



LANDSCAPE WITH A VISION

Peter Reason finds a new sense of wonder in a traditional Taoist artwork

Existence: A Story

David Hinton

Shambhala, 2016

ISBN: 9781611803389

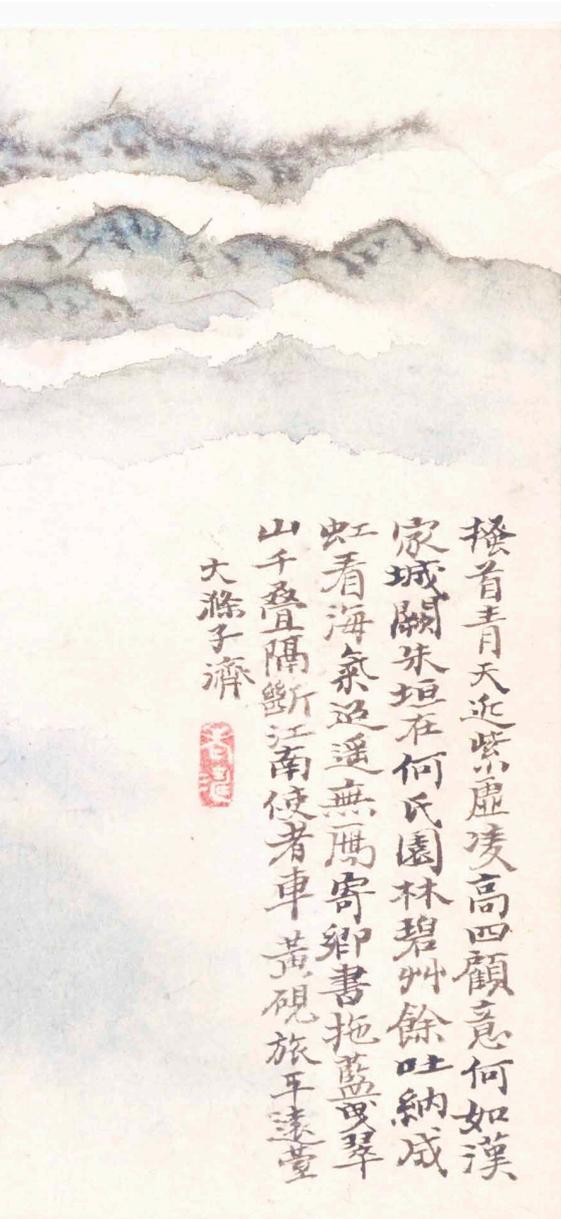
Contemporary writers have written extensive critiques of the Western mindset or worldview. A major theme in these critiques is that it creates a split between the human and the more-than-human, a dualism that is reflected widely: male versus female, civilised versus savage, reason versus emotion, and so on. But while we may have intimations of a more

just, holistic, participatory worldview, the challenge is always to bring philosophical abstraction down to lived experience. David Hinton's latest book does this better than many by taking us into the vision of the ancient Chinese Taoist landscape painters and poets.

Hinton is a renowned scholar of ancient Chinese language and culture who has translated all the major classics. This slender, beautiful volume centres around a 17th-century landscape painting by Shih T'ao, with reflections on the painting and the poem by Huang Yan-lü that is calligraphed down the side. The painting shows two figures contemplating a mysterious

mountain landscape. The poem, written at the time of the destruction of the Ming Dynasty by invaders, describes ruined cities, abandoned gardens and orchards. How are we to understand such artworks? Indeed, are they "artworks" in the modern Western sense, or more likely part of a spiritual practice?

Hinton invites us to understand the Chinese sages' starting point. This is not in the human person as a "centre of identity", a timeless independent soul: rather it is in an "immediate experience of empty awareness", a place "in the beginning, free of thought and identity" where deep insight into the nature of reality and consciousness can arise.



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 拖藍曳翠山千疊
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Hinton is pointing to a profound meditative experience in which the world is present to us with no preconceptions: “We encounter a revelation altogether unexpected and unimaginable: existence!” This is a place of intimate, immediate experience that reveals a further discovery: that “there is no distinction between empty awareness and the expansive presence of existence.”

It is here that Hinton introduces a phrase that I find compelling: what we encounter, he writes, is a single existential tissue, an *existence-tissue* that is also our most fundamental self. The term ‘existence-tissue’ fills a hole in English vocabulary: we don’t have a word

that integrates matter and experience. It points, not to a world where things and consciousness are separate, but to a living process that we humans are *inside*.

A challenge for us in the modern West lies in part in language. Western linguistic thought, and the English language in particular with its firm distinction between verbs and nouns, creates a world of static entities that are drained of life. In particular, pronouns detach a transcendental soul from a stable objective reality. In contrast, classical Chinese language does not separate a centre of identity out from the tissue of existence: it lacks restrictive pronouns and most other grammatical material. In the Western perspective, language is prior to the world: in Genesis, God created the universe by speaking commands, and in modern constructionist thought language creates our reality, if not the real itself. For the Chinese sages, language is part of the living Cosmos, an organic expression that is itself “wild”, emerging as the existence-tissue strives to describe and explain itself.

From this perspective we can see that the landscape painting and poem that Hinton explores in *Existence* should not be taken as the expression of a transcendental soul on a mountaintop, but “as the existence-tissue experiencing itself”. The practices of landscape painting and poetry writing are themselves spiritual disciplines that at their most profound level open consciousness to an immediate experience of existence-tissue.

Hinton shows carefully how the absence of pronouns and other grammatical markers makes it impossible to determine whether the poem comes from the perspective of the two figures in the painting or from the mountains themselves, and that ambiguity is essential to the beauty and verity of the expression. The poem, the painting and the calligraphy all reflect the mysterious movements of existence-tissue by investing the language and the brushwork with as much emptiness as possible.

Of course, ancient Chinese sages also experienced themselves as centres of identity in their everyday lives; there was a necessary rupture between the named thing and existence-tissue. As the first lines of the *Tao Te Ching* tell us (in Hinton’s translation), “The Tao called

Tao isn’t the perennial Tao / A name that names isn’t the perennial name.” Even the first word, ‘Tao’, “whispers our separation from the cosmos”. But this was not a metaphysical rupture, but rather part of the living process in which the “ten thousand things” emerge into Presence from Absence. For the whole is not simply the boundless presence of existence-tissue: as we sit in our space of primal emptiness, “we encounter yet another marvel, breathtaking and heartbreaking too: things disappear! ... Absence is the generative void from which this ever-changing realm of Presence perpetually emerges.”

Throughout the book, Hinton shows how this primal cosmology of Presence/Absence is central to Chinese landscape painting, calligraphy and poetry. These are disciplines, for the practitioner and for those who look at the paintings and study the poems, for deconstructing the experience of the self as centre of identity, and opening to the primary experience of empty awareness.

I find Hinton’s book enormously influential in my own writing practice, linking the tradition of Nature writing to the ecological crisis of our times. I suspect it will be equally so for practitioners of other arts who wish to heal our rupture with the “ten thousand things”, the more-than-human world. The cowslips that are glowing in the spring sunshine will in a matter of weeks become seed pods; spring itself turns to summer and then autumn and winter; I have lived a full life and in maybe ten or fifteen years I will be dead and buried; whole empires and cultures rise and fall; species emerge, flourish and become extinct; continents drift around the globe, and this drifting is arguably essential to the emergence and continuation of life on Earth.

Hinton’s book suggests that the job of the artist is to reinvigorate a sense of wonder. He challenges us to experience our art as existence-tissue describing, understanding, celebrating itself through us as it emerges into presence and retreats into absence. Surely this is central to any art practice that wishes to be relevant to these times of astonishing beauty and loss? R

Peter Reason’s book *In Search of Grace: An Ecological Pilgrimage* will be published by Earth Books later this year.