

Patterns and Pathways: The Artistry of Cui Fei

Jerome Silbergeld

Supreme means going on;
Going on means going far;
Going far means returning.
-- *Dao de jing* ¹

The early writings about Chinese calligraphy and painting set forth an elaborate if somewhat cobbled-together mythology. Two propositions prevail among these early myths. The first, that Chinese writing and painting were *not* a human invention but "move together with the four seasons and arise *from nature itself* rather than from (human) contrivance"² The sacred tortoise of the warm Luo River and the dragon-horse of the Yellow River bore the auspicious designs, carried forth humankind's ur-images. Another line of design-origination stems from the four-eyed Cang Jie, sometimes referred to as an official historian of the (mythical) Yellow Emperor who, "mated the footprints of birds and of tortoises, and at last determined the forms of written characters." By this, mankind was empowered with the ability to depict and record, organize and share their cultural memories with posterity; thereafter, as told in the mid-ninth century by Zhang Yanyuan, "Creation could no longer hide its secrets . . . supernatural beings could no longer hide their shapes, therefore the demons howled at night."³ The second tenet of faith was that calligraphy and painting arose together as one (and map-making should be included)⁴; their differentiation came later, by human hands and activities,⁵ and despite their evolved differences, their fate has remained entwined ever since, entangled in the lingering similarities and remaining overlaps. Over time, while some painters have struggled to paint more and more as the eye sees, other painters have struggled to be more "calligraphic" in their brushwork, and a major feature of Chinese painting's history has been the ongoing working out of this relationship. The tenth-century landscape painter Dong Yuan was said to have reduced his brushwork mostly to lines and dots, rather like those of the calligrapher, and in later centuries he was rewarded for this with great popularity among China's literati painters. A century after Dong's death, the polymath Shen Gua (1031-1095) wrote that Dong's images visually dissolved when seen close at hand: "Seen from close by, [Dong's painting] shows no resemblance to physical forms, but when seen from afar, landscape scenery unrolls before the eye."⁶ Step forward and Dong's painting ceases to be a painting, returns to its mutual origins with calligraphy and their joint parentage in nature's tracings.

When one steps forward to look at artist Cui Fei's calligraphy (Fig. 1, 2) it ceases to be calligraphy, and it becomes what calligraphy was believed to derive from: from nature's own markings. *That*, more than anything else, is what Cui Fei's art is "about," tracing the



Fig. 2. Cui Fei, *Manuscript of Nature V Tendrils*, Dimensions variable. Installation view from Museum of East Asian Art, Cologne, Germany, 2016

图2. 崔斐《自然的手稿之五》，藤枝，针，可变尺寸，德国科隆东亚艺术博物馆展览现场，2016

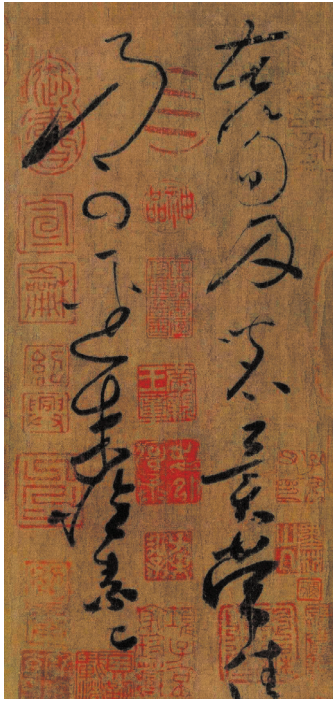


Fig. 3. Huaisu, *Bitter Shoots Manuscript*, Ink on paper, Mid-8th century, Shanghai Museum.
图3 怀素,《苦笋帖》,书法,唐,上海博物馆



Fig. 4. Yan Zhenqing, *Eulogy for a Nephew*, Ink on paper, National Palace Museum, Taipei.
图4 颜真卿,《祭侄文稿》,书法,唐,国立故宫博物馆,台北

origins of art back to its natural origins. Tracing, step by step, going backward into the mythic origins of art by going forward in her own art. Step by step, forward to the past.

Once upon a time, Chinese calligraphers couldn't say enough about nature's ability to inspire (Fig. 3, 4): "When I see extraordinary mountains in summer clouds, I try to imitate them," said Huaisu (737-799) to Yan Zhenqing (709-785). "Good calligraphy resembles a flock of birds darting out from the trees, or startled snakes scurrying into the grass, or cracks bursting in a shattered wall." Yan replied: "What about the staining patterns that result from rain running down a wall under a leaky roof?" Huaisu rose and grasped his hand, answering, "Indeed!"¹⁷ Huaisu and Yan Zhenqing were two who shook Chinese visual aesthetics to its core, changing the order of things forever after. As if the old masters of elegant writing had suddenly run out of new ideas, Huaisu and Yan, and their contemporaries Zhang Xu and Wu Daozi, turned directly to nature, rough and fresh, imperfect yet flawless, for a new (renewed) and endless source of inspiration. Theirs was a revivalist movement, sophisticated while primitivist, historically- and self-conscious. The same may be said of Cui Fei. Yan's taste in calligraphy, boldly inelegant, represents the best of what Cui Fei might have seen in Xi'an's Forest of Stele during her senior class trip there in college; Huaisu's strokes twist and turn like Cui Fei's grape tendrils. "I think I *use* calligraphy," she says, "but it's not calligraphy. It's a more original state." Meaning: her work is about a time before calligraphy became calligraphy, ceased being painting; a time before art became separate from nature, before changing styles and local fashion emerged, when Creation was still the great artist.

Cui Fei studied calligraphy in both elementary school and high school, so she knows what it is and what it is not. Her vegetal installations (and her phototransfers, cast bronze sculpture, and works in other media) share an interest in calligraphy with the art of several other important contemporary "calligraphers" who have supplanted the brush with other tools, including the computer: learned and artistic metacalligraphers like Xu Bing (b. 1955) who hand carves his homemade "characters" (pseudocharacters, wholly illegible), who computes his neocharacters (legible, with a bit of training), and globally borrows traffic signs to pursue his interests in language, its uses and abuses, and who has recently taken to "painting" landscapes by using actual leaves and grass and other vegetation, the very stuff of which real landscapes are made (rather than the somewhat arbitrary substitution of pine soot applied for the sake of illusion) – organized in a lightbox; and like Cai Guoqiang, who prefers gunpowder and fireworks to pine-soot ink. The artist today is confronted with an endless array of possible media and formats, installation and mixed media often preferred, and the viewer is dazzled with an endless display of choices. Beginning perhaps with the rise of photography as a recognized art form, the traditional definitions of art – brush with oil-based pigments on canvas, flat, rectangular, framed, suspended – have given way to a dramatic expansion of admissible media, formats, and definitions. The artist seeking to shed tradition, or else hoping to explore it in greater depth unburdened by dependence on it, may let go of her or his medium in order to understand it better. What does it mean to compose a landscape out of landscape materials? What does it mean to compose a calligraphic inscription out of natural materials that are unable to convey literary content but wholly endowed to convey states of motion and energy, mood (consider the thorns, compare the seeds) and even values?

Cui Fei's *Manuscript of Nature* series, exhibited here, can be walked back to earlier works and to earlier origins, along convergent and complex pathways. Each step back adds something to an understanding of what and where her work is now. Her original composition in this series, *Manuscript of Nature I*, 1999 (Fig. 5), is the first of several steps that we can take back toward the origins of Cui Fei's art and toward its motivation.

Manuscript I was Cui's unmistakable first turn from semi-representational painting toward something more abstract, more like writing. Made three years after coming to America, Cui Fei's own memories of what went into making this work take us back to 1992, the year of a study trip made by her art academy senior class, travelling west to Xi'an, with its age-old "forest" of stone-carved inscribed stelae (the Bei Lin), and from there far west to Dunhuang. *Manuscript of Nature I* has the black gloss of an ink rubbing taken from one of the Forest of Stele's library of monumental stone tablets, capturing the chipped and chiseled feel of knife and time on the slow-to-give-way surface of stone. Cui's comment on the work emphasizes not only the sense of ink and stone but one other element that was equally new to her artistic formula: plant materials. "The leaves," she says, "look like [those marks] on the stone tablets, so memory of my visiting Xi'an had something to do with that work, something universal through West and East, through the ancient until now. I wanted to say this message is timeless so I used the stone tablets. At that time I wasn't really thinking about calligraphy." The leaves came from an area with oak trees near her studio, gathered one by one, carefully – connoisseurially, one might say – but they could have come from anywhere. Leaves rather than words; nature's leaves, nothing one could disagree with. Stone and vegetation together, in her words, "to emphasize the timelessness and lasting significance" of the work's messages.

Cui Fei describes the process of producing this mixed media work:

By painstakingly making each leaf's impression onto the panel, I intended to reinforce the importance of these messages from nature. I began this work by first applying plaster on to the panel. While the plaster was wet, I pressed the leaves onto it. After the plaster was completely dry, I then peeled the leaves away to create a cast of their impressions. The leaves are painted to be a warm light gray in the contrast to the dark cold gray background. The leaf casts are rubbed with charcoal, conté, and pastel to get a fossil-like image; the background is painted with oil, and marks are made with a painting knife and screwdriver. By doing so, I try to create an aged and ruined image to imitate the engraved calligraphy in ancient Chinese stone steles which has been in practice since the fourth century B.C. The heavy textured surface, the fossil-like leaves, and the cracks give the overall painting the ambiance of an ancient ruin.

The reference to calligraphy is here: the Chinese characters – readable by some – are replaced by leaves, universally "readable" by all; but the format, the array of leaves, is that of Chinese manuscripts. It beckons the viewer to "read." Everybody can read a leaf, and almost nobody can. One has to study it closely and to learn how to study it, and to consider what one is trying to learn from it. "When I look at the twigs, at the thorns, each one is so interesting," says Cui Fei, "all of the twists and turns are so interesting I can hardly even grasp it! I don't even think I can compete [with nature, so] I just can borrow from it." She examines closely the spatial design of every twig, seed, leaf, and thorn, "especially when I make bronze castings and sculpt each detail by hand." (Fig. 6) Those chosen few materials that make it to her studio are carefully selected, sorted and stored (as in a pharmacy or an auto supply store), and later called on for use. In this, Cui Fei exerts a methodical discipline that she feels she gained from her mother, Zhang Zhenlan, an elementary school teacher. Cui says it is because the vegetation "had a life in it, that is why the line in it is so powerful," and that is the life line that underlies the calligrapher's aesthetic, derived from the calligrapher's own life and traced, recorded, by brush and ink. The power of the line, derived from nature; the power of the word, the basis of culture: these two are fused and formatted in these works, into the universally recognizable epistolary and publication patterns of China. Here, they suggest but refuse ordinary legibility and force the "reader" to cope instead with Chinese visual aesthetics and even to contemplate their historical traditions.



Fig. 5. Cui Fei, *Manuscript of Nature I*. Mixed media on panel, 96 x 48 in, 1999.

图5. 崔斐《自然的手稿之一》，板上综合材料，244 x 122 cm, 1999



Fig. 6. Cui Fei, *Tracing the Origins XVII*, detail, Bronze on concrete, 96 x 72 x 28 in, 2012, Commissioned by Socrates Sculpture Park, New York.

图6. 崔斐《溯源之十七》，局部，铸铜，244 x 183 x 71 cm, 2012. 由纽约苏格拉底公园委托创作



Fig. 7. Cui Fei, *Manuscript of Nature VI_II*, detail, Seeds, Dimensions variable, 2016.

图7 崔斐《自然的手稿之六_二》，局部，种子，可变尺寸，2016



Fig. 8. Cui Fei, *Manuscript of Nature VIII_III*, detail, Thorns on board, Triptych, each 13 1/4 x 24 1/2 x 1 in, 2016.

图8 崔斐《自然的手稿之八_三》，局部，树刺、板，三联幅，每件 35 x 62 x 3 cm，2016

Cui Fei's *Manuscript VI* (Fig. 7) is an exception – it is legible (although like any language, only to some). It is the first chapter, opening words, of the classic *Dao de jing* rendered in Braille, a celebration with seeds of the honey locust for the sightless and sighted alike of the elegance of Braille, whether appreciated with the eye or the finger tips, both for its extending of literacy and for its design value. These Daoist words of wisdom were first written out, perhaps with a primitive brush and ink on bamboo slips, well over two millennia ago, extolling the virtues of retreat and humility in the quiet surround of nature, ironically in a world beyond words and language:

The Way that can be told of is not an Unvarying Way;
The names that can be named are not unvarying names.
It was from the Nameless that Heaven and Earth sprang. . . ⁸

Seeds, tendrils, leaves, each medium has something of its own generic character – tendrils flowing and linear like cursive script, thorns like small-regular script). Seeds offer hope. "With thorns," says Cui Fei, (cf. Fig. 8, made from black locust thorns) "the messages are sharp and full of criticism. The messages from nature are more like warning signs, such as human beings' overuse or abuse of the environment and we already see the result in global warming."

Cui Fei's *Manuscript* series expanded into a second series, *Tracing the Origin*. She describes the two series in this way:

These two are two sides of one coin. In the *Manuscript of Nature* series, I always use found natural materials, such as tendrils, thorns, or leaves directly in the work and compose them to a Chinese calligraphy format. It looks like nature wants to tell us something. The *Tracing the Origin* series is a way of using calligraphy as an example to show nature influencing culture – in these works I have the original natural materials and then using different art making techniques, such as printmaking, sculpture, photographs, casting, I try to take the original object and to translate it into different works: to translate it into photography, from three-dimensional into two-dimensional, that's one simple switch, or others such as phototransfer. What I do [in phototransfer] is to xerox the tendrils to make a black-and-white photocopy and then using a solvent I transfer them one by one onto a larger sheet of paper, original scale, so that it looks like Chinese writing. By now, it is two times detached from the original object and in the end result you cannot recognize that it is tendrils. It looks more like writing than a tendril. So this is borrowed, like Chinese characters in the beginning being created from images in nature, and over time the characters being developed, simplified, abstracted. Now, if you look at the characters – in simplified Chinese characters especially – you cannot find that relationship to nature. So I want to use this from Chinese calligraphy and from Chinese characters to imply that *our* relationship with nature also has become detached.

A third series of Cui Fei's work is emerging, adding the calendar to other conventional text-presentation formats. Each thorn represents a day, each line a month, each column a year. The *Not Yet Titled* installation in Fig. 1 was made of sharp honey locust thorns, some as long as five inches and intended to designate human tragedy. This work might remain "nameless," Cui Fei suggests. No name is big enough to encompass the unspeakable tragedy it is intended to designate.

Calligraphic artists attempt to match nature's creative processes and to leave the mark of their having done this to share with others. In Cui's art, the ink and its brush mark are

dismissed and the marks are taken directly from nature's own growth-force, the artist selecting, organizing, and serving as editor of nature's own products. Nature's editor. Gardeners do the same, working with what is there. In using grape tendrils, for example, Cui cuts the material, brings it to her studio where she cuts it further or breaks it by hand, selects, organizes, and stores it; but she does not bend or manipulate to shape the material and she only tries to make it look "sort of like" calligraphy by borrowing some of calligraphy's well-known conventions.

At age 29, did Cui Fei's *Manuscript of Nature I* mark a major moment in her art? "Looking back," she says, "it is very clear – at that time I didn't know – that this was a turning point." What came before Cui Fei's *Manuscripts from Nature*? What led to this pivotal turn in her career? Looking back again over those six years to just her trip to Xi'an's Bei Lin, Cui submitted three paintings at graduation time for her senior project. One of them was entitled *Track I*, 1993 (Fig. 9). It is abstract and structurally complex, and only gradually (with the help of a title) does it reveal a specific subject, a rutted muddy roadful of tracks (tire tracks are visible left of center). The artist confirms a period of frustrated artistic and personal searching that didn't end in satisfaction until her *Manuscripts* project began more than half a decade later. The image might be a challenge for some to identify but the subject is not at all new to most in the Chinese audience: mud on the ground, tracks in the mud, a pathway, a direction or an indication of being at a standstill, a discarded cigarette sometimes seen. Here are tracks that lead nowhere in particular, a painting followed a year after her graduation by the third in a growing series, the 1994 painting less attractive, more brutal, more clearly indicative of this sense loss of direction. It was a time of difficulty, in the decade following the death of Chairman Mao, the opening up of China and installation of a business-based dominant ethic. As the Cultural Revolution, which Cui Fei was too young to remember well, had swept away everything old, so China chose to throw everything "old" away again, this time meaning Maoism and along with it, any lingering clear sense – Confucian or Maoist – of right and wrong. Suddenly, everyone wanted to get rich fast, including artists. Many cheated and used connections, some protested cheating and favoritism, others quashed protests, and China became fragmented, distrustful, disillusioned." I was very confused at that time. In art in college, many students directly borrowed the Western artists' styles and just used them. I did the same thing, but I didn't like that. I didn't even want to make art any more, it seemed so dried up. I had to go back to find my interests." But finding a pathway back to the origins did not just happen at once and left Cui Fei in a period of puzzlement. By the time she painted these works she had grasped the nature of the problem, had turned it into art, and was working it through by means of her art. For a third graduation painting Cui was required to include a figure, so from a photograph she took at the outset of her class trip she painted a typical Shandong peasant ("very honest looking, very sincere") set against the background of a mountain scarred and fragmented (the title is *The Crack*, Fig. 10) like the ground in *Track I*. Like her, the peasant sits unsure of which way to turn in relation to the fracture mapped in stone behind him – stone that is mountain, mountain that is China, China that is fragmented. The emerging art world in China mirrored other changes: the sudden abundance of new styles that replaced the old Socialist ("Soviet") system, the loosening of government control and departure of government support for the arts, the commodification of artistic values. "Chaotic" best describes the situation at that time."

Cui Fei learned in time that "Sincerity must be part of all I do, so I didn't have to go the way that many people went. What bothered me," says Cui, "was that I didn't know how to deal with the changes. I was young and with all my experience I didn't know how to respond. I used those two paintings to indicate my difficulties." At the age of 23, Cui's troubled paintings won her teachers' praise and she graduated with their high regard. These works take on an added dimension for being part of a dialogue among artists at that



Fig. 9. Cui Fei, *Track I*, Mixed media on linen, 39 x 28 1/4 in, 1993.

图9.崔斐《痕迹一》，布面综合材料，100 x 73 cm，1993

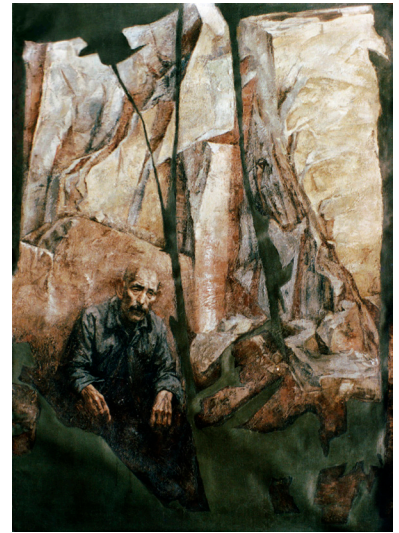


Fig. 10. Cui Fei, *The Crack*, Mixed media on linen, 96 x 70 in, 1993.

图10.崔斐《裂痕》，布面综合材料，244 x 178 cm，1993



Fig. 11. Cui Fei, *The Door*, Oil on linen, 24 x 19 3/4 in, 1989.
图 11. 崔斐《门》，布面油画，70 x 50 cm，1989

time, artists for whom their chosen language was that of stone and mud, marked and the patterned and bearing in that pattern the whole weight of the times.

Stepping back again, now another four years to Cui Fei's high school graduation project, in 1989 she submitted a work done from an earlier student travel session to a Shaanxi province peasant village in the Xi'an area (Fig. 11). Students based their work on sketches or photographs that they had made (in Cui's case, on several photographs). Here, as old China was finally embracing everything new and Western, the young Cui Fei was clinging to the old: old architecture, old ways of life, old materials, old media (oil paints), old style (Classical Western rather than Soviet School), old as in nature itself. Cui's doors are formally, symmetrically posed, like some old, unsmiling ancestral pose steeped in propriety. The subject "is very old and distorted," claims Cui. "It has its character and tells a story, equal to a very old person. The image itself shows the time and the life that it went through, sculpted by time. . . . recording life's process." Here we find a link through nature to Cui Fei's fractured stone, her muddy tracks, her stone-carved leaves, her reliance on the old and the natural. The artist was now 19. Her subject is on the human side, working with the natural. And that is as far back as the record of Cui Fei's work can take us.

There is, however, one more path further into the past left to travel, leading from Cui Fei's muddy *Track I* (1993, age 23) to a revealing source. Cui Senlin (b. 1943) , Cui Fei's father, was an art editor for the Shandong People's Fine Arts Publishing House and a painter. Not a political person, he nonetheless did his required share of political art, including paintings of Party Chairman Mao Zedong and Prime Minister Zhou Enlai and of unnamed, heroically energized peasants. In one of these works (Fig. 12), *Chairman Mao Inspects Beiyuan* (now a part of urban Jinan)(1971-72), painted while head of a production team that included Meng Jinyuan, Jie Weizhuo, and Zhao Dechang, Mao is made the focus of a full-length, informal view by placing him at the end of an earthen path with ruts and edges converging toward him. This was not meant to be an unusual composition but rather to fit well into the prescribed national mold. For example, in 1972, Chen Yanning's iconic propaganda painting, *Chairman Mao Inspects the Guangdong Countryside* (Fig. 13), similarly enframed several of the politically correct visual features of its day: Mao strides forward confidently, joined by a spontaneously swelling crowd, friendly and easy-going. Mao Zedong's forward path is centered between the broad tire tracks of a large tractor, which leaves a proud record in the mud of industrial modernization being brought to the countryside by a forward-looking peasant-friendly government. The two paintings, Cui's and Chen's, are strikingly similar in many ways and the Chairman has hardly even changed his attire from one painting to the next, as if both were following some well-known prescribed model. What is most important in each painting is the track, the path, the clear way forward, straight and narrow, one way only, a certain course chosen and pioneered by a determined leader – a clarity to be lost after Mao's death, by much of China as it was by artist Cui Senlin's artist daughter, in a time of public and personal confusion.

The history of the pathway and its significance in Chinese painting history is a subject too big to be written; in bits and pieces, it is written about with great frequency.⁹ For Cui Fei, the clarity that disappeared in her college years and was mapped in her art by fracture and jumble was replaced by a more subtle artistic wisdom gained by guiding her art down a different path, leading forward into the past, reaching back to the values lodged in Chinese art's mythic past, before painting and calligraphy became separate arts media, before they were even considered art at all, when nature itself



Fig. 12. Cui Senlin, Meng Jinyuan, Jie Weizhuo, Zao Dechang, *Chairman Mao Inspects Beiyuan*, 129 x 216 in, Oil on canvas, 1971-72.

图 12. 崔森林, 孟晋元, 解维础, 赵德昌《毛主席视察北园》, 布面油画, 583 x 363 cm, 1971-72



Fig. 13. Chen Yanning, *Chairman Mao Inspects the Guangdong Countryside*, Oil on canvas, 67 x 116 in, 1972, Sigg Collection.

图 13. 陈衍宁, 《毛主席视察广东农村》, 布面油画, 173 x 295 cm, 1972

was a nameless art. Chinese culture has always made much of traces and remains, of patterns and pathways left by those who pass by, human and otherwise, exemplary markings left by Heaven as hints and clues to its truths. "By adhering to the Way of the past, / You will master the existence of the present / And be able to know the origin of the past. / This is called the clue of the Dao."¹⁰ Cui Fei's art has both sought out old traces, the very oldest, and left its own. Whether script-based and abstract or painted and pictorial, her work has cherished informational pathways and patterns. From bits and fragments, it has charted directions and values. It has both pursued the mythic origins of its own genus and told its own narrative through patterns traced in mud and stone, through their array of leaves and tendrils and the seeds of new generations.

¹ *Tao Tê Ching* [*Dao de jing*], trans. Ch'u Ta-Kao (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1937), 37.

² Zhang Yanyuan, *Lidai minghua ji*, trans. William Acker, *Some T'ang and Pre-T'ang Texts on Chinese Painting* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1954), 61.

³ Zhang Yanyuan, in Acker, 62-63.

⁴ See the analysis of the relationship between Chinese painted landscapes and maps by Maxwell Hearn, "Pictorial Maps, Panoramic Landscapes, and Topographic Paintings: Three Modes of Depicting Space During the Early Qing Dynasty," in Jerome Silbergeld, Dora C. Y. Ching, Judith G. Smith, and Alfreda Murck, editors, *Bridges to Heaven: Essays on East Asian Art in Honor of Professor Wen C. Fong* (Princeton: P. Y. and Kinmay W. Tang Center for East Asian Art and Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University, 2011), 93-114.

⁵ Zhang Yanyuan in Acker, 64; see Acker, 81-110 for remarks on Zhang's presentation of these myths.

⁶ Quoted in Shou-ch'ien Shih, "Positioning Riverbank," in *Issues of Authenticity in Chinese Painting* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999), 132.

⁷ Adapted slightly from Wen Fong, "Chinese Calligraphy," in Robert E. Harist, Jr., and Wen C. Fong, eds., *The Embodied Image: Chinese Calligraphy from the John B. Elliott Collection* (Princeton: The Art Museum, Princeton University, 1999), 46.

⁸ Arthur Waley, trans., *The Way and Its Power: A Study of the Tao Te Ching and Its Place in Chinese Thought* (New York: Evergreen, 1958), 141.

⁹ My own dissertation long ago was motivated by the obscuring clouds and truncated pathways in Gong Xian's painted views of China conquered by Manchus in the mid-seventeenth century.

¹⁰ *Tao Tê Ching* [*Dao de jing*], trans. Ch'u Ta-Kao, 26.