Of Moon and Man: A Close Look at Chinese Landscape Painting

By Ricardo Dobekow

The moon has long held special significance in Chinese popular mythology, and as such has been depicted in numerous works of literature and art. Its smooth, reflective surface was said to be the home of animals like the rabbit and the toad. It was also considered an island paradise floating in the skies – a dreamland. In the eighth century the imagery of the moon changed, becoming a residence of the legendary Queen Mother of the West, perhaps under the influence of Western ideas that came to China by way of Buddhism. Based on an investigation of poetry, and ninety landscapes from the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, Jeonghee Lee-Kalisch’s Das Licht der Eden (junzi zhi guang) (English: Light of Nobles) gives an insight into the relationship between the illuminated celestial body and its male observers. The primary aim of this study is to pursue this relationship, and as a result the author deals with questions that revolve around men. Where do the noblemen ponder on, or dreaming of, while gazing upon the moon? What kind of association with the moon did they have? Lee-Kalisch also examines the stage names (of) individual painters and literati, in order to communicate an idea of the relationship with the moon. Through an investigation of literary patterns, mainly from Tang period poetry, the author shows that the purity of the moon is associated with the pure and chaste heart of the noble. Du Fu, Li Bai, and Tu Fu are taken as example to illustrate situations whereby literati gather together on a terrace near the water, watching the moon, drinking wine, and playing the flute or erhu. They describe solitary men viewing the moon, sitting in a boat floating on the river. These people are portrayed dreaming of leaving society and its rigid structure behind, searching for freedom of spirit and body, and even immortality.

The second part of this study accentuates the formal composition, and focuses on the characteristics of moonlit landscapes, and without men viewing the moon. Lee-Kalisch concentrates on the compositional element of an invisible line between the person and the moon. By using schematic drawings the author is able to outline the different viewpoints and experiences of painter, up to the Ming period, for a diagonal line between the viewer and the moon. This stereoscopic effect enables art works to become more vivid. A vertical line between the moon and its viewer is often used to intensify the distancing effect of the composition. Frequently, depictions of literati, the moon, and a third element, such as flying birds or another person, form a triangle.

How the moon and its emitted light are represented in the paintings is another jeonghee-ripe theme for research. Is there reflection of the moonlight? How are shadows dealt with? The author points out that questions such as these are repeatedly neglected by Chinese artists. They emphasize, not a naturalistic representation of a moonlight landscape, but rather the manipulation of the essential, the qi, of the moon. In comparison with Western realism with its representations of changing light, Chinese artists rely upon a more subjective form of representation. The inscriptions on the paintings or the title are used to heighten the intention of the painter. A circle in a fair sky will evoke the perception of a moonlight at nighttime. The means of representation – be it colour, ink or wash – is secondary. Nonetheless, the publication would have been more complete if it had provided the reader with colour, and not only black-and-white illustrations. As a whole this work, although interesting, unfortunately is marred by the monotonous treatment of the subject matter. The whole complex of animals, plants, and beautiful women in moonlight, as well as representations of the moon in religious paintings, have been treated in this study. This is unfortunate but understandable considering the enormous range of material researched in undertaking this analysis. As such this text can only be intended as an overview or an introduction to the topic. It provides the reader with a wide range of material and is a solid basis for further research.

By Paul van Els

Differentiation and Integration in Daoism

A member of the Ba minority in South-West China in the second century CE, a female poet of the Tang dynasty, an elite scholar-official of the Ming, and a priest in present-day Taiwan – what do these people have in common? One commonality between the two is that they are ‘Daoists’, either self-styled or labelled so by others. But what is ‘Daoist’ about all these people of different times, places, professions, sexes, and cultures? What defines their ‘Daoist identity’?

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From antiquity the moon has been considered one of the most attractive elements of nature, and men have often been depicted pondering its light. In Chinese, the ‘literati viewing the moon’ is an important strand in the history of art. As an expert in East Asian art history, discusses this specific genre of poetry and landscape painting.


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