances” and the ripple effect that gradually spread from the vision of the landscape to the imagination of ancient times.

“Three distances” in the composition

“Three Distances” is proposed by Guo Xi when discussing the arrangement and form of landscape in the painting.

There are three distances in the mountains: looking up from the foot of the mountain to its peak is called high-distance; peering through the front of the mountain to the back is called deep-distance; looking from near mountains to distant mountains is called flat-distance. (山有三远: 自山下而仰山颠, 谓之高远; 自山前而窥山后, 谓之深远; 自近山而望远山, 谓之平远。高远之色清明, 深远之色重晦, 平远之色有明有晦。高远之势突兀, 深远之意重叠, 平远之意冲融而缥缈). (Guo [2010]: 69)

If we consider Guo Xi as an art theorist, then his definition of three distances leaves us with a strong impression that knowledge of mountains lays a theoretical foundation for producing a landscape. This “Three Distances”

serves as a pre-given idea for the formative process by which the different elements come into a world of mountains and water. It is not difficult for us to address the forms of three distances in Guo Xi's painting. If this idea is taken as a lens to examine the Chinese landscape paintings, then it will not be difficult to recognize different forms of three distances. In this sense, we understand Fong Wen's argument about the fundamental grammar of Chinese landscape paintings.

These three compositional schemas have been basic to Chinese landscape paintings ever since; the picture-plane dominated by vertical elements, the picture-plane filled by a series of horizontal elements, and the picture-plane divided vertically between these two alternatives. (Fong [1969]: 393)

To demonstrate his perspective, Fong Wen provides direct evidence through three pieces of 8th-century paintings on biwas in the *Shōsōin* (*ibid*). In early landscape paintings, various elements were arranged vertically, and the "Three Distances" were separated as individual scenes from top to bottom. Along with the maturation of compositional techniques, the isolated application of the "Three Distances" was better and better combined, creating more and more complex layers in landscape painting. Fong Wen uses the dissection and integration of the "Three Distances" as a tool to analyze landscape paintings and thus finds an intuitive explanation to spell the evolution of landscape painting.

As we can see in another research by Fong Wen, he lists *Hawk and Ducks* (《隼鸭图》) from the 8th century, a partial section of *Dream Journey through the Xiao Xiang River* (《潇湘卧游图》) from the 12th century, and a partial section of *Autumn Colors on the Que and Hua Mountains* (《鹊华秋色图》) from the 13th century (Fong [2003]: 273). He dissects a landscape painting into parallelogram slices, with each slice presenting the rock formations from a specific viewpoint. The more slices are extracted, the more visual perspectives are included in the composition. The arrangement of mountains progresses from vertically parallel sections to gradually merging into a unified horizontal plane, and the forms of plants, streams, and mist contribute to visual unity. In the final stage, the entire composition becomes closer to the viewer's perspective and mental projection. As Fong points out, different painting styles emerge within specific cultural and intellectual contexts. In correspondence with various practices of painting, we discover the following theoretical principles regarding the arrangement of forms. i) «Too many would create chaos, too few would lack grace, the right balance lies in distinguishing near and far» (多则乱, 少则慢, 不多不少, 要分远近) (Jing [2015]: 160) The principle proposed by Jing Hao, emphasizing the need for spatial order and separation rather than the connection between near and far elements, provides an explanation for the

style represented in *Hawk and Ducks*. ii) «The ancients had a broad mind. They arranged the scenery according to the law of nature to express their inner mind. This is the pinnacle of the painting method». (古人作画，胸次宽阔，布景自然，合古人意趣，画法尽矣) (Huang [2017]: 3) Huang Gongwang (黄公望), in his explanation of antiquity, reveals his requirements for the composition, which should be sufficiently expansive, allowing the viewer's gaze to wander and experience the extension and changes of the scenery. This is precisely the effect that *Autumn Colors on the Que and Hua Mountains* seeks to achieve. iii) Positioned between high-distance and flat-distance, *Dream Journey through the Xiao Xiang Rivers* has a more open composition and a more refined and gentle landscape. With the combination of theoretical insight and practical skill, we are ready to accept the “Three Distances” as a basic rule to construct the totality of Chinese landscape paintings.

In particular, this rule is also applicable to measure Guo Xi's works. With the dissection method, Guo Xi's paintings can be divided into three layers: the foreground representing deep-distance, the middle ground representing high-distance, and the background representing flat-distance. Within each layer, the influence of different traditions on Guo's brushwork can be identified. Guo Xi complained that his contemporaries only knew how to imitate Li Cheng and Fan Kuan, stating: «Nowadays students from Qi and Lu (齐鲁) copy only Yingqiu (营丘, namely 李成), while students from Guan and Shan (关陕) only copy Fan Kuan» (Guo [2010]: 23) Similarly, Liu Daochun (刘道醇), a painting critic in Guo's time, regarded Li and Fan as exemplary masters in his writing. These assessments from various perspectives demonstrate the widespread influence of Li and Fan. According to *Xuanhe Catalogue of Paintings* (宣和画谱), Guo's early style was excessively intricate, but later he adopted Li's approach and excelled in compositional arrangements (McNair [2019]: 254). Unfortunately, very few of Li's works have survived, with the exception of *Reading Tablet and Pit Stone Picture*, (《读碑窠石图》) believed to be a collaborative work by Li Cheng and Wang Xiao (王晓). Comparing this work with Guo's, one can observe the influence of Li's ink technique on the old trees' branches resembling crab claws and the needle-like pine leaves. In addition to trees, Guo also incorporated Li's method of using large individual rocks to block out the fragmented background stones, creating a sense of layered recession. While borrowing this sense of recession, Guo employed complex and subtle variations to enhance the visual effect of fine, deep, and illusory spaces. In high-distance, Guo's pursuit of lofty and majestic mountain peaks reflects the influence of Fan Kuan:

Mountains are immense things. They have a towering form, a robust and lofty form, an open and expansive form, a haughty and proud form, a vast and boundless form (山，大物也。其形欲耸拔，欲偃蹇，欲轩豁，欲箕踞，欲磅礴)。 (Guo [2010]: 62)

The mountains in Guo's paintings are all of a kind that highlights the sense of "immense things" – majestic and heavy. Fan's masterpiece, *Travelers by Streams and Mountains* (《溪山行旅图》) composed of towering cliffs, evokes a strong sense of grandeur and power. As Wang Shen

stated, «It appears as if one is standing in front of the real scene, with majestic and robust peaks, exuding a powerful and vigorous aura» (如面前真列, 峰峦浑厚, 气壮雄逸) (Han [2016]: 94). Although Guo's main peaks may not be as rigid and straight as Fan's, they gradually reach their highest point through the construction of stacked mountain ranges. Lastly, for the figuration of flat distance in Guo's paintings, although there is no clear model of influence, it can be seen as inheriting the entire tradition of landscape painting. The fusion of elements in the flat distance, characterized by a sense of blending and ethereality, has always been a pursuit in landscape painting. Wang Wei's (王维) paintings has already expressed a strong inclination toward flat distance in the depiction of «distant mountains and waters» that «gradually blur and merge into the horizon (or dissolve into the primal origins of nature)» (山水平远, 绝迹天机). This attempt is repeatedly visible in the paintings after Wang, like what we can see in Dong Yuan's (董源) works, such as *Summer Scenery at Shanmen Ferry* (《夏景山口待渡图》) and *Cold Forest on the Riverbank* (attributed) (《寒林重汀图》(传)), which is also shared by Guo Xi. In this way, Guo Xi inherited the rich skills of pictorial practices and created his own way of organizing these skills together by embracing the "Three Distances" in composition.

Whether considering the "Three Distances" as the inherent structure of Guo's works or using it to grasp the evolution of landscape painting during the Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties, the analysis of the composition through the "Three Distances" provides a solid theoretical anchor for art historians and offers visual evidence to construct a coherent narrative of landscape painting styles. Summarizing the basic grammar of painting from numerous works, the achievements of art historians enable us to understand the historical styles of landscape painting from a chronological perspective. Moreover, the exploration of formal language in art history can further reveal the differences in aesthetic perception between cultures. For example, by juxtaposing Chinese landscape painting with Western pieces, the comparisons are often carried out in terms of principles of themes, forms, materials, and mediums, as well as aesthetic enjoyment. As more painting styles are absorbed through comparative methods, these works eventually converge and give rise to a universal phenomenon of painting and even of art as a whole.

This prompts James Elkins to critique Fong's methodology, particularly the spatial constructions applied by Fong in the context of Chinese painting. Elkins argues that Fong's ideas are influenced by modern painting practices yet the spatial arrangement in Chinese painting remains culturally distant.

(Elkins [2010]: 40-42) Elkins holds a deep suspicion of the concept of art history, stating that «(f)rom this farthest viewpoint, all of art history is a Western project, one with no place in China before the twentieth century» (Elkins [2010]: 140). In alignment with Elkins' concerns, we become more attuned to the realization that the analysis of pictorial forms or spatial arrangement has not fully delved into the intricacies of brushwork. In other words, the comparative gaze presupposes purity and equality among all artworks, abstracting landscape painting from its historical existence and social practice. As a research method, this way of seeing has originated from the development of museums in recent decades. The idea of museums is intricately linked with modern episteme, serving as a mean to specialize and organize knowledge by categorizing it into different fields, thus breaking the existence of an object into pieces. With these considerations, we aim to return to the historical reality of Guo Xi and his brushwork, seeking to elucidate the “Three Distances” from its most original position.

The “three distances” in guo xi’s world

We have currently few extant works attributed to Guo Xi, reportedly around 20, most of which were undertaken in his later years and composed as large-scale scrolls. For example, the painting *Mountains and Spring Snow* (《关山春雪图》) measures approximately 180 centimeters in height and 50 centimeters in width, while *Valley in Solitude* (《幽谷图》) is 168 centimeters high and little less than 60 centimeters wide. The *Early Spring* (《早春图》) painting, drawn on two pieces of silk, is nearly 160 centimeters tall and over 100 centimeters wide. These hanging scrolls all depict towering rocks, deep valleys, and a sense of grandeur and vastness. Even *Flat Distant View of Rocks* (《窠石平远图》), even composed relatively simply, is still a large-scale work measuring 120 centimeters in height and 167 centimeters in width, created on two pieces of silk. The immense size of the paintings naturally demands stronger control of brush, richer details, and more inclusive composition. Huang Tingjian (黄庭坚) praised Guo Xi, saying: «Although Guo Xi is old, his eyes are still bright enough to capture the essence of rivers and mountains». Naturally, Guo's robust brushwork is attributed to nothing but his continuous dedication to the practice and study of painting.

Meanwhile, displaying such large-sized paintings requires a proper open area. Literati are more used to place handscrolls on tables and appreciate them piece by piece in the solitude of their “small chambers” or “study pavilions.” Wu Hong describes the material characteristics of handscrolls, stating: «handscroll is the extreme form of what I call the ‘private medium’ of visual art

because only a single spectator can manipulate the painting's movement and control the pace of reading» (Wu [1996]: 61). By contrast, big pictures allow for simultaneous appreciation by groups of individuals. The manner of individual appreciation versus group appreciation differs, resulting in reactionary attitudes, including visual enjoyment and personal judgment. Handscrolls unfolded in private spaces evoke the viewer's personal interest and active engagement, while big pictures, observed by a group of people, aim to transcend individual preferences and pursue a less self-affected visual enjoyment and a more reflective aesthetic judgment.

According to Guo Si's (son of Guo Xi) note, after Guo Xi entered the capital of Dongjing (present-day Kaifeng/开封), he was appointed to create murals, screens, and other brushwork for places such as the Three Bureaus (三司使), the Kaifeng Prefectural Hall, the Xiangguo Temple, and Remonstrance Bureau (諫院). He once created the painting *Snow in the Northern Wind* (《朔风飘雪》) to decorate Emperor Shenzong's (宋神宗) felt tent. In fact, Guo Xi made countless screens of various kinds: palace screens for the cool pavilions on lotus ponds and carriage screens for the imperial procession. Almost every important palace exhibits Guo Xi's grand handiwork. It was mainly out of the emperor's favor and recognition that Guo Xi received an unparalleled reputation. However, this favoritism, relying on the emperor's personal preferences, also raised suspicions and caused interpretations that emphasized their political value over their aesthetic value.

As one among them, Alfreda Murck viewed the painting *Early Spring* as a political metaphor praising imperial favor. Mountains become symbols of imperial authority, and a person's position on mountains implies their position within the hierarchy of power: «*Early Spring* is an elegant metaphor for the success of the New Policies. It depicts a dynamic, harmonious society and an ideal socio-political hierarchy» (Murck [2000]: 34-36) If the peaks in the painting correspond to political power in reality, then Guo's understanding of the high-distance, «looking up from the foot of the mountain to its peak», will become a gaze of admiration toward authority. In this view, all the peaks in landscape paintings are suspected of embodying political power. Yet, standing in front of Fan Kuan's *Travelers by Streams and Mountains*, if the monumental rocks are seen solely as a figuration of the absoluteness of power, then where does the freedom of wandering through streams and mountains come from? Where can we find the spiritual enjoyment of literati? Consider this method; does this political perspective only apply to Guo Xi and the academy painters he represents, or does it apply to all literati painters? This question prompts us to examine the extent to which a political interpretation is effective in explaining literati paintings, particularly in reassessing the importance of the painter's self-recognition.



Fig.1 – Guo Xi(ca. 1010-ca.1090), *Early Spring*, 1072. Taipei, National Palace Museum

Guo Xi was appointed to the Hanlin Academy (翰林院) and «served as a Scholar of Arts in the Imperial Painting Academy» (McNair [2019]: 253). The emperor provides him with abundant learning resources and an esteemed status. In return, the painter consistently excelled in completing the tasks assigned by the emperor. *Linquan Gaozhi* records that Guo Xi was commissioned multiple times to undertake brushwork. In one account of a screen placed in “Small Hall of the Inner East Gate”(内东门小殿), the arrangement is described as follows:

Eight screens, with two at the front. On the left screen, there is a painting of pine and rocks by Fu Daoyin from Chang’an. On the right, there is another painting of pine and rocks by Li Zongcheng from Fuzhou. The six screens in the middle were painted by Guo Xi under the command of the emperor, depicting autumn scenery (屏八幅，面有两掩扇，其左扇长安符道隐画松石，右扇鄜州李宗成画松石，当面六幅，某奉旨画秋景山水). (Guo [2010]: 148)

Considering the layout of traditional Chinese palaces, the person seated in front of these “six screens in the middle” should be Emperor Shenzong himself. According to Guo Xi’s way of handling season scenery, autumn would be «clear and pure, with falling leaves evoking solemnity».

The screen, imbued with a sense of autumnal desolation, perfectly complemented the imperial majesty of the emperor seated before it. Such a screen is not only an object for aesthetic appreciation but also an essential part of the palace architecture. Wu Hong explains the political function of screens in the palace: «To the emperor, the screen is both an exterior object and an extension of his body [...] facing the other participants, the emperor and the screen merge into each other, appearing in unison to confront and control the other participants» (Wu [1996]: 12) Let us take Wu Hong’s idea and return to the *History of Song* (《宋史》) and we will find that “Small Hall of the Inner East Gate” was a significant place:

After the evening timekeeping starts, the emperor would go to the Small Hall of the Inner East Gate to summon officials, issue imperial orders, and handle official documents, for all matters involving the appointment of prime ministers or important affairs. (Ni [2004]: 3153)

During the day, Emperor Shenzong would conduct discussions with ministers in big palaces like the Purple Palace Hall (紫宸殿) and the Chonggong Hall (垂拱殿), but in the evening, he would make important decisions in this small hall. In such a small and informal palace, the screen serves to enhance the emperor’s dignity and better uphold the hierarchical distinctions between ruler and subjects. Wu’s interpretation reconstructs the general characteristics of screens in the imperial era. When this conceptual idea encounters specific circumstances, it inevitably undergoes distortion or even reversal at the experiential level, especially considering the principle of joint decision-making between the emperor and ministers during the North Song dynasty. Therefore, if one judges Guo Xi’s works purely as a mean to please imperial power, it will be difficult to grasp the spiritual freedom subtly implied in the landscape painting and understand the admiration of literati like Huang Tingjian and Su Shi for Guo’s works. In particular, it will be impossible to comprehend the intention of Guo himself, «one can fully enjoy the fun of a retreat to forest and spring yet without leaving the banquet» (不下堂筵，坐穷泉壑) (Guo [2010]: 11). Now, we will attempt to respond to the interpretation of Guo Xi’s paintings as an expression of reverence for power from three perspectives.

First, in direct conflict with this political interpretation is the fact that along with “high-distance,” Guo Xi proposed “deep-distance”: “peering through the front of the mountain to the back.” The perspective set in deep distance is a downward view, but with some sideways instead of a straight bird’s-eye view.

The eyes wander itself among top of hills, standing trees, edges of stones, flows of water. This relaxed viewing experience is continuously mitigating the oppressive feeling of high distance. Additionally, the details presented in deep distance provides a supplement to the simply brushed peaks in the far height. For example, in the deep-distance of *Early Spring*, there are upward-pointing tall pines, downward-hanging ancient pagodas, and dead branches with new leaves on trees. As the mountains recede into the distance, the depiction of the scenery within them becomes increasingly simplified. However, since the distant landscape echoes the nearby surroundings, although we may not discern the distant details clearly, we can still envision the forms it should possess. In this sense, the scenery in the deep-distance visually supplements the blurred details in the high-distance. This also depicts the skill Guo Xi used to maintain a balance between different perspectives.

Second, as Guo's particular principle of composition, huge mountain always takes the main surface of painting, to which everything else is secondary. However, whether this distinction inevitably falls into the metaphor of political power requires specific textual analysis. Guo has explained how to arrange mountains in his painting. The main peak is described as «the Son of Heaven, who was in the Yang position, receiving pilgrimages from all the lords, without the slightest momentum of being trapped or being rebelled against» (其象若大君，赫然当阳，而百辟奔走朝会，无偃蹇背却之势也。) (Guo [2010]: 39). On the surface, the relationship between the subordinate peaks and the main peak resembles a symbol of political power. Yet, Guo's expression here is not straightforward; instead, he borrows from the popular textual allusions of his time. As Zhu Liangzhi (朱良志) points out: «this passage actually comes from the 'Shi' hexagram (师卦) in the *Book of Changes*. The 'Shi' hexagram consists of five Yin and one Yang, with the Yang representing the ruler among the Yins, occupying the position of the sovereign. This is what is meant by "in the Yang position"» (Zhu [2006]: 112). Following these clues, let us take a closer examination of the "Shi" hexagram.

The "Shi" hexagram in the *Book of Changes* discusses the art of warfare, and its divinatory text states: «if the noble one maintains his perseverance, good fortune will come without blame» (Yang & Zhang [2011]: 80) Song literati commonly studied the *Book of Changes*. Zhou Dunyi (周敦颐), Shao Yong (邵雍), Zhang Zai (张载), and the Cheng brothers (程颐、程颢) were well-known exemplars. Their purpose in interpreting the *Book of Changes* was to extract keywords and clues relevant to reality from the divinatory texts and hexagram images, giving these abstract scriptures practical significance. This pragmatic spirit is most evident in the interpretation by Wang Anshi (王安石), the leading advocate of reforms. In his interpretation of the "Shi" hexagram, solidarity is the key to success in conquest:

Six at the beginning means: the army departs in regulation (律) [...] The “regulations” (律) are like “listening to the military signal with the same rhythm”. To take regulations only as the law is never seen in the early dynasties of three kings [...] (It starts at that) when King Wu (武王) attacked Zhou (纣), he blew the flutes, and the soldiers listened to the sound (初六，师出以律……荆公曰：‘律’如‘同律听军声’之‘律’，法律之律，三代未有……武王伐纣，吹律听声。). (Wang [2017]: 29)

Wang’s interpretation is linked to his own circumstances. As a reformer, he is aware that support from the emperor is necessary to promote new policies. Nevertheless, with the example of the righteousness of King Wu, he strongly expressed the aspiration of the literati to take responsibility for the world and lead the people on a righteous path. Wang Anshi hides himself behind the status of the emperor. Compared with his prudence, Cheng Yi (程颐) suggests that leading the troops as long as it is in accordance with the righteous way, the commander can have full control over all matters:

The second line (of Shi hexagram) is the master of this hexagram as well as the leader of the army, who has exclusive control over the army. Although the leader occupies a lower position in the imperial court, he gains exclusive control over the army. Since ancient times, when a general was appointed, he was able to order the army completely independently on the outside. In the army, he who has exclusive control follows the middle way; thus, it is auspicious and without blame (二乃师之主，专制其事者也。居下而专制其事，唯在师则可。自古命将，阃外之事得专制之。在师专制而得中道，故吉而无咎). (Cheng [2011]: 42)

Being away from the court, the generals were not bound by the emperor’s decrees. This was because the emperor, being distant from the battlefield, lacked real-time information. In essence, due to the emperor’s limited capabilities, the generals leading troops in the field could make independent decisions. From the interpretations of Wang and Cheng, it can be seen that the “Shi” hexagram contains the ideal aspirations that literati seek to achieve. Later, when Fan Zuyu lectured Emperor Zhezong (宋哲宗), he repeatedly advised the emperor to seek the guidance of virtuous literati. (Fan [2015]) Reflecting on Guo’s theory of painting, since he chose to quote the text of the “Shi” hexagram, the principle of arranging elements may not necessarily derive from political hierarchy but rather from the basic doctrines of cosmic order, human nature, or *Dao* of the world. Under the operation of *Dao*, the power dynamics of the human world are merely temporary manifestations of the former.

Finally, if we consider the proportions of “Three distances” in Guo’s works, we can see that the majority of his paintings are subject to “flat-distance.” In summer, he likes to draw *Summer Mountain in Flat-Distance* (《平远夏山》) and *Rain Clears, Flat-Distance* (《雨过平远》). In autumn, he likes to draw *Clear Autumn After the Rain* (《平远秋霁》), *Autumn Scene in Flat-distance* (《平远秋景》), and *Clear Autumn on Distant Waters* (《远水澄秋》). In

winter, there are *Snowy Stream in Flat-distance* (《雪溪平远》) and *Wind and Snow in Flat-distance* (《风雪平远》). Although Guo does not discuss how to address flat distance in a spring scenery, we can find his practice on the left side of *Early Spring*, in which the space gradually recedes with the gentle retreat of the water's edge, and the ink dissipates into the infinite void. As a skill of composition, the figure of streams and riverbanks is more conducive to creating a sense of levelness and vastness. As we have already mentioned, flat distance has remained a popular theme over time, especially in the later South Song and Yuan dynasties. People prefer solace in the tranquility and serenity conveyed by the flat-distance landscapes, as they reveal a lifestyle imbued with a sense of seclusion. To cater to this aesthetic preference, many landscape paintings consciously pursue expansive space with scattered brushes. In comparison to these works, Guo's works reveal the particular tendency of North Song landscapes. He does not simply pursue the impression of tranquility and relaxation but absorbs the grandeur and profundity at the same time. That is why we can find open spaces of dilution and simplicity as well as filled spaces of magnitude with details. Following the meandering trails or streams, the eyes travel in the abundant scenery. As the eyes arrive at open spaces, the gaze comes to rest, and spirits find expansion and release in the openness, almost as if settling down within the painting. In Guo Xi's understanding, he emphasizes the quality of landscape as both a place to travel and a place to settle in his paintings. In practice, he adopts the realism method and achieves the authenticity of the mountains and forests to evoke a spiritual projection and lead the viewers to seek their inner utopias.

No matter how inventive and skillful the painter is, we should not forget the essence of the painting, which is fundamentally an object of observation. Song literati had a particular penchant for engaging in observational activities. They believed that the ultimate truth contained in things could be grasped through observation and contemplation. Under the influence of the literati, Song emperors, from Taizong (太宗) and Zhenzong (真宗) to Zhezong (哲宗) and Gaozong (高宗), enjoyed inviting their subjects into the palace to observe various objects together. Considering Guo Xi's large-scale screens standing nearby, we may imagine that when the emperor and literati were viewing things together, these screens opened-up a world of mountains and waters from the closed space of power. The idealized scenery conveyed a sense of spiritual projection, diluting the pressure from the political hierarchy. With the landscape on the screens alleviating the sense of political tension, the emperor and the literati would have found it easier to interact and collectively savor the moment. As a result, Guo Xi's works facilitated literati's smoother integration into political activities.

Before Guo Xi, most painters like Zong Bing (宗炳) used painting for an individual to dispel distractions from the mind for contemplating *Dao*. Even while

lying in bed, one can wander spiritually through the process of seeing painting. This is exactly the private enjoyment of the literati. Meanwhile, Guo Xi perceived painting as having a deliberate significance in the interaction between the emperor and literati:

In the era of peace and prosperity, under a good emperor and kind parents, it would be wrong to go off alone and merely cling to one's own purity. For there is duty and responsibility which should not be ignored [...]. One can fully enjoy the fun of retreat to forest and spring yet without leaving the banquet (直以太平盛日, 君亲之心两隆, 苟洁一身, 出处节义斯系.....今得妙手, 郁然出之, 不下堂筵, 坐穷泉壑). (Guo [2010]: 11)

Compared to Guo Xi, Zong Bing's joy of painting reflects a passive attitude, as spiritual wandering becomes a necessary choice for him due to his physical disability caused by aging. By contrast, Guo Xi believed that the pleasure of painting is not meant to compensate for the regret of being unable to travel due to aging. The reason literati cannot linger among landscapes is that they bear an inescapable responsibility to the mundane world. They must undertake the duty of caring the country. The more literati immerse themselves in the secular world, the more they need the air of liberation that the landscape world provides. In this sense, landscape paintings offer moments of brief contemplation, temporarily alleviating political pressures for literati. One could say that the significance of painting lies in aiding literati to engage more actively in worldly affairs. The understanding of the enjoyment of painting shifted from previous passive reclusion to achieving self-fulfillment in court.

Three distances in linqua gaozhi

Guo Xi was already 60 years old when he was summoned to the Imperial Painting Academy, which held a collection of masterpieces and provided Guo Xi with ample inspiration and assisted him in developing his techniques. While continuously refining his skills, Guo Xi also gradually developed his understanding of painting by extensively studying the theories of his predecessors. In *Linquan Gaozhi*, the section on *Mountain and Water Instruction* (山水训), *Painting Intention* (画意), *Painting Techniques* (画诀), and *Painting Subjects* (画题) are believed to be written by Guo Xi. Among these four sections, the weight of *Mountain and Water Instruction* is the heaviest. The title suggests that this section is in the lineage with Zong Bing's *Preface on Mountain and Water Painting* (画山水序), Wang Wei's *On Mountain and Water Painting* (山水论), and Jing Hao's "Prose on Mountain and Water Painting" (山水赋). Guo Xi draws inspiration from the previous theories, which he merges with the ways of aesthetic appreciation and practical living of literati. If we place "Three-distance" within the

context of the framework of classical discourse, this approach will allow us to find the continuity of literati painters' heritage as well as the distinctive aspects of Guo Xi's theories.

In the above discussions, the concept of "Three distances" is emphasized on the arrangement of "height" (高), "depth" (深), and "flatness" (平) perspectives within the composition while overlooking the significance of "distance" (远). However, with the rise of landscape painting from the Six Dynasties, the pursuit of "distance" has been a central intention of painters, and their writings have consistently revolved around the imaginative power of "distance." For example, although Gu Kaizhi's (顾恺之) painting of Mount Yuntai (云台山) is lost, his *Record of Painting Mount Yuntai* (画云台山记) is regarded as one of the earliest texts about the formation of landscape painting. In this rather intricate essay, Mount Yuntai is identified as the place where Master Zhang (张天师) cultivated and tested his disciples. By following Gu's narration, one can almost see his unparalleled brush skill to shape clouds among rocks, position pine trees to create pathways and delineate the master's calm composure in contrast to the disciple's nervous apprehension. With his fantastical creatures, we are even more strongly transported from the real Mount Yuntai into the realm of the imaginary Mount Yuntai. Everyone standing before the painting wants to experience the fairyland, where the «mountain is high and people are distant» (山高而人远). (Gu [2015]: 38). It is precisely because of the "distance" that people see in the aura of the mountain. The distance maintained between landscape paintings and mundane reality aptly reflects the independence and freedom of one's spirit. In this sense, we understand Xu Fuguan's point that: «"distance" means the spiritual realm achieved by Daoism as well as the goal pursued by Daoism in their time» (Xu [2014]: 327).

In the Six Dynasties era, the painters had already mastered the skills of conveying distance through the use of size proportions. For example, Zong Bing created «a vertical stroke of three inches represents a height of a thousand *ren* (仞); a horizontal brushstroke of several feet depicts a distance of a hundred *li* (里)» (Zong [2008]: 45). Compared with the earlier doctrines, like «Water does not allow for turbulence, and people stand larger than mountains» (水不容泛、人大于山) (Zong [2008]), Zong Bing's utilization of proportions reveals a rational analysis and a realism approach, that is to take the enjoyment of landscape painting away from the secular function as «accomplishing cultivation, enhancing moral regulation» (成教化、助人伦). During the Tang dynasty, the awareness of distance is manifested in the varied treatment of details. Complexity in the distance could be simplified and the non-existent could be portrayed: «distant figures have no eyes, distant trees have no branches. Distant mountains have no stones, faintly resembling eyebrows. Distant water has no ripples, rising high to meet the clouds. This is the doctrine» (远人

无目，远树无枝。远山无石，隐隐如眉。远水无波，高与云齐，此是诀也。)(Wang [2015]:155). With only a few light strokes, the pictorial space opens up the vastness of the entire universe, directing the imagination of the absolute distance. After Guo Xi, Han Zhuo (韩拙) quickly put forth his new version of Three Distances:

There are mountain roots and shores, and the water waves stretch far away, which is called broad-distance. There are wild clouds and deserts, and those who seem to be invisible across wild waters are called misty-distance. When the scenery is reaching the horizon, faint and ethereal, it is called remote-distance (有山根边岸，水波亘望而遥，谓之阔远。有野霞暝漠，野水隔而仿佛不见者，谓之迷远。景物至绝而微茫缥缈者，谓之幽远)。 (Han [2016]: 68-69)

Compared with Guo Xi, this new version highlights the poetic sentiments conveyed in the misty and vague atmosphere of the painting. People are more inclined to emphasize the suggestive quality than visual fidelity; as we can see in this new “Three Distances”, and the simplification of techniques and the abstraction of figures ultimately converge toward the infinite extension of distance. Thus, in stark contrast to the trajectory of Western perspective methods, in landscape paintings, the rational visual aspect that was once manifested in proportional considerations gradually became faded into the poetic imagery of painting. *Linqun Gaozhi* documents Guo Xi’s preparations before painting:

Every time when he was going to paint, he sat under the clear windows, in front of the tidy desk. Incense was burning on both sides, and the brushes and ink were of excellent quality. He washed his hands and cleaned the inkstone as if he were receiving an esteemed guest. Only when his spirit is calm, and his mind is focused, he would proceed with the painting (凡落笔之日，必明窗净几，焚香左右，精笔妙墨，盥手涤砚，如迓大宾，必神闲意定，然后为之，岂非所谓不敢以轻心掉之乎？)。 (Guo [2010]: 31)

The old painter’s careful preparation imbues his workspace with a spiritual quality, filled with a sense of reverence and a dedicated attitude, all of which determine the success of the painting:

In any painting, regardless of its size or quantity, one must devote oneself wholeheartedly to it. Without diligence, the spirit will not be focused. The spirit must be present alongside the work; if the spirit is absent, the essence will not be evident. One must approach it with seriousness and solemnity; without seriousness, one’s thoughts will not be profound (凡一景之画，不以大小多少，必须注精以一之，不精则神不专。必神与俱成，神不与俱成，则精不明。必严重以肃之，不严则思不深。)。 (Guo [2010]: 28-30)

Scholars such as Xu Fuguan and Zhu Liangzhi associate Guo Xi’s pre-painting preparations with the spirit of “respect” (敬) in Confucianism. Xu Fuguan suggests that «respect allows the spirit to gather and penetrate into the object of creation, enabling a deep and complete understanding of the object» (Xu

[2014]: 333) Zhu Liangzhi also agrees with the emphasis on «concentrating the spirit, gathering one's thoughts, and observing in tranquility» (Zhu [2006]: 145). Influenced by Neo-Confucianism, they consciously linked Guo's attitude with the principle of "investigating things to attain knowledge," believing that concentration leads to the acquisition of cognition. However, within their interpretation, there emerges a modern epistemological pursuit of overcoming the distance between the gaze and the object as well as keeping the object under cognitive practice. This unaware pursuit conflicts with Guo's concern of "Three Distances." "High-distance," "deep-distance," and "flat distance" all require a distance between the object and the viewer so that eyes and minds may wander themselves in the gap. Zong Baihua (宗白华) describes visual enjoyment as the eyes engaging in a rhythmic movement amidst mountains and water and ultimately coming to rest in contemplation of Dao (Zong [????] 437). This interpretation perhaps aligns more with Guo's intention of painting, as «mountains and waters offer places for viewers to walk in, gaze on, wander through, and dwell within» (山水有可行者, 有可望者, 有可游者, 有可居者) (Guo [2010]: 19). In his proposal, what is noteworthy is that painting possesses the quality of being habitable. Guo Xi believed that since there are few landscapes in reality suitable for both habitation and enjoyment, paintings should compensate and provide us with an ideal dwelling place with perfect landscapes. Guo's proposition of habitation sounds unusual, considering that painted landscapes cannot physically bear the weight of a person. So, how can we understand the concept of "habitation" in this context? The idea of habitation goes beyond the physical act of residing within a painting. It is more about immersing oneself mentally and emotionally in the painting, finding a sense of belonging, tranquility, and engagement, as Guo Xi always carries a desire for the distant world: «The noise and shackles of dust are what people often detest; the misty realms of immortals and sages are what people often yearn for but cannot see» (尘嚣纒锁, 此人情所常厌也; 烟霞仙圣, 此人情所常愿而不得见也) (Guo [2010]: 11) Despite his longing for the realm of the legendary landscape, Guo Xi never advocated withdrawal from the world; instead, he adhered to engagement with the world. In this context, the world within the painting acts as a companion to the mundane world, always maintaining a sense of distance and parallelism with reality.

Guo Xi's idea of distance reflects the spiritual pursuit of Song literati, who used to praise and reference ancient times, while criticizing and disparaging the contemporary time. For example, a new policy is justified by referencing the earliest historical texts, which emphasize the ideal of an "inner sage and outer king" (内圣外王). They prefer to take the moral heritage from Yao-Shun (尧舜) rather than the Han-Tang dynasties. Fan Zuyu requested Zhezong (宋哲宗) to learn from Renzong and «take Yao and Shun as models, treating Confucian lit-

erati as guests and friends» (Fan [2015]: 131). The most typical example is the dialogue between Wang Anshi and Shenzong when the emperor inquired about the principles of ruling. He asked:

“What about imitating the art of emperor Tang Taizong?” Wang’s reply was, “Your Majesty should follow Yao and Shun. Why concern Taizong? The way of Yao and Shun is exceedingly simple and straightforward, essential but not roundabout, easy but not difficult. It is just that the people of this era cannot comprehend it and consider it unattainable (帝问为治所先，对曰：“择术为先”。帝曰：“唐太宗何如？”曰：“陛下当法尧、舜，何以太宗为哉？尧、舜之道，至简不烦，至要而不迂，至易而不难。但末世学者不能通知，以为高不可及尔。”) (Ni [2004]: 7313)

Han-Tang dynasties have always been regarded as the most prosperous eras, and Tang Taizong has been seen as an exemplary ruler. However, according to Wang Anshi, given that Han and Tang were seeking political power, they already forgot the importance of virtue in the state and deviated from the teaching of the ancient sages. So, it becomes a duty and a mission for Song literati to elaborate on the ancient virtues in the context of the present reality. Yu Yingshi particularly points out that the ancient world is so distant that Song literati hardly hold sufficient knowledge. Nevertheless, the lack of knowledge allowed them to reconstruct the ancient world based on their own interpretations. In this way, the meticulously constructed ancient world serves as a mirror, reflecting the aspects of the real world that need improvement. On the other side, the idealized imagination of the ancient world strongly encourages them in all practical endeavors.

During this historical time, Guo Xi was appointed to the Imperial Painting Academy. His paintings soon adorned almost every major palace. Besides the screen in the “Inner East Gate Small Hall,” Guo Xi created another significant work, namely the “Jade Hall Folding Screen.” After the emperor systematically renovated crucial palaces, he specifically commissioned Guo Xi to create a folding screen painting for *Jade Hall* by saying: «the Imperial Academy is a place where literati gather. Since you have a son who is a student, you should pay special attention to painting here» (翰苑摘藻之地，卿有子读书，宜与着意画) (Guo [2010]: 153). According to the record of the *History of Song*, “Jade Hall” is another name of the Imperial Academy. This name was given by Song Taizong. In the second year of the Chunhua era (淳化), Song Taizong wrote in an artistic font, “Jade Hall, the official bureau” (玉堂之署) on a plaque, and sent this to the Imperial Academy (Ni [2004]: 71). The Imperial Academy was the official bureau for literati to «compose imperial edicts, decrees, orders, and other similar documents» (Ni [2004]: 3153). This is to say that it is in Jade Hall that literati carried out the task of drafting edicts in response to the emperor’s command from the “Inner East Gate Small Hall.” What made this palace even more distinctive was that the emperor would also listen to literati giving lectures there and

read books together with them. Considering these various functions, Jade Hall is believed to be the place where the literati could fulfill their lifelong ambitions.

It was for this palace that Guo Xi was commissioned to create a screen. Shenzong specifically reminds Guo Xi of his boy, who is still a student but would one day serve the country in this palace. Guo Xi fasted and lived in seclusion for several days and finished it all in one go. What he made is a spring mountain scene. Although we cannot personally appreciate the magnificence of this great brushwork today, as a consolation, we can refer to the preserved *Early Spring* painting and the poem composed by Su Shi for this screen:

Jade Hall closes its windows during the day and opens the leisure of spring, since there is Guo Xi's painting of the spring mountains. The cooing of doves and the chirping of swallows awaken from their slumber; white waves and green peaks, truly not of this world (玉堂昼掩春日闲，中有郭熙画春山。鸣鸠乳燕初睡起，白波青嶂非人间)。 (Guo [2010]: 153)

To deal with so many pictorial figures, Guo Xi would adhere to his principle of composition and let all life conform to their natural order. Through this, he aimed to reveal the existence of *Dao* through his paintings. Compared to the screen in the “Inner East Gate Small Hall,” which aims to maintain the political hierarchy, the purpose of the “Jade Hall Screen” is to awaken the awareness of *Dao* through the tranquil mountains and forests. That is to say, the natural vitality of forests and streams evokes the memory of the ancient epochs, which provides a transcending point for the literati to reflect on their current situation. The painting makes visible the solidness of heaven and earth to the literati and releases them from the political tension so that they join in the harmony between heaven and earth, as well as between the emperor and his subjects.

Therefore, the concept of “distance” has a dual nature: it is taken from the emperor as well as from the literati. Guo's landscape paintings were used by the emperor to maintain the power relationship between the emperor and his subjects while also being taken by the literati as a manifestation of *Dao*, allowing them to shift away from the threat of power. In this sense, Guo Xi distinguishes “distance” into different forms, encompassing both oppressive high-distance and ambitious deep-distance and unifying their tension within the realm of flat-distance. Alfreda Murck's interpretation concerns the symbolic role of mountains in the political context, yet misses the fact that in the North Song dynasty, the relationship between the emperor and literati was not simply of command and obedience but rather a shared responsibility for governing the country together. The emperor promised a policy of “shared determination for the country,” which efficiently attracted selfless dedication from the literati. This spirit is expressed clearly by Fan Zhongyan: «When the people of the country have something to worry about, I am the first to worry about it; when

the people of the country have something to enjoy, I am the last to enjoy it» (先天下之忧而忧，后天下之乐而乐) (Fan [2015]). Song literati's passion for devotion to the country makes the need of self-preservation or self-edifying minute. Guo Xi, as one of them, expects that his brushwork could provide not only the awareness of *Dao*, including the mundane responsibility, but also the spiritual liberation found in the forests and streams. In this sense, Guo Xi's passion for painting was not solely motivated by his position in the painting academy but also by his concern and care for the well-being of the literati. While Guo Xi gained skills through imitating painting tradition, his recognition of painting extended beyond the traditional view. His intention is to balance active engagement and negative escapism, just as his skills manifested a conscious balance between complex details and clear composition, between the oppressive high-distance and aggressive deep-distance. After Guo Xi, literati painting gradually moved away from high-distance and deep-distance and leaned more toward flat-distance. These changes also reveal the external shift in the status of literati and the internal changes in their mindset. Therefore, when looking at the development of landscape painting in its entirety, Guo Xi fully recognized how brushwork could express the spiritual pursuits of literati most completely. In this sense, his idea of "Three Distances" is taken as the most comprehensive interpretation of his practice of painting.

The significance of "Three Distances" goes beyond the framework of composition as it expresses the spiritual movement of self between reality and the ideal, that is, between the transcendence of worldly matters and the aspirations of worldly ambitions. Guo Xi, on the one hand, occupies a prominent position in the painting academy, and this compelled him to continuously refine his technique to better serve the emperor. On the other hand, from the standpoint of literati, he also aimed to liberate himself from the repetition of techniques and pursue the forest-spring spirit that the literati aspired to. The asymmetry between Guo Xi's public identity and his self-recognition causes difficulty in categorizing his paintings by academic or literati painters. Similar difficulties arise in distinguishing the orientation of "Three Distances" between Daoism and Confucianism. Whether it be Guo Xi's painting practice or his idea of the painter's mission, Daoist and Confucian thoughts blend and permeate each other with ease, jointly cultivating the spiritual power that enriches the lives of Song literati. The multiplicity of "Three Distances" reminds us of the abundant intellectual resources behind literati paintings. We have examined different elements involved in landscape painting: brush skills, composition principles, political implications, and the self-recognition of Song literati. The operative ways in which these elements are interconnected provide an aesthetic intuition of the theoretical historical facts – the interplay of ideology and power, as well as the duality of cultural and political subjects embodied in Song literati.

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Notes

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- 2 Yuan/“远” has been translated as “perspective” by Lin Yutang (林语堂). This translation focuses on the ways of viewing in Chinese landscape paintings, but it loses the basic meaning of Yuan, which refers to the distance in space. Subsequently, instead of adopting Lin’s translation, I choose Fong Wen’s(方闻). See: Lin and Fong (1969).
- 3 王诜, a renowned contemporary painter of Guo Xi.

