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Chinese Landscape Painting in Stevens' "Six Significant Landscapes"

ZHAOMING QIAN

IN *PICTURE THEORY* (1994) W. J. T. Mitchell refers to Wallace Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar" as a "pure example" of ekphrasis (166), the literary mode defined by James Heffernan as "*the verbal representation of visual representation*" (3). "Anecdote of the Jar" (1919) certainly is not Stevens' first experiment with ekphrasis. Several of his earlier poems—section I of "Six Significant Landscapes" (1916), "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (1917), and section III of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" (1918)—may serve as excellent examples of the genre whose central goal, according to Mitchell, is " 'the overcoming of otherness,' " that is, "those rival, alien modes of representation called the visual, graphic, plastic, or 'spatial' arts" (156). One thing strikes us at once: all three earlier poems signify Stevens' effort to represent otherness in an intricate way. What he seeks to explore includes not only passage to the other genre (the visual) but also passage to the other age (the past) and the other culture (the Orient). His endeavor to cross genre, age, and culture at the same time is best exemplified by section I of "Six Significant Landscapes," a verbalized depiction of Song Chinese landscape painting:

An old man sits
In the shadow of a pine tree
In China.
He sees larkspur,
Blue and white,
At the edge of the shadow,
Move in the wind.
His beard moves in the wind.
The pine tree moves in the wind.
Thus water flows
Over weeds. (CP 73)

In this poem, Chinese landscape painting is represented in several ways: by focus on a single point of sight ("An old man" gazing out forever at those gazing at him); by choice of subject of all that is most elemental in nature and in Chinese landscape painting ("a pine tree," "larkspur,"

“wind,” “water,” and “weeds”); by reliance on a few simple strokes of description (five simple sentences without subordinate clauses); and by an almost monochrome tonality of gray and blue and white (“shadow” and “Blue and white”) that is known to have dominated Chinese landscape painting in the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries. The repetition of “Move in the wind” (“moves in the wind”) in the last five lines emphasizes only too obviously the painting’s power of showing motion in “still life” and turning every object, including the lone figure, into an integral part of the immense cosmos. There is a deep abiding joy that tranquilizes and uplifts. The poem, like the Chinese painting it represents, portrays a single impression: consciousness of the unity of all created things. In A. Walton Litz’s description, “Here nothing is wasted: the mosaic of images, one superimposed upon the other in the mind of the reader, makes a complex statement on the paradox of permanence within change” (39–40).

For those who are familiar with Chinese art, the style and sentiment presented here really recall a particular school of Chinese landscape painting—the Southern Song (or Late Song) landscape painting that flourished in the late twelfth to the thirteenth centuries A.D. The work of this school is valued today especially for its power of illustrating obtuse and enigmatic aesthetic beliefs shared by Taoists and Chan Buddhists.¹ Prior to 1916 when “Six Significant Landscapes” first appeared, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Mr. Charles Freer of Detroit (whose collection was later bequeathed to the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.) had already assembled a considerable number of landscape paintings by prominent figures of this school, such as Ma Yuan and Xia Gui.² Their scroll paintings are characterized precisely by impressionistic and fragmentary depiction of trees, hills, streams, and lone figures, by sweeping strokes of the brush that suggest the most with the simplest means, by the faintest application of color, and by means of expression for the artist’s sentiment. A single man in the midst of rippling pine trees, weeds, and waters in a Ma Yuan or a Xia Gui is enough to awaken in the mind of the viewer a sense of ease, leisure, and contentment, or, to borrow a term from the renowned Chan scholar Daisetz Suzuki, the Chan-Buddhist sense of “the Alone” (22).

In less than three years (February 1919), Stevens was to purchase from a Boston bookstore a copy of the Rev. Samuel Beal’s *Buddhism in China* (1884) and to read it with great gusto. His copy of the book, now housed in the Huntington Library, is filled with his marginal markings. A passage that refers to a certain contemplative school of Chinese Buddhists, for instance, is marked out with a bold vertical line and a star in the left margin:

This priest belonged to the Lin-tsi branch of the contemplative school of Chinese Buddhists. With them the essence of religion is quietism; to have no strong belief on any point except the

necessity of virtue and good conduct,—the rest will adjust itself. (Beal 198)

In the upper left of the front endpaper is Stevens' characteristic inscription:

W. Stevens
Boston
Feb. 12, 1919

At the end of the book's index is his notation, "The Awakened 83" (Beal 263), which singles out for attention a passage on page 83 that deals with the Chan Buddhist ideal of "the Awakened":

Then comes the climax. "Bodhisattva now remained in peaceful quiet; the morning sunbeams brighten with the dawn; the dusk-like mist, dispersing, disappears; the moon and stars pale their faint light; the barriers of the night are all removed; whilst from the above a fall of heavenly flowers pay their sweet tribute to the Bodhisattva." Then, passing through successive stages of rapt ecstasy, he traces back all suffering to the one cause of ignorance (*avidya*), that is, absence of light, and then himself attains the great awakened state of "perfect light." Thus did he complete the end of "self"; as fire goes out for want of grass, thus he had done what he would have men do; he first had found the way of perfect knowledge, then lustrous with all-wisdom, the great *rishi* sat, perfect in gifts, whilst one convulsive throe shook the wide earth. This is the condition of the Buddha, or the awakened, and by this name henceforth he is to be called. (Beal 82–83)

To our amazement, in Stevens' 1916 version of a Chinese landscape painting, this sense of "the Awakened," which Suzuki refers to as "the Alone," is well captured: we as readers are given an opportunity to feel the breathing of nature and to become one with it.

If Chinese landscape painting aiming to communicate the spirit of the Chan or the Tao has a traditional scene, this is it. First of all, the old man in Stevens' ekphrastic poem, as in the kind of Song landscape painting it endeavors to emulate, appears sitting in meditation, that is, in a state of active tranquillity that opens the way to Enlightenment. Note, by the way, that the old Chinese in section III of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" appear sitting in meditation also: they "Sat tittivating by their mountain pools" (CP 14). Second, the figure is shown to be perfectly in harmony with nature. The larkspur he gazes at may provide the shock that brings Enlightenment. The man who sees the larkspur moving in the wind suddenly, in the flash of a single thought, is no longer aware of himself. He is that larkspur, the larkspur that reveals universal reality. When the artist paints

the landscape, the essential breath is discharged through his brush: he captures it in its dazzling “suchness.”³ Third, the flowing water in the scene is a perfect symbol of Tao. As the *Dao de jing* (*Tao Te Ching*), the single most important text of Taoism, teaches, “The sage’s way, Tao, is the way of water. There must be water for life to be, and it can flow wherever. And water, being true to being water, is true to Tao” (Laozi, *The Illustrated Tao Te Ching* 41). Finally, the wind in the scene is just another symbol of Tao. According to the *Dao de jing*, “The Great Tao goes everywhere past your left hand and your right—filling the whole of space. It is breath to every thing, and yet it asks for nothing back; it feeds and creates everything, but it will never tell you so” (93).

In this light, it is not surprising that Stevens’ image of “An old man . . . / In the shadow of a . . . tree” is to be seen in numerous Chinese landscape paintings of the Southern Song period and thereafter. The New York collector C. C. Wang, for instance, owned an album leaf by Ma Yuan, which is now in the collection of Mr. and Mrs. A. Dean Perry, Cleveland, showing a scholar with a servant on a terrace beneath a pine tree gazing out into flowing waters (fig. 1). He sees bamboo leaves, gray and white, at the edge of the water, move in the wind. The pine tree moves in the wind. Thus water flows over rocks. In the Boston Museum of Fine Arts is a hanging scroll attributed to Lu Xinzong, another Southern Song painter, por-



Fig. 1. Ma Yuan (active 1190 to after 1225), *A Scholar and His Servant on a Terrace*
 Album leaf, ink and light color on silk, 9 ¾ x 10 ¼"
 Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. A. Dean Perry Collection, Cleveland

traying a Luohan (a Buddhist saint who remains in the human world) sitting in the shadow of a willow tree contemplating a lotus pond (fig. 2). He sees lotus, pink and white, in the pond, move in the wind. The willow tree moves in the wind. Thus water flows in the lotus pond. Evidently there is Buddhist poetry in both paintings.⁴ Likewise, the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., houses among its Song exhibits two valuable handscrolls, one attributed to Ma Yuan representing an old man admiring rising waters in a pavilion in the shadow of two tall pine trees and the other attributed to Xia Gui delineating two old men sitting side by side viewing waterfalls under a huge tree.

More examples of landscape paintings repeating this theme are to be found in books on Far Eastern art. Ernest Fenollosa, in *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art* (1912), a work Stevens might have gone through between 1912 and 1916, presents two: one attributed to the Song emperor Huizong (fig. 3)⁵ and the other by Xia Gui. It is worth quoting Fenollosa's version of a little poem given below Xia Gui's image: "Where my pathway came to an end by the rising waters covered, I sat me down to

watch the shapes in the mist that over it hovered" (42) (fig. 4).⁶ Also, in *The Illustrated Tao Te Ching*, a 1993 version of Laozi's influential treatise that Stevens could not possibly have seen, the illustration for the saying "The Tao is the breath that never dies" (37) is precisely an old man in the shadow of a pine tree gazing out onto a flowing stream. So is the illustration for the saying, "The sage's way, Tao, is the way of water. . . . [W]ater, you know, never fights; it flows around without harm" (41).

One painting that matches Stevens' poem to the smallest detail, however, is the handscroll *A Sage Under a Pine Tree*, a thirteenth-century imitation of a masterpiece formerly attributed to Ma Yuan (fig. 5). This painting is "a synthesis of exceptional concentration," to borrow a phrase from Stevens (NA 164), and has been in the Metropolitan Museum of Art ever since 1923. Though the treasure is not publicly displayed except on rare occasions, its image appears in numerous books on Chinese art. Indeed,

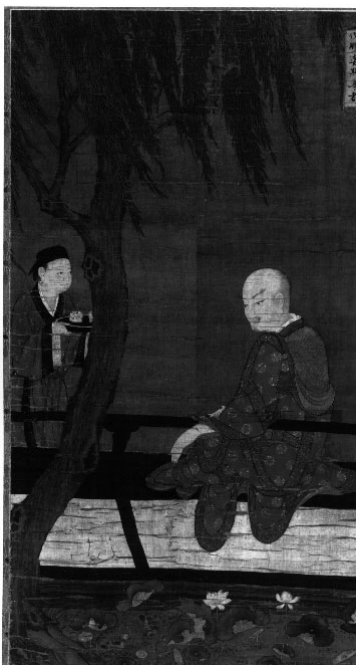


Fig. 2. Attributed to Lu Xinzong (mid-thirteenth century), detail from *A Luohan Contemplating a Lotus Pond*

Hanging scroll mounted as panel; ink, color, and gold on silk, 31 ½ x 16 ¼"

William Sturgis Bigelow Collection
Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts,
Boston



Fig. 3. Attributed to Huizong (1082–1135), *A Scholar Seated Under a Pine Tree*
Reproduced from Ernest Fenollosa, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*, Vol. 2 (1912)

The poem is, therefore, more likely to have been inspired by stored images,⁷ that is, Stevens' reminiscence of other Chinese landscape paintings repeating Ma Yuan's favorite theme. He might have seen one example of this tradition with admiration, and then another and another, in books and in art galleries. As he observes in his 1951 article on "The Relations between Poetry and Painting," "The mind retains experience, so that long after the experience . . . that faculty within us of which I have spoken makes its own constructions out of that experience" (NA 164). Here his theorizing sounds like Chan. Several facts appear to point to the truth of my assumption. First, as an enthusiastic admirer of Chinese landscape painting, Stevens went to quite a few exhibitions of Far Eastern art in Boston and New York during the years 1897–1916. Second, his interest in Oriental art spurred him to study the subject extensively in 1908–1909. Third, in his reading and viewing of Chinese art his taste appeared specially for Song landscape painting that illustrates the Tao or the Chan with "unnatural" clarity.

many may recognize it as the cover art for a volume of the Norton series of anthologies, *Masterpieces of the Orient*, edited by G. L. Anderson.

As can be seen, in the painting the invisible wind really becomes visible with the rhythmical movements of the pine tree, the weeds, the water, and the old man's beard. The flower that captivates the figure does not look like larkspur though, but Stevens could have taken it as such, if he indeed had this image in mind while composing the poem. On 25 July 1915, it may be remembered, Stevens was attracted toward some larkspur from China in the Botanical Garden of New York, and in a letter of that evening to his wife, he remarked, "I was able to impress on myself that larkspur comes from China. Was there ever anything more Chinese when you stop to think of it?" (L 184).

However, according to the records of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the handscroll *A Sage Under a Pine Tree* entered its collection in 1923. Research uncovers no evidence that the work was ever on loan to it prior to that date.



LANDSCAPE BY KAKEI (Hsia Kuei).

**“ Where my pathway came to an
end by the rising waters covered,
I sat me down to watch the shapes
in the mist that over it hovered.”**

Fig. 4. Attributed to Xia Gui (active 1180–1224), *Landscape*
Reproduced from Ernest Fenollosa, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*, Vol. 2 (1912)

Joan Richardson believes that Stevens' preoccupation with Oriental art was stimulated by his conversations with Arthur Pope, Witter Bynner, and Arthur Davison Ficke. She speculates, "Together they no doubt commented on pieces Fenollosa had gathered for the Oriental Collection at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts" (62). This is quite possible. During the years 1897–1900, the great Oriental collections of William Sturgis Bigelow and Charles Goddard Weld (which included the Fenollosa collection) were on permanent display.⁸ Stevens and his Harvard schoolmates who shared a keen interest in Oriental art must have visited the Museum of Fine Arts during their college years and their visual exchanges with China and Japan must have begun in the Museum of Fine Art's Oriental Wing. In fact, I must add, Stevens' three friends all became enthusiasts about Oriental art in their later careers. Arthur Pope, who lived with Stevens at 54 Garden Street in Cambridge, joined the faculty of Fine Arts at Harvard. He freely used Oriental artworks to illustrate his books on art. Among his illustrations for *The Language of Drawing and Painting*, for example, are five Song paintings from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and one Ming portrait and two Japanese prints from the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard. In 1945 he was appointed the third director of the Fogg Art Museum, which boasted one of America's finest Oriental collections. Witter Bynner, who used to eat midnight buckwheat cakes with Stevens at a restaurant in

Harvard Square called Ramsden's or " 'Rammy's' " (SP 67), traveled to China and Japan in 1917 and to China again in 1920–21. In early March 1909 when he and Stevens had dinner together at the Players Club in New York, the most exhilarating topic of their conversation was Oriental prints. Arthur Davison Ficke, "a great conversationalist" on the topic of Oriental prints (Gladys B. Ficke's phrase in her 1958 preface to *Chats* [8]), published a book called *Chats on Japanese Prints* in 1915. He took trips to China and Japan together with Bynner in 1917, and upon return turned himself into a distinguished collector of Oriental prints.

In his New York years, moreover, Stevens kept going to various exhibitions of Chinese and Japanese art. As his journal and correspondence reveal, in mid-March 1909 he saw "an exhibition . . . all from the Chinese, painted centuries ago" (L 137). On 2 January 1911, he "went into the American Art Galleries, where, among other things, they [were] showing some Chinese and Japanese jades and porcelains" (L 169). Stevens is known as a frequenter of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In a letter of 10 January 1909 to Elsie, for instance, he refers to the Museum's German pictures (L 116–17) and in a letter of 11 August 1912 to his wife he refers to its Flemish room (L 176). During these and subsequent visits, he could have ventured into the Far Eastern Room and seen various landscape paintings copying Ma Yuan's timeless motif. By 1913 the Metropolitan Museum of Art had acquired, among other pieces, Xia Gui's album leaf *Landscape*, the handscroll *Landscape in the Style of Guo Xi*, and, above all, the hanging

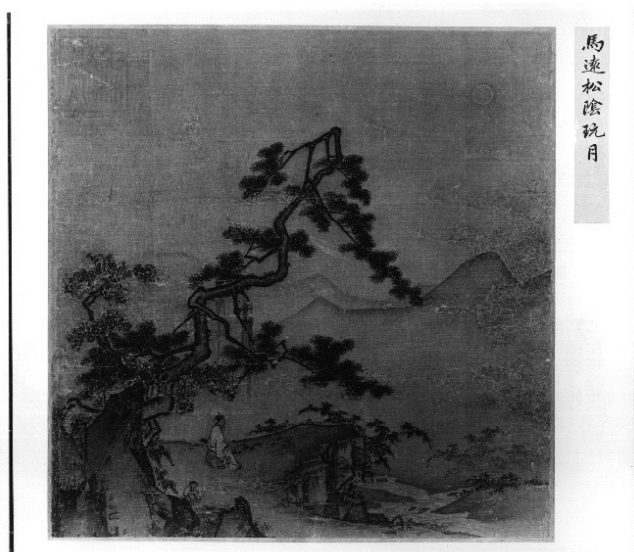


Fig. 5. Formerly attributed to Ma Yuan, *A Sage Under a Pine Tree*
Handscroll, ink and light color on silk, 10 x 10"
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1923. (23.33.5)

scroll *Scholar Under a Tree in Autumn* (fig. 6), a Ming (1368–1644) copy of Ma Yuan’s famous theme.

Also, Stevens may have visited other exhibitions of Chinese art in New York and its vicinity. Several of these got a great deal of publicity in the media. In March and April 1909, for instance, a professor and private collector of Chinese and Japanese art, Isaac Taylor Headland, had his remarkable collection of Chinese paintings displayed first at the Century Club and then at the galleries of the Pratt Institute Library Building, Brooklyn. In early March 1916, a matter of weeks before Stevens’ version of a Song landscape painting appeared in *Others*, and a period during which he might have been writing *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise*, an impressive exhibition of Chinese, Japanese, and Persian paintings was shown at the Bourgeois Gallery. Its prize was a large Song painting signed by Li Tang (said to have been a mentor of Ma Yuan), showing a sage and his followers on a mountainside in a landscape diversified by trees and streams with waterfalls. Thus was the scroll described in the *New York Times* (5 March 1916).

The museum that boasted “the finest collection of oriental art under one roof in the world” was, nevertheless, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (Okakura’s phrase, qtd. in Fontein 6). Between 1905 and 1913, Kakuzo Okakura (1862–1913), as successor of Fenollosa and curator of the Department of Asiatic Art (then the Department of Japanese Art), made an extraordinary effort to consolidate this reputation by acquiring among other things many more Song and Kamakura-Muromachi (fourteenth- to fifteenth-century Japanese) paintings. These included such masterpieces as the hanging scroll *A Luohan Contemplating a Lotus Pond* referred to earlier, the handscroll *Clear Weather in the Valley* formerly attributed to the Northern (or Early) Song painter Dong Yuan (907–960), Ma Yuan’s round album leaf *Bare Willows and Distant Mountains*, and the Muromachi painter Bunsei’s hanging scroll *Landscape* (fig. 7). John Gould Fletcher, who visited the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1914, was so overwhelmed by its



Fig. 6. Anonymous (Ming Period, 1368–1644), *Scholar Under a Tree in Autumn*

Hanging scroll, ink and light color on silk, 88 ¼ x 48"

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, John Stewart Kennedy Fund, 1913. (13.220.8)



Fig. 7 Bunsei (active mid-fifteenth century), *Landscape*
Hanging scroll, ink and light color on paper, 29 x 13"
Chinese and Japanese Special Fund
Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts,
Boston

notes into his journal. These included passages from Kakuso Okakura's *The Ideals of the East* (1903) and Laurence Binyon's *Painting in the Far East* (1908). It was Okakura's *The Ideals of the East* rather than Beal's *Buddhism in China* that first introduced Stevens to Chan Buddhism. From *The Ideals of the East* he might have acquired an understanding of Neo-Confucianism, "an amalgamation of Taoist, Buddhist, and Confucian thought, acting chiefly . . . through the Taoist mind" (156); and of the Chan, "introduced into China" through India but thoroughly transformed by absorbing "Laoist [Taoist] ideas" (160). That Stevens had carefully read Okakura is evidenced by his sensible statement, "Kakuzo Okakura is a cultivated, but not an original thinker" (SP 221). He seemed to think more highly of

Oriental collection that after two decades he still cherished a wonderful memory of the experience and had this to say: "The hours I spent then in the Oriental Wing seeing the Sung or Kamakura masterpieces with new eyes, re-educated me in regard to the purposes of a pictorial art close in spirit to my own poetry, and to the function of the poetic artist in reshaping the world. They rededicated me to the vital instinct, and to the soul of nature" (185). To a considerable degree, Fletcher had spoken Stevens' mind. Since Stevens traveled to Boston so frequently during that period (September 1906, October 1907, September 1909 with his bride, etc.), we have reason to believe that he had returned to the Museum of Fine Arts for its Song and Kamakura additions and had seen Ma Yuan and his Chinese and Japanese followers with fresh eyes.

Further, according to Stevens' journal and correspondence, in the spring of 1909 he did considerable reading about Chinese art in New York's Astor Library, where, six years earlier, Ernest Fenollosa, also a Harvard graduate and America's leading Orientalist, studied the same subject.⁹ On 14 May 1909, Stevens copied what he considered to be essential of his Astor Library

Binyon, the British champion of Oriental art, in whom he found “a kind of sedateness . . . less than tranquillity” (SP 222), and from whose profusely illustrated *Painting in the Far East* he was able to learn a great deal more about Chinese landscape painting.

Interestingly, Pound and Stevens, who both came under the impact of Binyon’s *Painting in the Far East* in 1908–1909, were charmed by different things. In fact, it may be noted, in mid-to-late March 1909, while Stevens was going over *Painting in the Far East* in Astor Library, New York, Pound was attending Binyon’s lectures on “Art and Thought in East and West” illustrated by slides every Wednesday evening in the Albert Hall, Kensington, London,¹⁰ and their younger fellow modernist Marianne Moore, then a senior at Bryn Mawr, was attracted to the Oriental art exhibits of the University of Pennsylvania Museum.¹¹ Different from Pound, who showed a strong taste for Tang art and poetry (notably Wang Wei and Li Bo), Stevens preferred “the refinement of Sung [Song] society” to “the glory of the Tang emperors” (SP 221). Into his journal he entered nothing but things of the Song. Of a list of subjects about nature and landscape:

The Evening Bell from a Distant Temple
Sunset Glow over a Fishing Village
Fine Weather after Storm at a Lonely Mountain Town
Homeward-bound Boats off a Distant Coast
The Autumn Moon over Lake Tung-t’ing
Wild Geese on a Sandy Plain
Night Rain in Hsiao-Hsiang (SP 222)¹²

he noted, “it is so comprehensive. Any twilight picture is included” (L 138). This list, the “Eight Views of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers,” a traditional series of subjects passed down from the Song period, is found to be copied from Binyon’s *Painting in the Far East* (133). It might have inspired him to write “Eight Significant Landscapes” (see OP 21), later changed to “Six Significant Landscapes.” To the best of my knowledge, Pound, who probably viewed both Chinese and Japanese versions of the “Eight Views” in the British Museum around 1910, did not refer to these famous scenes until nearly two decades later when he sent for an old Japanese manuscript book of his relative’s with both verbal and visual imitations of the scenes and produced his own version of the “Eight Views” in his *Seven Lakes Canto*.¹³

And of a little landscape poem by the Song poet-essayist-economic reformer Wang Anshi (1021–1086), which he copied out for his fiancée Elsie on 18 March 1909—

“It is midnight; all is silent in the house; the water-clock has stopped. But I am unable to sleep because of the beauty of the

trembling shapes of the spring-flowers, thrown by the moon
upon the blind"¹⁴—

he remarked, "I don't know of anything more beautiful than that anywhere, or more Chinese." He was quite enchanted by its imagery: "I am going to poke around more or less in the dust of Asia for a week or two and have no idea what I shall disturb and bring to light. — Curious thing, how little we know about Asia, and all that. It makes me wild to learn it all in a night" (*L* 138). Indeed, this little poem by Wang Anshi lingered in Stevens' mind for many years. Its image of the moonlight appears to have contributed to his Cubist image of the starlight in section V of "Six Significant Landscapes":

Not all the knives of the lamp-posts,
Nor the chisels of the long streets,
Nor the mallets of the domes
And high towers,
Can carve
What one star can carve,
Shining through the grape-leaves. (*CP* 74–75)

Like sections I, II, III, and IV, this is a variation "on the 'anti-rational' theme of [section] VI":

Rationalists, wearing square hats,
Think, in square rooms,
Looking at the floor,
Looking at the ceiling.
They confine themselves
To right-angled triangles.
If they tried rhomboids,
Cones, waving lines, ellipses—
As, for example, the ellipse of the half-moon—
Rationalists would wear sombreros. (*CP* 75)

As Litz aptly notes, the first five sections are all meant to mock "those habits of mind and language which screen us away from new perceptions of things as they are" (30).

Binyon, in *Painting in the Far East*, also pays tribute to Ma Yuan, Xia Gui, and their precursor Guo Xi (1020–1077),¹⁵ whom he refers to as the three "pre-eminent landscape masters of Sung [Song]" (136). Of Guo Xi, the artist who inspired Ma Yuan and Xia Gui, Binyon observes that he "published an essay on landscape, in which . . . [he] insists on [the 'far-off effect'] as necessary to unity. . . . The painter must have varied experience, must build on incessant observation, he says, but above all things he must seize essentials and discard the trivial" (128). Largely due to his influence,

according to Binyon, the “Sung [Song] landscape is built up of tones rather than of lines. . . . The artists worked almost entirely in monochrome; and they chose for subject all that is most elemental and august in nature” (128–29). There is no indication as to how this remarkable account impressed Stevens in 1909. But two years later, on a summer day of 1911 (19 August perhaps), Stevens is found to have been fascinated by the excerpt of an essay on Chinese painting in the newspaper—“The Noble Features of the Forest and the Stream” (*Linquan Gaozhi*) by Guo Xi (383–84), precisely the same essay Binyon has paid tribute to in *Painting in the Far East*. Of this essay Fenollosa remarks in *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*, published in the following year, “with the exception of some relatively dry portions, it is one of the greatest essays of the world.”¹⁶ To this he adds, “It proves to us what an integral part landscape had come to play in Chinese culture and imagination; and it shows us just why the Zen [Chan] symbolism of nature gave such a splendid insight into characteristic forms” (11). It is in this essay that the Song artist “expressed once for all the guiding sentiment of Chinese landscape painting.” The aim of landscape painters, according to him, is to enable those who wish to “enjoy a life amidst the luxuries of nature” but “are debarred from indulging in such pleasures” to “behold the grandeur of nature without stepping out of their houses.”¹⁷ The passage seemed to be directly addressed to Stevens, who like the Song artist had always preferred a solitary life in nature and who had always wanted to be able to portray the atmosphere and spirit of nature in his own art.

More than four decades later, Stevens was to echo Guo Xi’s sentiment and outlook in “The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain”:

It reminded him how he had needed
A place to go to in his own direction,

How he had recomposed the pines,
Shifted the rocks and picked his way among clouds,

For the outlook that would be right,
Where he would be complete in an unexplained completion:

The exact rock where his inexactnesses
Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had
edged,

Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,
Recognize his unique and solitary home. (*CP* 512)

Less than seven months before his death, upon receiving a large scroll from his protégé, the Korean poet Peter H. Lee, he was to remark of the delightful gift: “It represents my ideal of a happy life: to be able to grow old and fat and lie outdoors under the trees thinking about people and

things and things and people" (L 865).¹⁸ Note his emphasis on being "old," "outdoors," and "under the trees" when referring to his "ideal of a happy life." If this large scroll, now in the possession of his grandson, Peter Reed Hanchak, is evidence of his sustained interest in Far Eastern art, the clipping of the essay by Guo Xi enclosed in his 1911 letter to his wife is proof of his youthful fascination with the Song (or Chan) aesthetic, which he first tried his hand at in "Six Significant Landscapes" and then translated into his more influential "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (1917) and "The Snow Man" (1921).

William Bevis in *Mind of Winter: Wallace Stevens, Meditation, and Literature* (1988) demonstrates in some detail how Stevens was attracted toward certain Chan-Buddhist notions best illustrated in Chinese and Japanese art. He perceptively points out, "One of Stevens' most distinguishing and pervasive characteristics, his detachment, is meditative and therefore experiential in origin, and difficult to perceive from within our culture" (7). Further, he notes, "If one distinguishes Western and Eastern artists along the lines of interest in cause-effect events, assertion, anxiety on the one hand, and consciousness, negation, serenity on the other, then Stevens would seem at least half oriental" (240). There is no need for me to refer to all the evidence Bevis cites to build up his argument. One incident toward the end of Stevens' Cambridge years, however, is worth repeating because of its close relevance to his poem under discussion.

In composing the poem Stevens probably had in mind two summer evening scenes in Reading, Pennsylvania. After a long walk on the afternoon of 17 July 1899, he went through garden "in a half enchantment over the flowers." Larkspur, "generally purple, or mixed purple and pink," bergamot, "a big husky flower," and mignonette, "a little, vigorous flower" caught his eye, and he was mesmerized by "The least breath of wind shimmer[ing] over them." "[T]he impression of them is daffodylic," he noted in his journal. "It is impossible to say more—they are so splendid" (SP 44). The next evening, as his journal entry of 19 July 1899 reveals, he "lay in a field on the other side of the creek to the S.E. of the house and watched the sunset. . . . The moon was very fine. . . . [He] felt a thrill at the mystery of the thing and perhaps a little touch of fear" (SP 46). The two summer evening scenes struck him as so beautiful that for days he tried to find words for what these had meant to him. A week later, he concluded, "Diaries are very futile. It is quite impossible for me to express any of the beauty I feel to half the degree I feel it; and yet it is a great pleasure to seize an impression and lock it up in words: you feel as if you had it safe forever" (SP 48).

This incident should no doubt help to illuminate two essential facts. First, Stevens developed in early youth an interest in "consciousness, negation, serenity," which Bevis has described as the "other aspect" in his nature. Second, he apparently had a strong desire to express this aspect "difficult to perceive from within our culture." In his search for forms,

Chinese landscape painting, particularly Song landscape painting, displayed in the major museums of Boston and New York, naturally had an appeal for him, as it appeared to be the best means of expression for clarifying the otherness in his character.

Stevens has evidently translated certain Song (or Chan) tastes, along with the “other aspect” in his nature, into section I of “Six Significant Landscapes.” The poem, despite its surface simplicity, exemplifies Song landscape painting in its most complex and articulate status. Its image might be seen as a labyrinth of Southern Song painters’—and Stevens’ own—reflections on the relations of art, artist, model, and observer. As the poem opens, the “old man” appears unequivocally as an object, a model, a part of a painting: he “sits / In the shadow of a pine tree / In China.” At this moment when he is classically posed, he is perfectly identified with other objects—the pine tree, larkspur, weeds, and water. Like everything else the figure is being gazed at, studied, and portrayed. This image, however, is capable of turning itself (or rather himself) into an active observer/seeing artist: “He sees larkspur, / Blue and white, / At the edge of the shadow, / Move in the wind.” Here he is no longer identified (at least not completely identified) with seen objects such as the pine tree and the larkspur. With the action of seeing and imagining his image as a model/seen object is subverted or deconstructed. His role has shifted from that of a passive model to that of an active observer/seeing artist. In other words, the viewer *in* the landscape has metamorphosed into the viewer *of* the landscape. At this moment we might as well question our own identity as the reader/observer/artist: Is it possible that the image has turned the table on us and changed us also into the gazer/object who at once gazes and is gazed at? This ambivalence intensifies in the final four lines where all the distinctions among art, artist, model, and observer disappear and everything in and beyond the poem (or the painting it depicts) becomes one moving along with the motion of the great “cosmic rhythm”:

His beard moves in the wind.
The pine tree moves in the wind.
Thus water flows
Over weeds.

This is the perfect experience of the Tao or “the Awakened,” the perfect condition of the Chan or “the Alone.” In the hanging scroll *A Luohan Contemplating a Lotus Pond*, one recalls, the Luohan, or Buddhist saint, pays no heed to the servant who has been standing there, tray in hand, for a long while. In the handscroll *A Sage Under a Pine Tree*, the old man is oblivious in relation to this world, so oblivious that he never notices a servant boy playing here and there around him. (In fact, in Ma Yuan and his most faithful imitators’ treatment of their timeless theme, the lone figure is also oblivious of being gazed at/portrayed. He sits characteristically with his face turned away from the artist/viewer.) Likewise Stevens in his poem

never mentions a little boy or a young servant that is always there in the background of the Southern Song landscape. Like the old man in the Chinese painting, he is oblivious of *this* world and he sees nothing but larkspur, blue and white, move in the wind. Thus water flows over weeds.

Section I of "Six Significant Landscapes" may not be a very important poem in Stevens' canon, but ironically it provides the fullest case for approaching Stevens' ways of crossing genre, age, and culture, his peculiar way of modernizing his poetry. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Stevens evidently was attracted to Song landscape painting, which at once stood for visual otherness, historical otherness, and cultural otherness. The influence comes down to his recognizing the Song artists' power of getting the unsayable message of the Tao or the Chan said. This power made it possible for Stevens to build a model of values dependent not so much on "cause-effect events, assertion, anxiety" as on "consciousness, negation, serenity." Out of this model some of Stevens' most memorable lines emerge:

The river is moving.
The blackbird must be flying. . . . (CP 94)

. . .

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. (CP 10)

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Notes

I wish to thank Patricia C. Willis, Curator of American Literature at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Yale University, for inviting me to speak on this topic at the Yale Conference on "Modernism and the Orient," October 18–19, 1996.

¹By the time of the Song, Chan had become the predominant Buddhist sect in China. Like Taoists, followers believed in "non-discrimination; universal *sunyata* or emptiness, the simultaneous transcendence and immanence of the absolute; and the ultimate inadequacy of language" (Yu 114).

²Ma Yuan (active 1190 to after 1225) and Xia Gui (active c. 1180 to 1224), often referred to as the Ma-Xia school, used ink washes to create effects of light and shadow. Their style influenced Chinese landscape painters of later generations.

³According to William Bevis, "*suchness* refers not to the *idea* of the thing itself, not to a theory of 'no ideas but in things,' but to the *experience* of perceiving the thing itself with meditative detachment, in a state of no mind. . . . [I]n meditative experience, voidness and thingness can be joined" (60).

⁴Many of these paintings were inspired by landscape poems of previous ages communicating similar themes. Ma Yuan's *A Scholar and His Servant on a Terrace* in the collection of Mr. and Mrs. A. Dean Perry, for example, is indicated as an attempt to illustrate the Tang poet Wang Wei's landscape poem, "Bamboo Lodge." (The seal at the lower left bears the Chinese characters for *bamboo lodge*.) Another famous painting

showing an old man gazing out into waters in the shadow of a pine tree, *Sitting by a Limpid Stream Composing Poems*, illustrates a scene from the Six Dynasty poet Tao Qian's ode on "Homecoming." The scroll, dated 1424, is now kept in China's Liaoning Provincial Museum. According to the Chinese art critic Wen Fong, this piece "shows the return of the Southern Sung [Song] style in both figure and landscape art" (135).

⁵This scroll appears a close copy of Ma Yuan's scroll *Scholar Viewing the Moon*, now housed in the Mokichi Okada Association Museum, Japan (see illustration JM 28-003 in Suzuki III: 349). The attribution to Huizong is questionable.

⁶According to Fenollosa, Xia Gui "quotes [these] as a poem especially liked by a painter." Fenollosa's widow, Mary Fenollosa, who edited *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*, explains in a footnote that the poem, like the painting, has an "inner meaning" Fenollosa often gave in his lectures: "The human figure sitting and gazing out into a distance that is blurred with mist typifies the sage—the thinker, the philosopher,—who does not blind himself to the social and political discords of his day, but can gaze on them calmly, knowing them to be, after all, just a little less ephemeral than mists or rising water. . . . This is a type of mind that has been for centuries an ideal one to both Chinese and Japanese thinkers" (II: 44).

⁷James Heffernan calls these "memory-pictures," that is, "a place at which—if not in which—the poet has stored idealized images of sea and sky" (98).

⁸I am indebted to Dr. Jan Fontein, former director of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, for confirming this in his response to my query.

⁹Fenollosa visited the Astor Library in New York in November 1903. His notes taken there are to be found in Fenollosa Notebook 5 ("Chinese Intercourse") now kept at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Yale University.

¹⁰Binyon gave a course of four lectures on "Art and Thought in East and West" in the small theater of the Albert Hall, Kensington, at 5:30 on Wednesday afternoons, March 10, 17, 24, and 31, 1909. The lectures were illustrated by slides of Chinese and Japanese paintings from the British Museum and elsewhere. Pound was given a ticket by Binyon. In a letter to his parents, Pound remarked that he found the lectures "intensely interesting" (15 March 1909). The letter is kept in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

¹¹In her letter to her family, 28 March 1909, Marianne Moore said that she had joined Dr. George Barton and his Oriental History class in a tour around the oriental section of the University of Pennsylvania Museum. In the letter she remarked, "Many of the class strayed away and yawned and whispered 'Oh! were you ever so bored.' I found everything however to occupy me." The letter is kept in the Rosenbach Museum and Library, Philadelphia.

¹²The eighth view, "Evening Snow," is left out in the first edition of *Painting in the Far East* (1908). In a second edition (1913), Binyon corrects the omission.

¹³For an account of Pound and Chinese and Japanese copies of "The Eight Views" in the British Museum, see my *Orientalism and Modernism*, 13 and 16. For a full discussion of "The Eight Views," see "Eight Views of the Hsiao and Hsiang Rivers by Wang Hung," in Wen C. Fong, et al., *Images of the Mind*, 213-35.

¹⁴A translation of Wang Anshi's poem can be found in H. A. Giles's *Gems of Chinese Literature*, Vol. 1 (1889, 1926):

A White Night

The incense-stick is burnt to ash,
the water-clock is stilled,
The midnight breeze blows sharply by
and all around is chilled.

Yet I am kept from slumber
by the beauty of the spring:
Sweet shapes of flowers across the blind
the quivering moonbeams fling! (392)

Stevens might have seen this version. His set of Giles's *Gems of Chinese Literature* in two volumes (the 1926 printing) is housed in the Huntington Library.

¹⁵ Guo Xi (born c. 1020) was an influential landscape painter and art theorist of the Northern (Early) Song period. The one great work by him that has come down to us is *Early Spring*, a hanging scroll of landscape painted in ink and light color on silk and dated 1072. It is now kept in the National Palace Museum, Taiwan. The Freer Gallery of Art owns a brilliant copy of Guo Xi's landscape, *An Autumn Day in the Yellow River Valley*. While Stevens could not possibly have seen any genuine work by Guo Xi, he may have viewed Tan Song's *Landscape in the Style of Guo Xi* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In *Painting in the Far East* Binyon states, "Besides Kuo Hsi [Guo Xi], already mentioned, whose work seems almost unknown, Hsia Kuei [Xia Gui] and Ma Yuan, famous in Japan as Kakei and Bayen, are the pre-eminent landscape masters of Sung [Song]. All three belonged to the Northern school, and their work has the Northern vigour, combined with the wonderful delicacy and sensitiveness which marked the true Sung [Song] style" (136–37). Among Binyon's illustrations is a masterpiece by Ma Yuan, *Pines and Rocky Peaks*, said to be in the collection of Baron Yanosuke Iwasaki, Tokyo.

¹⁶ Fenollosa in *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art* provides extracts from a translation of this essay done in Japan by Japanese scholars (II: 12–19). See also John Hay's version of Guo Xi's essay in S. Bush and Shih Hsio-yen, eds., *Early Chinese Texts on Painting* (150–54).

¹⁷ The complete newspaper clipping, which Stevens enclosed in his 20 August 1911 letter to his wife, follows:

Nearly a thousand years ago the critic, Kuo Hsi, in his work, "The Noble Features of the Forest and the Stream," expressed once for all the guiding sentiment of Chinese landscape painting. He takes it as axiomatic that all gently disposed people would prefer to lead a solitary and contemplative life in communion with nature, but he sees, too, that the public weal does not permit such an indulgence.

This is not the time for us [he writes] to abandon the busy worldly life for one of seclusion in the mountains, as was honorably done by some ancient sages in their days. Though impatient to enjoy a life amidst the luxuries of nature, most people are debarred from indulging in such pleasures. To meet this want, artists have endeavored to represent landscapes so that people may be able to behold the grandeur of nature without stepping out of their houses. In this light painting affords pleasures of a nobler sort, by removing from one the impatient desire of actually observing nature.

Such a passage yields its full meaning only upon very careful reading. One should note the background of civilization, quietism, and rural idealism implied in so casual an expression as the "luxuries of nature." Nor should one fail to see that what is brought into the home of the restless worldling is not the mere likeness of nature, but the choice feeling of the sage. (Huntington: WAS 1926)

¹⁸ Stevens received two scroll paintings from Peter H. Lee. Of the first he remarked on 26 February 1952: "The scroll pleases me more than I can tell you. I have hung it in my own room. . . . I don't recognize the birds with their crests and strong feet" (L 741).

His comment about the second appears in the text. At the upper left of the first scroll there is a Chinese poem written out by one Tanyue Jushi on an autumn day in the year Xinji (18th in a sixty-year cycle):

From the Crystal Palace, unshut at night,
Issue sea fairies, reaching white waves;
For playing with the moon's reflection, my head lowered,
I am unaware that dew has soaked my clothes.

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