Tracing the Traceless Antelope: Toward an Interartistic Semiotics of the Chinese Sister Arts

Muhlenberg College Pennsylvania, USA' Da'an Pan

I. Ut Pictura Poesis and Ut Poesis Pictura

Universal and yet culture-bound, the sister arts tradition makes an interesting case for the comparative study of Chinese and Western poetics. As an essential component of Western as well as Chinese poetics this tradition is expressed respectively by the proverbial formulation of ut pictura poesis and of shi zhong you hua hua zhong you shi (literally, there is painting in poetry and poetry in painting). These two formulations indicate the uniqueness of each poetic system in defining and appreciating the sister arts relationship and the related dialectic of word and image, a dialectic that functions in a larger context as a constant in the fabric of signs that a culture weaves around itself (Mitchell 43).

In Western poetics, the sister arts tradition traces back to Simonides to whom Plutarch attributes the saying painting is mute poetry, and poetry a speaking picture. However, it was ut pictura poesis, misquoted from Horace’s Ars poetica as a convenient and canonical doctrine enshrined in the Aristotelian tradition (Abrams 33), that has truly inspired critics to develop various interartistic theories for centuries to come. The gist of this doctrine, as Steiner explains, is that poetry is like painting because both have as their subjects existent reality and both are limited in their mimetic adequacy to that reality (8).

Critics of the Renaissance and the succeeding Baroque believed that
it was in pictorial vividness of representation, or, more accurately, of description—in the power to paint clear images of the external world in the mind’s eye as a painter would record them on canvas—that the poet chiefly resembled the painter (Lee 4). Such power is said to be gained through emphasis (“the verbal representation of visual representation”) (Heffernan 3) and its result antenargeia (“pictorial vividness”) (Hagstrum 11), both of which are concerned with the transposition of the natural sign into the arbitrary sign, and are virtually integrable as one principle that has helped formulate the doctrine of ut pictura poesis (Krieger 14). This doctrine, though challenged by Lessing and Burke from different perspectives (Mitchell 50–51) and then kept in limbo during the Romantic period in literary criticism (but not necessarily in poetic creation) when the mirror was replaced by the amp, was reinvigorated in the modern and the postmodern age and rethought vis-à-vis traditional theories such as expounded by Lessing in his Laocoon. As Wellbery points out, in the Laocoon “the doctrine of ut pictura poesis is not abandoned, but is relocated on a higher level of generality: in the principle that all the arts draw their efficacy from their status as natural signs” (7).

Compared with ut pictura poesis, the Chinese sister arts tradition has enjoyed a more smooth development, promoted vigorously and continuously over the past centuries by poets and painters in general and those from the literati school in particular. As many Chinese literati are interartistic virtuosoi, their choice between poetry and painting, while indicating personal predilections, is chiefly determined by the consideration as to which medium better expresses a particular type of subjectivity or conceptuality. Owing to the intrinsic limitations of each medium the expression of certain types of subjectivity or conceptuality is either poetry-specific or painting-specific, promising no mediumistic substitution or conversion. As the Song poet Su Shi (1037–1101) writes in his poem “Creek-Light Pavilion”: “No one has ever painted the creek light since ancient times, / It all relies on this new poem to be written out” (Su
Dongpo Ji Collection I, 7: 43). Despite this, a heightened awareness of interartistic complementarity and of the mutually inspiring power of the sister arts permeates the literati minds, creating a lyrical resonance between the poet and the painter.

While the proverb there is painting in poetry and poetry in painting has become a household word among Chinese poets and painters and an axiomatic sine qua non in their creation as well, the doctrine it represents has never been clearly defined in traditional Chinese literary criticism, partly because such criticism is made ambiguous to some extent by the critic's aesthetic intuition and impression, which, obscurum per obscurius, reads like the Chan discourse. In the modern and contemporary scholarship on the Chinese sister arts tradition there have been various attempts to reshape the poetry-painting relationship into the Lessingian model, but a coherent theory that would truly rationalize this relationship in its native context has yet to be formulated.1

Such being the case, this paper undertakes to review the Chinese sister arts tradition and relationship from three fresh perspectives: a diachronic perspective at the cross-referential context of classical Chinese poetics out of which this tradition has evolved; a semiotic perspective at the signifying economies of classical Chinese poetry that are variously related to the poetry-painting relationship; a cross-cultural perspective at the aesthetic connotations of this relationship in special comparison with the China-oriented aspects of Pound's and Fenollosa's poetics. It argues that the Chinese sister arts tradition evolves from the Taoist philosophy of forgetting words after getting meaning and then comes to form an aesthetic triangle with the poetics of resonance beyond tone and of “emotion-scene fusion.” It also argues that as an essential component of the affective-expressive tradition of Chinese poetics the Chinese poetry-painting relationship is best defined as *ut poesis pictura* rather than *ut pictura poesis*. It further argues that what makes the “painting” in Chinese poetry is not the descriptive capability of poetry to render things picture-like and lifelike or its mediumistic convertibility but its semiotic po-
tential to signify ad infinitum beyond descriptive pictorialism. It finally argues that whereas the Poundian notion of “color-sense” as applied to Chinese poetry is comparable (but not equivalent) to the notion of “painting in poetry” the Poundian translation of Chinese poetry spoils such “painting” due to a lack of genuine understanding of the Chinese sister arts relationship. Holistically, these three perspectives contribute toward an interartistic semiotics of the Chinese sister arts; one of the reasons being that “semiotics has made the painting-literature analogy once more an interesting area to investigate” and “(s)ign theory...has changed the rules of the game, and so made it worth playing” (Steiner 32).

It was Su Shi, one of the founders of literati poetics, who first broached the issue of poetry-painting relationship. In his colophon to a landscape painting “Misty Rain in Mt. Lantian” attributed to the Tang poet-painter Wang Wei (701–761), Su thus characterizes Wang’s artistry: “Savoring Mojie’s [Wang’s cognomen] poetry, [I found that] there is painting in it; viewing Mojie’s painting, [I found that] there is poetry in it” (“Written on Mojie’s Painting ‘Misty Rain in Mt. Lantian,’ ” Dongpo ti-ba 5: 94). To illustrate his notion of painting in poetry Su cites the poem In the Mountain purportedly authored by Wang, which will be discussed later in this paper; [In] the Blue Creek white pebbles lie bare,/ [In] the Jade River red leaves turn thin;/ On the mountain path there is actually no rain./ The airy green wets mens clothes (Dongpo ti-ba 5: 94). In his poem Eight Sights in Fengxiang County: The Paintings of Wang Wei and Wu Daozi [ca. 685–758], Su appraises Wang’s painting in comparison with Wang’s poetry as well as his contemporary Wu Daozi’s painting: Viewing this painting on the wall, [I found it ] as qing and dun as his poetry.// Master Wu, exceptionally wonderful as he was, / Should still be considered an artisan. / Mojie attained what lies beyond the image. / Like a fairy bird leaving its cage (Su Dongpo Ji Collection I, 1: 10).//

Since Su’s theory is central to literati poetics his comments above provide a clue for us to understand both his concept of the poetry-paint-
ing relationship and literati poetics. First, Su views Wang’s painting and poetry as partaking of the common attributes of qing and dun, which carry a plurality of meanings and connote pure and natural in imagery and rich and profound in meaning in this particular context. Second, Su suggests that Wang is capable of attaining what lies beyond the image in his painting, and this is what makes him an artist rather than artisan. Wang must have attained the same in his poetry since, according to Su, there is painting in it. The common aesthetic features peculiar to Wang poetry and painting alike actually embody Su’s ideal of literati art, as Wang was venerated by the Chinese literati as their spiritual patriarch as well as the paragon of poet - painter. Based on his appreciation of Wang’s artistry, Su develops his interartistic poetics through Two Poems Written about the Rootless Flowers [in Chinese, zhe - zhi, a subgenre of flower painting] Painted by Secretary Wang from Yanling County:

Judging a painting in terms of formal likeness, / Such understanding is close to a child’s. / Composing a poem that means no more than itself, / Such a person certainly knows no poetry. / Poetry and painting actually follow the same rule——/ Both are tian - gong [literally, the work of Nature] and qing - xin [literally, fresh]. / Bian Luan’s [famous Tang painter, ? - ?] painting depicts the vivid looks of birds, Zhao Chang’s [famous Northern Song painter, ? - ca. 1016] painting conveys the inner spirit of flowers./ But neither is a match for Wang’s two scrolls,/ Their light, plain touches contain exquisiteness and harmony./ As someone puts it, a single dot of red/ Conveys a limitless spring. (Su Dongpo Ji Collection I, 16: 63).

In this poem, while deprecating formal likeness and closed signification Su argues that the commonality of poetry and painting lies in following the same rule of achieving the so-called tian - gong and qing - xin. These and similar terms, though used occasionally by Su in his other poems and also by other poets and critics from different periods to critique poetry and painting, can hardly be counted on to define the Chinese poetry - painting relationship due to their ambiguous connotations. It would
be far-fetched and futile, therefore, to make Su's formulation of painting in poetry and poetry in painting make any aesthetic and semiotic sense by simply interpreting these terms out of context without being aware that his formulation actually signifies, in a way like a Chan koan, the mutuality of poetry and painting.

As a matter of fact, it was Su who set the fashion of critiquing poetry and painting in Chan terms; and the ambiguity of his critical terminology is to some extent typical of traditional Chinese poetic writing. Su's concept of the poetry-painting relationship differs from ut pictura poesis in that it is based on the mutuality of poetry and painting in sharing the same aesthetic attributes rather than the one-sided emulation of painting by poetry to approach the status of the natural sign. Commenting on his contemporaries poems and paintings Su Shi addresses painting's analogy to poetry in terms of the mode of conception and of representation:

Since ancient times painters have never been ordinary men, / Their subtle thoughts actually come from the same source as that of poets. (Following the Rhymes in Wu Chuanzheng's A Song of Withered Trees Su Dongpo Ji Collection II, 3: 36)

Since ancient times painters have never been ordinary men, / In depicting things they are almost the same as poets. (Written on His Stone Screen at the Request of Ouyang, the Prince's Preceptor Su Dongpo Ji Collection I, 2: 27) What poetry [i.e., the poetry of the famous Song bamboo painter Wen Yuke, 1018 – 1079] has not yet fully expressed overflows into [his] calligraphy or turns into [his] painting. Both [his calligraphy and painting] are the extension of [his] poetry. (In Praise of Wen Yuke's Screen of Bamboo Ink Painting Su Dongpo Ji Collection I, 20: 123)

Su Shi's comparison made above points to the fact that Chinese painting did not begin its process of being gradually elevated to a liberal art until the Six Dynasties period (220 – 589) while poetry was canonized as the essential of humanistic education as early as the Spring – Autumn period (770 – 476 BC). There is more in Chinese poetry for Chinese
painting to absorb than vice versa; and what characterizes the Chinese sister arts relationship may well be ut poesis pictura rather than ut pictura poesis. As poetry speaks intent (in Chinese, shi yan zhi, a dictum recorded in the Shu Jing or The Classic of History), so does painting. As the Yuan poet Yang Weizhen (1296–1370) observes: Poetry and painting share the same style: one being the voice of the mind, the other the picture of the mind (11: 8). Viewed in this light, although Su Shi does note laborite on what he means by stating that Shaoling's [i.e., the Tang poet Du Fu's, 712–770] poems: paintings without forms, / Han Gan's [the Tang painter, fl. 742] paintings: wordless poems ("Han Gan's Horses" SuShi Shi Ji 48: 2630) and that "When Master Su writes a poem, you feel as if seeing the painting" ("Han Gan's Fourteen Horses" Su Dongpo Ji Collection I, 8: 63), the interartistic qualities of Du's and Su's poetry and Han's painting may well be defined and appreciated in terms of Su's own aesthetics.

From an art-historical point of view, traditional Western painting is essentially mimetic, defined by Hagstrum as a truly imitative art whose physical details coexisted simultaneously, like those of nature (159), and which is able to produce its effect all at once in a single pregnant moment (159). For traditional Western poetry, the pregnant moment is the major means of realizing ut pictura poesis, which, when adapted to poetry's signifying economy, turns the temporal flow into spatial stasis. As Lessing argues in the Laocoon, poetry should use similar means as used in painting in its progressive imitations (79). In traditional Chinese painting and in particular literati painting, landscape (shan-shui) is the predominant genre. The pregnant moment does not fit the signifying economy of traditional Chinese landscape painting because it is essentially affective-expressive and therefore is meant for signifying the artist's "mind landscape" beyond natural landscape. Rather, it is the mobile perspective (as opposed to the central perspective) that is peculiar to the mode of spatial representation in Chinese landscape painting.

This perspective reconfigures the painterly space of natural landscape
into a Taoist meta-space through spatial condensation and displacement. It prescribes a reciprocal mode of viewing; and the viewers are expected to “roam” the landscape with their minds eye in a temporal sequence to reify the Taoist ritual of contemplating nature and the Tao, a ritual described by the Six Dynasties poet Xi Kang (223–262) in his “Poems Presented to Elder Brother on his Joining the Army: The Fourteenth”: “Looking up and down [I] feel at home, / [My] mind roaming tai-xuan [literally, the primeval darkness, i.e., the Taoist ultimate realm]” (Lu 483).

Through such a temporized perspective the signifying economy of landscape painting, as it were, is turned into a space-time continuum. In some Chinese landscape poems an analogous perspective is used that is believed to have introduced painting into poetry. The cross-media applicability of the mobile perspective constitutes one aspect of the Chinese poetry-painting relationship, though it remains arguable as to whether or not the Chinese poet has actually borrowed the perspective from Chinese painting. In the context of an affective-expressive tradition of poetics, what makes the “painting” in a Chinese landscape poem is not the latter’s descriptive capability to render things picture-like or its mediumistic convertibility into a painting but its semiotic potential to evoke the poet’s mind landscape. There can be no painting in poetry without the latter’s departure from descriptive pictorialism, and the non-paintability of such painting creates the paradox that a poem featuring its presence is not a painting and yet more than a painting. That is why even poems from the painting-related genre of ti-hua-shi (poetry that represents and/or critiques painting) cannot be characterized indiscriminately as shi zhong you hua (literally, there is painting in poetry). Such being the case, to impose ut pictura poesis on the Chinese poetry-painting relationship in terms of the pregnant moment amounts to imposing the concept of Western painting onto Chinese poetry. In this respect, Lessing’s sign theory on poetry’s analogy to painting expounded in the Laocoon provides a cross-cultural analogy for us to better appreciate the subtlety of the Chinese notion of painting in poetry, though he approach-
es this analogy basically from a mimetic perspective:

A picture in poetry is not necessarily one which can be transferred to canvas. But every touch, or every combination of touches, by means of which the poet brings his subject so vividly before us that we are more conscious of the subject than of his words, is picturesque, and makes what we call a picture; that is, it produces that degree of illusion which a painted picture is peculiarly qualified to excite, and which we in fact most frequently and naturally experience in the contemplation of the painted canvas (88).

II. Painting in Poetry and Resonance beyond Tone

While Lessing defines poetry—painting relationship mainly in terms of poetry's capability to elevate its arbitrary signs to the status of natural signs (Letter to Friedrich Nicolai [March 26, 1769], qtd. Wellbery 226) Su Shi does so in terms of the sister arts'mutual capability to signify ad infinitum beyond the surface text, as is suggested in his above—cited poem deprecating formal likeness in painting and closed signification in poetry. What Su means by writing that Poetry and painting actually follow the same rule—Both are tian—gong and qing—xin actually refers to such signifying capability, the attainment of which has become a golden rule in literati creation. To appreciate the Chinese poetry—painting relationship in the context of literati poetics we need to explore the rationale of this golden rule by tracing its origin to ancient Chinese philosophy. Su's deprecation of formal likeness in painting and closed signification in poetry implies the dialectic of image and idea and that of word and meaning.

Both dialectics serve as the semiotic underpinnings of his golden rule.6 The former dialectic is first expressed through the dictum of li xiang jin yi (literally, establishing emblematic image to express idea fully) in the Yi jing (The Classic of Change), a dictum which postulates the correlation between natural phenomena and human affairs. The Yi jing quotes Confucius (551 – 479 BC) as saying that written words cannot
fully express speech while speech cannot fully express ideas. So the sages have established emblematic images to fully express their ideas (Zhou 250). The latter dialectic is expressed through the dictum of de yi wang yan (literally, forgetting words after getting meaning) in the chapter “Wai—wu” (“External Things”) in the Zhuangzi (reputedly authored by the cofounder of Taoist philosophy Zhuangzi, ca. 369–286 BC), a dictum that establishes the paradox and semiotics of language. Zhuangzi compares words to the fish trap and the rabbit snare, both of which can be forgotten once the catch is secured. By analogy, words can be forgotten once the meaning for which they exist is captured (Wang et al 530).

These two dialectics are interrelated as they each translate into the same relationship between the signifier and the signified. While both privileging the signified over the signifier they also differ from each other in that the former valorizes the semiotic capability of the emblematic image as the faithful carrier of ideas whereas the latter, by assuming the forgettableness of words, problematizes their capability to convey meaning.

In the Zhuangzi the forgettableness of words is made justifiable through the following argument in the chapter “Tian dao” (“The Way of Heaven”): “Words have value. What is of value in words is meaning. Meaning has its locus. The locus of meaning cannot be conveyed in words…” (Wang et al 254). In the above argument the locus of meaning cannot be conveyed in words echoes the opening dictum of the Dao dejing (The Classic of the Tao and Virtues) (reputedly authored by the founder of Taoist philosophy Laozi, an older contemporary of Confucius): “The way that can be spoken of / Is not the constant way; The name that can be named / Is not the constant name” (Lau 57) What is meant by the “locus of meaning” actually represents the Tao which is intangible and ineffable. Knowing that the Tao defies and transcends language the Taoist wise men forget words after they have grasped the meaning and become silent. For them, the expression of meaning is the end of words function but not the end of meaning itself. If one focuses too much attention on words, words will function counterproductively as a barrier to meaning rather
than a carrier of meaning.

Consequently, one will fail to grasp meaning, let alone reach its locus. The paradox inherent in the Taoist semiotics of language is that the conveyance of meaning as the signified entails the use of images or words (spoken or written) as the signifier but neither images nor words are capable of conveying the locus of meaning. The dialectic of words and meaning is related to the Taoist relationship between xu (the unreal) and shi (the real), which is derived from that between yin and yang. The xu-shi relationship underlies Chinese poetics and the poetry-painting relationship as well. In this sense, in the formulation of painting in poetry the so-called painting as an ideational entity is xu while poetry as a tangible form is shi. The reverse is true of the formulation of poetry in painting. During the Six Dynasties period the rethinking and reinterpretation of the Yijing, the Dao de jing, and the Zhuangzi became the vogue of scholarly pursuit; and the dicta of li xiang jin yi and de yi wang yan were reformulated into one of the major topoi of the neo-Taoist metaphysics known as yan yi zhi bian (literally, word-meaning differentiation).

The best exponent of this topos is Wang Bi (226–249), who, in his treatise Ming xiang (Elucidating the Emblematic Image), establishes a semiotics of language based on the triangular relationship between xiang, yi, and yan (literally, emblematic image, idea, and word), advocating the Zhuangzian doctrine of forgetting in the process:

Xiang originates from yi; yan elucidates xiang. To express yi fully nothing is better than xiang; to express xiang fully nothing is better than yan. Yan originates from xiang which in turn can be viewed through yan. Xiang originates from yi which in turn can be viewed through xiang ... However, forgetting xiang is getting yi; forgetting yan is getting xiang. Getting yi depends on for getting xiang; getting xiang depends on forgetting yan. Therefore, xiang is established to express yi fully but is forgettable (Han Wei cong-shu 5:9).

Judging from this discourse, Wang Bi seems to be the first scholar in
China to have laid down the semiotic foundation for the poetry – painting relationship, a fact hitherto passed unnoticed. The special significance of Wang's semiotics to this relationship is twofold. On the one hand, in analyzing the triangular relationship between image, idea, and word, Wang advances the notions of viewing (or observing) image (guan – xiang) through word and viewing (or observing) idea (guan – yi) through image, which hint at the visibility or pictoriality of idea for the very idea of an idea is bound up with the notion of imagery (Mitchell 5) 7. On the other, in Wang's semiotic triangle, composed of the dialectic of word and image and of image and idea, both image and word are mere signifiers (image also functions as the signified in relation to word) that are forgettable and should be forgotten after the signified has been procured.

The paradox of this semiotics is that to express an idea one needs to use words whereas to capture that idea one needs to forget words. Wang's doctrine is applicable to both the reception and creation of literature and art, which actually prescribes a paradoxical mode of reading (or viewing) and of writing (or painting). Both the reader and the viewer should master the art of forgetting, knowing better than to cocoon themselves in words or images so that their pursuit of meaning or its locus will not end up in a wild-goose chase. The art of reading or viewing is essentially the art of forgetting: the more one forgets about what one has read or seen, the more meaning one gets, a paradox allegorized in the chapter “Tian di” (“Heaven and Earth”) in the Zhuangzi through the Yellow Emperor's Dark Pearl (a metaphor for the Tao) lost and regained. Among the four investigators dispatched by the emperor to recover the pearl only the one called Imageless (in Chinese, Xiang – wang, the concept of non-image incarnate) is able to find it (Wang et al 210).

The art of forgetting is also discussed in Chan discourses through the metaphor of antelope, as Chan Buddhism during its development in China absorbed much of the quintessence of Taoist philosophy. In the Song dynasty record of Chan masters discourses entitled Jing – de chuan – deng lu (A Record Made during the Reign of Jing – de [1004 – 1007] of Handing
Down the Lamp) both Master Daoying and Master Yicun compare the meaning of awakening to the antelope, which habitually stays out of range at night by hanging from the branches by its horns so that no trace will be sniffed out by the hound from the ground. Promoting the art of forgetting in the practice of Chan, they admonish their disciples that seeking the meaning of awakening through the mere pursuit of the masters' words is as futile as the hound's tracing the traceless antelope (16: 117; 17: 134).

The art of forgetting should also be mastered by the author, which, in this case, refers to the art of writing in such a mode as to make the reader forget words after getting meaning. This art is suggested by the Six Dynasties critic Liu Xie (ca. 465 – ca. 520) in the chapter “Shen-si” (“Thought and Imagination”) in his famous treatise Wen-xin diaolong (literally, The Literary Mind: Dragon-Carving): “As for the subtle meanings beyond one’s thought, and the complicated moods beyond verbal expression, since they cannot be captured by words, one certainly should know when to stop the pen” (Zhao 249). Here, Liu alerts authors to the limitations of language, admonishing them not to overwrite lest words should override and nullify meaning. Between words and meaning there inevitably exist gaps or semiotic blanks, which, nevertheless, can be turned into semiotic potentials from which to tap meaning. As to how to control one’s pen in writing, Liu develops the style of yin (literally, covertness, implicitness) in the chapter “Yin xiu” (“Implicitness and Epigrammaticality”) that features the signifying mode of yi sheng wen wai (literally, meaning arising beyond writing). According to him, such a signifying mode is analogous to the way the linear emblems are permuted to form endless patterns of hexagrams expounded in the Yi jing (Zhao 335). In semiotic terms, this mode compels readers by its provocative power to pursue the signified by themselves without making it readily available to them. As Giles observes, “A poet should not dot his i’s. The Chinese reader likes to do that for himself, each according to his own fancy” (155).
The doctrine of "forgetting words after getting meaning" is addressed not only in Taoism, Chan, and literary criticism but in poetry as well. A case in point is the famous poem "Drinking Wine: The Fifth" by the Six Dynasties poet - recluse Tao Yuanming (365 - 427), in which the poet describes an epiphanic moment during his contemplation of the pastoral scene:

⋯/ Picking chrysanthemums under the east hedge, / Leisurly, [I] see the South Mountain. / The mountain's aspect looks good at sunset, / The birds are together flying home. / In this there is true meaning, / Trying to define [or, discriminate] it, [I] forget the words (Ding 3: 110 - 111).

Situated, as he is, amidst the twilight scene, the poet seems to have entered a meta-verbal zone where words are gone while meaning, or rather the meaning of meaning (for this is what true meaning means), is left alone in its autonomy. In fact, this poem heralds the style of yin discussed above and serves as an apt metaphor for the forgetful mode of reading (or viewing) and writing (or painting). On the one hand, in invoking the neo-Taoist topos of word-meaning differentiation, it makes readers aware that as soon as they see the meaning of the poem they should forget words lest the meaning be lost in words. On the other, it shows when authors should stop their pen once meaning becomes educible from words. In terms of the mode of signification Liu Xie's notion of yin is related to the notion of chao-yi (literally, transcendence) developed by the Tang poet-critic Sikong Tu (837 - 908) in his Shi ping (literally, Classification of Poetry), a discourse defining twenty-four pings (styles, moods, or modes) of poetry that is couched in a poetic language tinged with Taoist undertones and therefore partakes of the forgetful mode of writing. As one of the twenty-four poetic pings chao-yi refers to a mode of poetic expression capable of evoking open-ended signification. It is valorized by Sikong Tu as a poetic ping par excellence, and is characterized in the following mini-discourse in the Shiping:

Relying neither on divine power, / Nor on Nature's subtlety; / Rid-
ing on the white clouds, / Returning on the refreshing breeze./ Beckoned from afar, it appears to be coming, / Approached, it looks different;/ Not perfectly conforming to the Tao, / Yet transcending the common way./ Tall trees [amidst] rambling hills, / The beautiful light [of the setting sun shining on] the green moss;/ It is constantly intoned and thought, / Yet its sound always turns into silence (Guo 37 – 38). 9 Interweaving pictorial imageries and Taoist idioms, this discourse is as hard to interpret as the notion of chao – yi itself. Fortunately, Sikong also discusses elsewhere the notion of open – ended signification that is characteristic of chao – yi in less baffling terms, which offers a clue to the underlying semiotics of this style. In his “Letter to Jipu [the poet Wang Ji, fl. 891]” he defines open – ended signification in terms of image beyond image and scene beyond scene: “Dai Rongzhou [the poet Dai Shulun, 732 – 789] said: ‘The scenes created by poets are like the fine jade deposit in Mt. Lantian, which, emitting fumes in the warm sunshine, can be viewed from afar but cannot be brought before one’s eyes.’ Image beyond image, scene beyond scene, can they be easily discussed?”(Guo 52). In his “Letter to Master Li Discussing Poetry,” he further defines open – ended signification in terms of yun wai zhi zhi (literally, resonance beyond tone): Accessible yet non – superficial, far – reaching yet inexhaustible; only when one’s poetry attains this state can one speak of yun wai zhi zhi (Guo 47). In the same letter, Sikong also compares resonance beyond tone to the best taste of food that always lies beyond saltiness and sourness, a metaphor that Su Shi later applied to poetry, painting, and calligraphy. Su characterizes Wang Wei’s painting as attain’s (151 – 230) and Wang Xizhi’s (303 – 361) calligraphy lies beyond the brush strokes (Postscript to the Collection of Poetry by Huang Zisi, Su Dongpo Ji Collection II, 8: 22). This is what Su means by “a single dot of red / Conveys a limitless spring” (Su Dongpo Ji Collection I, 16: 63). Su is also quoted by the Song poet Jiang Kui (ca. 1155 – ca. 1221) as saying: The words that end with endless meaning are the ultimate words in the world (2). Judging by the conceptual link between Sikong’s and
Su’s poetics, it seems that it is based on Sikong’s poetics of resonance beyond tone that Su conceives his poetry—painting relationship; and what Su means by painting in poetry and poetry in painting may actually refer to the respective attainment of resonance beyond tone in poetry and painting. Furthermore, Su uses Sikong’s notion to distinguish literati art from what he regarded as artisan’s craft in formulating literati poetics.

Although there is no specific reference to the notion of forgetting words after getting meaning in Sikong Tu’s discourses, the Taoist undertones therein ring strong enough to suggest that this notion is a source of inspiration for his poetics of chao—yi. The pictorial imagery employed by Sikong in the Shi ping to define chao—yi as well as the other poetic styles facilitates the reader’s comprehension of his theory. Such an imagistic mode of critical discourse has been viewed by critics as partaking of Wang Wei’s art of “painting in poetry.” As for why the scene of trees growing amidst hills and the sunlight shining on the moss reifies the notion of chao—yi, readers are expected to decode the authorial intention lurking behind the scene by themselves. Judging by the imagery juxtaposition of the sunlight and the moss Sikong seems to have been inspired by Wang Wei’s masterpiece Deer Park to conceive that notion: Empty mountain, no man is seen, / Only heard are men’s voices echoing; / The sunlight re-enters the deep wood, / Shining again on the green moss (Zhao, Wang Youcheng ji jian—zhu 13; 4).

This poem helps substantiate the aesthetic link between Sikong Tu’s poetics of “resonance beyond tone” and Su Shi’s poetics of “painting in poetry.” On the one hand, as one of the most celebrated and yet enigmatic pieces in Chinese poetry, it aptly epitomizes the style of chao—yi, whose imagery is accessible yet non—superficial and whose signification is far—reaching yet inexhaustible, to use Sikong Tu’s terms. On the other, this poem has also been traditionally viewed as a paragon of reifying Su Shi’s notion of “painting in poetry.” The signifying economy of this poem is built upon a number of imagery juxtapositions: the empty mountain and the echoing voices, the re—entering sunlight and the deep wood, the
moss—shining sunlight and the green moss, and the voices and the moss. Read in a religio-philosophical context in which the poet’s background is taken into account, the first juxtaposition can be interpreted to signify the Buddhist relationship between se (literally, color; here referring to the sensible universe) and kong (literally, empty; here referring to the supersensible realm). The second and third juxtapositions may be read together as a metaphor for the Chan notion of sudden enlightenment when the dark wood of man’s mind lights up to become a “Chanscape.” Both the first and fourth juxtapositions seem also allusive of the Taoist theme of wu—hua (literally, transforming with things), or man’s metamorphosis into things in nature or merger with nature, developed in the chapter “Qi wu lun” (“Equalizing All Things and Views”) in the Zhuangzi (Wang et al. 51); and the landscape in the poem as a whole can thus be viewed as a “Taoscape.” Furthermore, the first juxtaposition can even be read as a Chan paradox about the transcendent state of poetic signification wherein no words are “seen” but the meaning echoes back and forth in a signifying mise en abime. In this sense, the poem seems to function at one level as a meta—poem. All these imagery juxtapositions may interact to evoke unceasingly image beyond image and scene beyond scene.” They enable the poem to transcend its surface text and compel the reader to conjure up a subtext reverberant of “resonance beyond tone” by forgetting the imagery. This is a signifying process when “the whole poem ceases to be descriptive, ceases to be a sequence of mimetic signs, and becomes but a single sign, perceived from the end back to its given as a harmonious whole, wherein nothing is loose, wherein every word refers to one symbolic focus” (Riffaterre 12).

It seems that there can be no “painting” in this poem without such a symbolic focus. Short as it is, “Deer Park” demonstrates at once how resonance beyond tone is signified and how painting in poetry is created, which helps explain why Su Shi, in addressing the poetry—painting relationship, would praise Wang Wei for attaining what lies beyond the image in his painting. No wonder the Song critic Yan Yu (1180—1235)
would praise the poets of the high Tang period (721 – 755) including Wang Wei for their single-minded pursuit of what he calls xing-qu [literally, inspired gusto], a poetic state which he compares in Chan terms to the traceless nocturnal antelope because in this state poetry signifies ad infinitum leaving behind no trace of words (Guo, Canglang shi-hua jiao-shi 24). 10

Semiotically speaking, the text of a Chinese poem written in the mode of chao-yi is comparable to what Barthes calls the writerly text as opposed to “its countervalue, its negative, reactive value; = 94 the readerly text (4). As Silverman interprets, whereas the latter = 93 tightly controls the play of signification and encourages the reader or viewer to move away from its signifiers...toward a privileged and originating signified (243) the former denies the possibility of closure (246 – 47) and promotes an infinite play of signification, in which there can be no transcendental signified, only provisional ones which function in turn as signifiers (246). By the same token, Sikong’s poetics of resonance beyond tone is comparable to what Eco calls the poetics of the open work. According to Eco, there exist works which, though organically completed, are open to a continuous generation of internal relations which the addressee must uncover and select in his act of perceiving the totality of incoming stimuli (21). The reader is excited by the new freedom of the work, by its infinite potential for proliferation, by its inner wealth and the unconscious projections that it inspires (91). Let there be no confusion that Sikong Tu’s notion of resonance beyond tone refers to chao-yi rather than han-xu (literally, implicitness) which he defines as capable of fully attaining the quintessence of things without a single word of direct reference and which therefore differs from chao-yi in the mode of signification. 11 Chao-yi enables a poem to signify ad infinitum; the reader is not so much a decoder of the preconceived signified as a producer of varied signifiers not necessarily intended by the poet. Unlike chao-yi, han-xu is capable only of making a poem signify between the lines, in which the signified, though hidden underneath the surface text, is de-
terminate and ready to be decoded. Some critics also mistakenly associate han-xu with Liu Xie’s yin.

Since Liu compares yin’s mode of signification to the permutation of the linear emblems in the Yi jing that creates hexagram beyond hexagram, it bears analogy to Sikong’s chao-yi rather than han-xu. In literati poetics chao-yi represents the highest level of poetic signification, as it is believed to be capable of signifying the true Tao, which is absolutely silent and inexpressible according to the Dao de jing. Viewed from this perspective, to create painting “in poetry actually symbolizes the Chinese poet’s attempt at expressing what is impossible for the Chinese philosopher to express. As the first poet in China to voice explicitly the concept of poetry as an embodiment of the poet’s apprehension of the Tao (Liu 35), Sikong seems to suggest that only by attaining resonance beyond tone can the poet attain the Tao whose best carrier is chao-yi. in Poetry.

(to be continued)