Landscape and Its Representation in Early Modern Chinese Pictorials: 1884~1937

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The modern Chinese history is the history of revelations. However, ordinary Chinese people had hardly seen the outside world before the appearance of the early modern pictorials. The pictorials, which were full of images, provided opportunities to most of Chinese to see the world through their own eyes for the first time in the late nineteenth century. To Chinese, the “outside” or “exterior” world meant not only the other nations, but also the other regions of China. The landscapes in the early pictorials became one of the primary channels for ordinary Chinese to become acquainted with the world. What are the characteristics of the visual representation in the early modern Chinese pictorials? What kind of changes happened on the visual representation of landscape?
What did the changes mean? The author would like to present some detailed discussion on these issues by close reading the landscapes from modern Chinese pictorials.

**The Uses of Photography**

Ancient China understood the relationship between the rest of the world and itself based on the idea of Central Nation (中央之国). Although Matteo Ricci (利玛窦) introduced the new geographic theories, such as the earth as a sphere, the idea of five continents etc., to China in the Ming Dynasty (14th-17th century), China still insisted that it was the whole world, or that at least it was the center of the world. But by the end of the nineteenth century, the situation had totally changed. The exterior pressure and the interior embarrassment compelled China to face an inevitable reform. However, China was still waiting for some new technology or equipment to be introduced to help implement reform, to improve the behavior of beholding the world to be a possibility, to fulfill an enjoyment and a need.

In the mid-nineteenth century, photography was invented in France, and then rapidly spread around the world as a totally new way of seeing. At the same time, landscapes around the world were also recorded in photographic images and transferred widely.

It was in *Dianshizhai Huabao* (《点石斋画报》，DSZHB) that, for the first time, Chinese pictorials printed foreign landscapes in large quantity. In 1895, DSZHB published a serial of foreign landscapes (14 images which included 4 foreign landscapes) after Yan Yongjing (颜永京), who had traveled around the world, showed slides he had taken during his journey. At the end of the serial, DSZHB added an image reflecting the process when the slides were showing to emphasize the painter as a witness of the event. The painter not only imitated the slides to create the landscapes, but also recorded the progress of showing the pictures following his experience.

Compared with the large quantity of the DSZHB’s readers, the slides show’s spectators were so poor in number. Photography had less influence than lithographic images due to its limited audience and spreading magnitude. However, according to the serials of images, lithographic pictorials obtained the contents from imitating photographs. It was the first time in the Chinese history for a Chinese painter seeing the outside world through the camera held by a photographer, and then created the new images, which would be applied to transfer in a much larger circumstance, based on the original photos. To painters, their situation had been changed due to photography: they were no longer the artists who painted for themselves. Their painting objects shifted or extended from natural mountains and rivers to various landscapes (for example...
buildings). Furthermore, the primary aim of their painting was no longer to amuse themselves but to provide opportunities for more ordinary people to learn new knowledge, to broaden their outlook.

A sentence in one of the frames of the pictures deserves special attention, for it mentioned that Yan Yongjing was explaining the contents as he showed the slides: “某山也，某水也，某洲之某国，某国之某埠也。⋯⋯”[2] Here Yan Yongjing emphasized the signified objects of the photo by not distinguishing the photographic images from the objects be shot. The documentary characteristic of photography was cultivating the idea of “photographic image is identical with object itself” from the very beginning when the new technology was introduced to China. This idea is fundamentally different with the traditional Chinese art theory or even the general knowledge. According to the ancient Chinese, paint could only be regarded as the copy of certain object, even though the best painter did it.

However, things changed remarkably. Photography was doomed to bring people the illusion that the difference between signifier and signified disappeared. That is to say, a photograph always makes people take the photographic image for granted as the object itself. The phenomenon appeared in the late Qing dynasty and the beginning of the Republic of China, for example in Yan Yongjing’s explanation. Photography, as a brand new tool, not only brought China the images of outside, but also reformed the entire image producing process by adding a link into it. Photography was becoming the new way for Chinese to see the world; moreover, it would soon become the most principal way.

Along with the developing of print technology, the print quality of photography improved rapidly. As a result of its development, the photographic pictorial was born. Photographic pictorials appeared as early as the beginning of the twentieth century, but they could not achieve the influential power of lithographic pictorials in a short period because of their limited circulation. However, it was a critical period for Chinese visual culture development because it was a connecting point between what came before and what went after. There were strong interactions between lithographic and photographic pictorials, meanwhile, a close relationship between imitating and imitated.

Shi Jie (《世界》， SJ) was published in 1906 in France by some Chinese radical revolutionists as the first photographic pictorial sold in China.[3] Tu Hua Xun Bao (《图画旬报》， THXB) was a lithographic pictorial published in 1909 in Shanghai. Some interesting phenomenons have to be addressed here by putting these pictorials side by side. Here are two landscapes come from SJ and THXB respectively. (Fig.1 and Fig.2)
By comparing Fig.1 and Fig.2, it is not hard to arrive at the conclusion that lithographic landscape has close connection with the photographic one. The conclusion can be reached not only by seeing the illustrations but also by comparing the text on the pages.

The text on Fig.1 from SJ is: “...Pompeii is an ancient Italian city ... the public buildings which have been discovered include election hall, market, palestra, bathroom, judicatory, and sanctuary as illustrated above etc....”[5]

The text below Fig.2 from THXB is: “... Ancient buildings, such as sanctuary, election hall, market, palestra, judicatory, bathroom, brothel, theatre, pub etc. were discovered constantly. The illustration above is the sanctuary.”[6]

Although the relative positions between the images and the text are totally different (the text is below the photo on SJ, while the text is within the frame on THXB), the painter still mechanically described the contents of the photographic pictorials in the same manner. On one hand, he followed not only the contents of the photographic pictorials but also the format. On the other hand, he added some elements following his own imagination.

When painters brought more and more foreign landscapes to China by obtaining inspirations from photographs and adding their own imaginations, the format of landscapes began to change under the influence of the new technology: photography.

The Evolution of Landscape’s Style

There was a remarkable shift on Chinese traditional paintings’ style in the late eleventh century: individual idea became more and more emphasized by the painters,
and the realistic style was gradually substituted by the impressionistic style. As a result, literati painting came into being and became the main stream of Chinese mountain and water paintings until the late Qing dynasty. Although Chinese traditional painting has a long history on impressionistic style, painters in the North Song period (北宋时期) found realistic style was more and more contradictive with the expression of painters' inner feeling. Poet Su Shi (苏轼) held: “Anyone who judges painting by formlikeness shows merely the insight of a child.” Wen C. Fong thinks it was Zhao Mengfu (赵孟颊) who “…initiated a fundamental redirection in Chinese painting, displacing realistic representation with calligraphic self-representation.”

There were still many lithographic pictures in impressionistic style in the late Qing dynasty. These mountain and water paintings lose gradation because of the limitation of print technology, but the impressionistic style was still there as the legacy of the traditional literati paintings: the vague landscapes, some element seemed not essential, and the poetic sentence, etc. A certain kind of inner artistic feeling and atmosphere emerges involuntarily. (Fig.3)

The similar style continuously existed in the landscapes of western modern cities in the lithographic pictorials. Fig.4 is an illustration from Wang Tao’s (王韬) work: Manyou Suilu Tuji (《漫游随录图记》, MYTLSJ). The painter still applied the impressionistic style in describing Paris in spite of it being one of the most modern cities in the world at that time. Some elements were added into the frame, such as distant mountains, mansions surrounded by clouds, etc. to express some abstract, ethereal idea.

According to details from the preface wrote by Wang Tao himself, the painter did
their work based on Wang Tao's text narratives: “朋otine成，月澜海外游踪，润为神往，……适有精于绘事者许为梁意，遂以（游记）附之，都为图八十幅……”[9] Though photography had been introduced into China since the late nineteenth century, the spreading magnitude of photograph was limited. Most of Chinese had never seen a single photo, to say nothing of traveling abroad. Consequently, painters could only produce their works basing on text materials (e.g. travel notes) and some of their own imagination. The way of the painters worked was freer than sketching. Therefore, the pictures produced in this way are the better embodies Chinese painters' imagination of western modern nations.

This imagination can't be created beyond the living, intellectual background of the painters, meanwhile can't be created beyond the pre-modern stage of Chinese society. Urbanization is one of the most pivotal characters of modernization. The development of production needs a higher and higher density of population. The number of cities was increasing, the size of cities was expanding, and the buildings in cities were constructed higher and higher to save the limited space. However, in China at the end of Qing dynasty, the Chinese modern city had not appeared yet. Even in Shanghai, dramatic differences amongst its different parts were still unavoidable. Hence the painter could not imagine a skyline full of skyscrapers and mansions, and he could not sweep out the natural elements completely from human landscapes either. The boundless modern human landscapes were out of the painters' imagination. That is to say, the modern landscape was not real to the pre-modernized painters.

The Chinese painters in the late nineteenth century imagined or saw the world in a traditional way, somehow romantic but lagging. The influence extended to the
photographs of the early twentieth century. It is hard to make a judgment on the location where Fig. 5 was taken. The location is not important, nor even necessary for either the photographer or the audience. Artistic atmosphere is the vital aspect here, similar to literati paintings. The primary aim of the photographer is to create a certain atmosphere from which the audience can feel sympathy and then understand what the author wanted to express. So it is not surprising that the text beside the photo wrote: “摄影难，摄影取景更难，摄影取景而后有画意者更难。”

Although the taste is totally different from the rising and flourishing documentary tradition in western photography of the age, the value of early Chinese landscape photography is obvious. By taking landscape photographs in the traditional way, the first generation of Chinese photographers showed their respect to their processors. At the same time, the artistic photographs are also the last glimpse to their ancient tradition from the photographers who were facing the modernizing process. Though there were still artistic photographs afterwards, they were either marginalized to a small scale or commercialized in the other direction. The tradition of meaning grasped words forgotten (得意忘言) was becoming history.

On one hand, from the example above, the traditional aesthetic thought still affected Chinese visual culture after photography was introduced into China; while, on the other hand, photography also left its effects on Chinese traditional paintings. It brought entire changes to lithographic landscape both on its format and function level.

![Fig. 6](image)

Fig. 6 is the first page of the first issue of THXB. It is totally different from the traditional literati paintings in its form. The great wall here is the object to be seen, then to be known, thus the appearance and background of the great wall are shown as
information. This lithographic picture stressed the shape and spatial location of the great wall through a certain perspective. What the painter did was try to recreate the result of a certain viewing behavior. So the frame was seen and formed in perspective order so as to emphasize the features of the great wall as a seen object. At the same time, the text in the frame introduces the history, function, geographic location and length of the great wall in details, whose style is in an extraordinary contrast with the poetic sentence on Fig.3.

In brief, the information about the great wall has to be presented in an objective style in order to make itself understandable to a wider readership. Such a requirement is in some ways contradictory with the traditional literati painting. In literati painting, “spirit is the most important issue regardless of form.” That is to say the subjects or the painters themselves have the most priority. More brilliant the subject is, more brilliant the painting is. For example, the blank space on the literati paintings are called Liubai (留白) which is set aside by the painter consciously and even intentionally for a certain purpose or content. So Liubai is not an extra part of literati painting, nevertheless, it is an important component element of it. A fine painter will make good use of Liubai in order to represent the cloud, the atmosphere and some other objects without concrete shape, thus achieving the self-expressing purpose. However, the blank space on Fig.6 represents that there is no content. The blank space here is not a Liubai as it was before. So the space can be applied to other function, such as containing the practical text.

In such a case, in spite of their similar contents (landscape), the lithographic landscape is entirely different with the traditional literati painting in forms. On the contrary, these local lithographic landscapes have much more in common with the foreign lithographic landscapes (e.g. Fig.2) in form. Both of these two landscapes from THXB were created in the realistic way can be regarded as the earliest Chinese modern landscapes.

The impact came with the new technology and new thought not only had an effect on the form and the style of the images, but also on people’s behaviors of seeing the world. In other words, changes happened not only in the process of image production, but also in the process of seeing. After this revolution, people would see different objects by emphasizing on different aspects, and thereby reflecting different thought when they faced the similar objects.

**The Evolution of Seeing**

The entirely different representation on foreign and local opera/theatre in early
modern Chinese pictorials is of great value on inspecting the evolution of Chinese visual culture.

In the text from MYSKTJ, which Fig.7 is accompanied with, described what Wang Tao had watched in the French theatre.

“······戏馆至尤著名者，曰提神达，联座接席，约可容三万人，非逢庆赏巨典，不能坐客充盈也。其所演剧，或称述古事，或作神仙鬼佛形，奇诡恍惚，不可思议。山水楼阁虽属图绘，而顷刻间变万状，几于逼真。一班中男女优伶，多或二三百人，甚者四五佰人，服式之瑰异，文彩之新奇，无不璀璨耀目。女优率皆姿首美丽，登台之时袒胸及肩，玉色灯光，两相激射，所衣皆轻绡明縠，薄于五铢，加以雪肤花貌之妍，霓裳羽衣之妙，更杂以花雨缤纷，香雾充沛，光怪陆离，难于逼视，几疑步虚仙子离瑶宫殿而来人间也。或于汪洋大海中涌现千万朵莲花，一花中立一美人，色相庄严，祥光下注，一时观者莫不抚掌称叹，其奇妙如此。英人之旅于法京者导余往观，座最居前，视之甚审，目眩神移，叹未曾有。”[12]

According to these descriptions, Wang Tao mostly paid attention to the performance, the actors/actresses and the background on the stage. As it was the first time for him to sit in a western style theatre, astonishment was inevitable. Unsurprisingly, the major contents of this travel note were the objects on the stage, which Wang Tao had watched.

However, the emphasis of lithographic landscape (Fig.7) is different with the text by portraying the exterior appearance of the theatre, and the performance can only be seen obscurely through the doors and windows.

Things changed completely. The objects inside the buildings or on the stage became
the major contents of the images in the early Chinese pictorials when Chinese painters described the Chinese theatres or the opera inside the buildings. That is to say, it was totally possible for the painters to notice the objects in the buildings and to enjoy the performance on the stage as long as they would like to do so.

Fig. 8 is a picture published on THXB. The picture was painted to introduce the new equipment that a Shanghai theatre had newly installed, and the name of the picture is “The New Equipment of Stage” (舞台新机). The contents of the text state:

“……仿西国戏园之制，园屋三层，空气独洁，已为他园所不若。而戏台除演剧时逐驳布彩外，中有机括，可以旋转自如，尤令观剧者别开眼界……”[13]

These words focus on the theatre’s equipment. But the frame described different objects: the Chinese opera performance on the stage. Here the painter stood in front of the stage, looking up to the stage, which is the same direction and angle with the normal audience in the theatre. The painter painted the opera in the perspective of normal people, and the result was the readers of THXB watched the opera image through the normal perspective.

The ways of watching operas were completely different between the picture of the Paris theatre and here. Painters applied entirely different strategy to describe the foreign and the local theatres.

Why did the Normal perspective apply in describing Chinese traditional opera? While watching foreign opera, it shifted to the outside of theatre to describe the building? It is easy to understand that Chinese painters were much more familiar with traditional Chinese opera than western ones. To Chinese painters, watching Chinese opera means enjoyment, even self-cultivation; however, watching western opera only means curiosity, at most funny experience.
In fact, not only theatres, but also other public buildings, such as museums, department stores, banks and so on, had a similar fate.

The museum, as a place for exhibition, has experienced significant transformation in the western modern history. It is the offspring of modernization. According to Tony Bennett: "For the emergence of the art museum was closely related to that of a wider range of institutions...which served as linked sites for the development and circulation of new disciplines as well as for the development of new technologies of vision."[14] The emphases and the major contents of the western museums are the objects (the collections) to be seen. All the collections have to be exhibited in the way to present artistic works, whether the object is a dinosaur fossil or a fish specimen, a new invention or an antique relic, a rare plant specimen or an astonishing industrial production, all the designs and arrangements are to be seen. The visualization process of the object guarantees the functions of museum can be achieved through the way of seeing.

Museums became the ordinary contents of early modern Chinese pictorials because of their enriched modern connotations. However the function of the museums in Chinese pictorials is subtly different with the museums in developed nations.

The buildings themselves are always the major contents of the Chinese landscapes of museums. The phenomenon is a clue that the image-maker regarded the buildings themselves, which were presented frequently, as the most significant part of the museums. This thought is obviously different with the original situation of the western museums. In the west, a museum is the space where the collections would be exhibited. In China, a museum (architecture) itself becomes the primary beholding object. Therefore, according to the painters, the collections in the museums were analogous with the western opera to some extent. Thinking in the way of traditional Chinese culture, the collections in the museums merely are something abnormal, and they are for fun, for amusement, nothing to do with the serious part of social life, such as politics, economic or the Real culture. All of them are interesting, but nothing else. So it is so natural for the painters to believe that they (such as western operas, museum collections etc.) did not deserve to be described attentively and then to be published on the pictorials.

Meanwhile, the situation was changing among a group of people who were radical and pioneering in social reform. SL, which was published in 1906 by the radical revolutionists abroad, published large amount of photos which were taken by the advanced technologies for the time, such as microscope, X-ray etc. These images,
which had not only been invisible before, but also beyond imagination to a Chinese audience, now became visible objects.

The objects, which had always been placed in the museums, now were printed in the Chinese pictorials. (Fig.9) Germs and skeletons, as a kind of new knowledge, were introduced to China through images. It is impossible to tell the reactions when the audience first caught sight of the photos, however, the idea of the photo-makers and image-editors had obviously been changed: the objects, which meant nothing but fun, became the symbols of new knowledge, new science, and further more, they were seen as the solutions of rescuing backwards China. The most important thing is the way of presenting, which was in the details, with advanced technologies, was accepted as the part of advanced idea. And the idea was exactly the one, to some of Chinese people, which could save China.

It is easy to find out that there is an evolution of seeing, which is from far away to nearby, from outside to inside of the objects. The evolution not only exists in seeing museums, but also the other objects. Of course, it seemed the new technology (photographic printing) and the change in thought happened simultaneously. The evolution of thought is the basic aspect, which made Chinese people willing, even eager, to watch the contents of western objects closely. The evolution of thought reflected that Chinese eventually realized it was not enough to learn the science or politics from the western nations; it became the main stream of the Chinese enlightenment movement to learn the western culture.

Therefore, the evolution of seeing embodies in the early modern Chinese pictorials can be understood as the further and deeper step of learning from the west.
Conclusion

Early lithographic painting was influenced, even reproduced from the photography which itself was the symbol of mechanical reproduction. Photography not only brought imitative source to painters but also, even much more important, accomplished substituting the photo (the signifier) for the visual object (the signified). The later aspect of the influence shaped Chinese visual culture a fundamental revolution both on contents and forms.

Such as single viewpoint, linear perspective etc. catered to the shift on the functions and nature of paintings: landscape was no longer the self-amusement of artist; correspondingly it swung to become a tool for mass communication.

And what's more, not only image itself changed during that time, but also the ways of seeing. The landscapes in the early Chinese pictorials present the evolution of seeing, which is from far away to nearby, from outside to inside of the seeing objects. The evolution is the projection of the early modern Chinese changing thoughts on the West.

Notes:
[1] 《点石斋画报》乙卷，广州：广东人民出版社，1983年6月第1版，p.41.
[2] 《点石斋画报》乙卷，广州：广东人民出版社，1983年6月第1版，p.42.
[3] 马远增，陈申，胡志川，钱章，彭永祥编著：《中国摄影史》，北京：中国摄影出版社，1987年8月第1版，p.86.
[4] It is included in Qingmo minchu baokan tuhua jicheng, which was published in 2003.
[5] 《世界》第2期A册，世界社1907年出版，p.17.
[6] 《图画旬报》第十期第七页，见《清末民初报刊图画集成》（第十八册），全国图书馆文献缩微复制中心（编），2003年出版，p.7994.
[7] 陈衡恪：《文人画之价值》，吴安澜编：《画论丛刊》，北京：人民美术出版社，1989年第一版，p.693.
[8] Wen C. Fong: Between Two Cultures: late-nineteenth - and twentieth-century Chinese paintings from the Robert H. Ellsworth collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001, p.11
[9] (清) 王韬：《漫游随录图记》，王稼句点校，济南：山东画报出版社，2004年6月第1版，p.3.
[10] 《良友》第5期，上海书店1986年影印本，p.3.
[11] 陈衡恪：《文人画之价值》，吴安澜编：《画论丛刊》，北京：人民美术出版社，1989年第一版，p.693.
[12] (清) 王韬：《漫游随录图记》，王稼句点校，济南：山东画报出版社，2004年6月第1版，pp.67-69.
[13] 《时事报图画旬报》，见《清末民初报刊图画集成》（第十七册），全国图书馆文献缩微复制中心（编）2003年出版，p.8007
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