

HUMAN PRESENCE IN LANDSCAPE PAINTINGS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF *MENSCHENBILDER* IN WESTERN AND CHINESE PHILOSOPHY AND ARTS

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This intercultural and interdisciplinary project (including philosophy, art history and cultural studies) explores how the Menschenbild, i.e. the understanding of the human being or – in Chinese – 人 which evolved in the Western and Chinese philosophical traditions over the last few centuries has shaped as well as materialized in the respective traditions of arts, especially in landscape paintings. The projects objective are:

- To bring together Chinese and Austrian experts from philosophy, art history and cultural studies in two workshops to work on the issues of the project
- To further explore the claim that analysing landscape paintings is indeed a significant method for discovering and exploring culturally defined understandings of the human being
- To prepare a joint research proposal to be submitted at a European or Chinese funding scheme (e.g. FWF, ERC, or NSSFC).

Since its genesis, the genre of landscape painting has never been purely about the landscape. Whether the hidden anthropologic premise of the birth of landscape paintings is about domesticating nature or naturalizing human life is debatable. It is, however, clear that the human presence in landscape painting – Western and Eastern ones alike – is pervasive and profound, not only given in the human figures who pose, wander or dwell in the landscapes, but also in the artefacts and any other traces that suggest human existence and interference. Moreover, even the chosen perspective and the manner of revealing an unpeopled wilds itself implies a particular way of looking that is already conditioned by cultural values, emotions and by a specific Menschenbild. This fact becomes especially explicit through a comparative browse of the Western and Chinese landscape paintings.

We contend that landscape paintings can be understood as highly amplified articulations of culturally-defined understandings of the human being, and that they thus provide holistic and intuitive realisations of Menschenbilder. Landscape paintings bring together human beings and nature. As such, they provide crystalized conceptions of some of the most familiar philosophical themes related to Menschenbilder, such as the nature of human beings, the human-nature relation, the nature vs. culture/nurture argument, etc.

One main asset of the project is its intercultural comparative perspective which will provide us with an unique potential for critical self-reflection. It will, for example, reveal that the term “human-nature relation” itself is a Westernized expression that has already incorporated in a specific Menschenbild which suggests a dichotomy that is not entirely self-evident in the Chinese aesthetic and philosophical tradition.

In addition, an intercultural comparative perspective can shed light on many meaningful details hitherto neglected in both Chinese and Western art history and philosophy. For example, the use of the solitary and unidentifiable rear-view figures in landscape painting – rather common in Chinese landscape painting but less usual in the Western counterpart until very late (in Caspar David Friedrich’s work) – might imply a peculiar human self-awareness which is highly cultural and historical and cannot be taken for granted. In fact, either in the West or the East, the idea that a particular view of nature is worth to be called landscape and enshrined with the help of art, is itself culturally determined, historically conditioned and highly related to a specific Menschenbild.

In the project, we will work on these issues by taking into account the following material: (1) Chinese and Western thought of the human being, (2) Chinese and Western histories of landscape paintings, and (3) art theories and aesthetics.

