This is a study of the landscape painting of the Southern Song period (1127–1279) in Chinese art history. In this study, I argue that the metaphysical Tao is both external and internal; it is embodied in nature and also in human heart and mind. Correspondingly, I observe that two cardinal semiotic paradigms, representation and self-expression, functioned in landscape painting when Chinese art history entered the period of Southern Song. The first paradigm defines the encoding of the Tao through representing the images of the external world of nature, which is found in the landscape painting of the Northern Song (960–1127), and the second defines the manifestation of the Tao through expressing the artist’s personal sentiment and thoughts, which is found in the landscape painting of the Southern Song. This is to say that the Southern Song landscape painting demonstrates the paradigmatic turn in Chinese art history.

The term “paradigm” is borrowed from linguistics; however, in the context of this article, it is based on sign relations, referring to the mode of art. The topic of this article, the paradigm shift from Northern Song to Southern Song, is an ideological and stylistic change from the representational mode of the out-going art to the self-expressional mode of the inward-turning art. Art historians in the West and China were aware of the
change, and some of them tried to describe what the change was and explain why it happened but failed to point out that this is a paradigm shift. Why did they fail? Scholars of today in the West tend to approach this issue from a political and economic perspective due to their postmodern-like point of view, whereas scholars in China tend to approach the same issue from a similar perspective due to their Marxist point of view. As a result, they both focus on the relationship between art and its sociohistorical background and missed an equally, or more crucial relationship.

I do not oppose those scholars because they told the truth, though partially. Rather, I intend to point out that these art historians missed the relationship between art and artist, which paradigmatically defines the self-expression of Southern Song landscape painting. In order to fill this gap, I bring in American philosopher Charles Morris’s semiotic concept of pragmatics, which is about the relationship between the sign and the sign user, to describe the change in Southern Song landscape painting as a paradigm shift, to analyze how the new paradigm worked, to interpret why it shaped Chinese landscape painting thereafter, and to evaluate the significance of the new paradigm, which has since redirected the course of the development of Chinese art.

Applying Morris’s pragmatics to this study, in return, I also propose three specifications to his theory. First, I specify the Morrisian semiotic dimensions as sign relation-based paradigms that define the functions of art. Second, I identify the Morrisian sign user as sign maker or encoder, which is the artist in the practice of art making. Third, I elaborate my opinion that the pragmatical paradigm works at formal and conceptual levels, which is supported by the study of the Southern Song landscape painting.

1. Morris’s semiotics, inwardness in Southern Song art, and the paradigm

In his early writings, such as *Foundations of the Theory of Signs* (1938) and *Signs, Language, and Behavior* (1946), Charles William Morris (1901–1979) briefly presented his initial theory about three dimensions of semiosis, namely, syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics. Then, he developed this theory in greater detail in later writings, including *Writings on the General Theory of Sign* (1971). In his terminology, syntactics is about the internal relationship of a sign or among signs; semantics is about the relationship between the sign and its object, while pragmatics is about the relationship between the sign and the sign user (Morris, 1971, pp. 21–22). Needless to say, the center of the three dimensions is the concentric “sign” that is found in all the three relationships, and thus the three dimensions are sign-based.

Morris carried on the heritage of the American philosopher Charles Peirce (1839–1914) and made a significant contribution to the development of modern semiotics in the mid-twentieth century. In addition to the theory of three dimensions, he also outlined four components of semiosis: the sign, the designatum (similar to the Peircean “object”), the interpretant, and the interpreter. Morris distinguished the “interpreter” from the “interpretant” which serves as a living setting for the “interpreter” (Morris, 1971, pp. 19–20). Moreover, he refers the “interpreter” to the user of the sign, sometimes either the encoder or decoder, and sometimes both. In the context of his discourse, I consider that the “interpreter” is mostly the encoder. In my study of Chinese art, the encoder, or the user of the sign, is the artist who uses images from nature as visual signs to encode the Tao.
Then, what is the relevance of Morrisian semiotics to my study of Chinese art history? The answer would be that his theory about the three dimensions provides me with a semiotic framework to explore the paradigm shift in Southern Song landscape painting. At this point, I use the term “paradigm” to refer to the above sign relations in both the Morrisian semiotic dimensions and the mode of art. In particular, Morris’s pragmatist relationship between the sign and its user could help me to decipher the so-called inwardness, which is the key in the paradigm shift from the mode of representation in Northern Song art to the mode of artist’s self-expression in Southern Song art.

Discussing the inwardness in Southern Song art in comparison to the art of the Tang Dynasty (618–907), a renowned American scholar of Chinese art history, James Cahill (1926–2014), observed,

The Sung [Song], for example, unlike the expansive and outward-looking T’ang [Tang], impresses us as a culture turned inward…. The only nourishment came from within…. And the special phenomenon of archaism arose in the late Northern Sung period, to remain a principle ingredient in much of Southern Sung art. (Cahill, 1962, p. 8)

On the one hand, Cahill pointed out the inwardness of Southern Song art, and on the other, he also noted an earlier change from the Tang to the Song, which served as the historical pretext of the Southern Song inwardness. He attributed the force that made the change happen to a sociohistorical fact, namely, the political and military defeat of China by its northern neighbors.

Three decades after the above observation, Cahill elaborated on that inwardness as the main topic of his series of lectures at Harvard University. The lecture series was included in his later book The Lyric Journey: Poetic Painting in China and Japan (1996). In the introduction to this book, Cahill wrote about the inwardness as a vivid “myth” in Chinese art:

[T]he myth of living in seclusion in nature, of strolling through the mountains in searching of poetic sensations, of pausing to experience certain sights and sounds and to savor the feelings they aroused, and of returning to the security of one’s home. This cluster of themes makes up what I call the lyric journey. That same cluster underlies much of the finest Chinese poetry strengthens my claim that it is central to poetic painting in China. (Cahill, 1996, p. 4)

Cahill’s exemplification of the inwardness in Southern Song landscape painting is more descriptive and less interpretive. For instance, he described what the poetic journey is and how it unfolds, such as the four episodes, or categories, of the journey (Cahill, 1996, pp. 54–67). Although Cahill offered less interpretation to why the journey happened, he referred to some external forces, such as the court art institution and literary fashion of that time; he even mentioned economic development and commercial activities, as well as the education system of the Southern Song (Cahill, 1996, p. 45).

Cahill’s description of inwardness is shared by some other scholars as well, such as Valerie Otiz who discussed the dream illusion in Southern Song landscape painting in her monograph Dreaming the Southern Song Landscape (1999). At this point, I would like to remark that these scholars’ observations of inwardness are not only true for Southern Song art but also true for Southern Song culture in general. In this regard,
another renowned American scholar of Chinese cultural history, James T.C. Liu (1919–1993), offered an illustrative analogy,

Sung China looks like an old, luxuriant tree surprisingly vigorous as it grows taller and larger than before, with new branches and fresh leaves spreading all over it. Old roots sprawl beneath the trunk. Then a stormy season somehow saps the vigor of its internal chemistry. The vitality that remains is turned to protective functions. The tree manages to keep on growing quite sturdily, but it remains the same size and shape. What was the critical change, then, of its internal chemistry? (Liu, 1988, p. 10)

My answer to this question is that the internal chemistry changed its mode, and the tree stopped growing outward but turned inward, nurturing its internal refinement. Indeed, Liu compared Northern Song and Southern Song cultures and observed as follows,

The eleventh century [Northern Song] was a time when culture among the elite expanded. It pioneered in new directions and blazed promising trails. With optimism it emphasized prospects. In contrast, the twelfth century [Southern Song] saw elite culture paying more attention to consolidating and extending its value throughout society. Turning more retrospective and introspective than before, it became tempered by circumspect and sometimes pessimistic tone. In short, while the Northern Sung characteristically reached outward, the Southern Sung essentially looked inward. (Liu, 1988)

As for what made the change, Liu is no different from Cahill; he looked at the external forces, such as the stormy season in his analogy. This external force, whether historical, social, political, military, economic, or intellectual, is certainly crucial to the cultural and artistic change in Southern Song. However, this is not the whole story. In my opinion, the change in Southern Song landscape painting is also ideological and stylistic, it is a paradigm shift. More specifically, the change from out-going art of the Northern Song to the inward-turning art of the Southern Song is a paradigm shift from realist representation to personal self-expression. In Morrisian terminology, this is the change from the semantic relationship between the sign and its object to the pragmatical relationship between the sign and its user. That is what I meant by the notions of “sign relation” and “paradigm shift.” With regard to Southern Song landscape painting, this is the change from emphasizing the semantic dimension to emphasizing the pragmatical dimension, that is, from centering on the representational relationship between art and the external world to centering on the self-expressive relationship between art and the artist.

As stated, I do not oppose James Cahill and James Liu in their opinions about the external force. However, I stress that they missed a crucial point: the paradigm shift. Certain scholars in the West and China have touched on the point and offered fruitful interpretations of the historical changes in landscape painting. However, their paradigm is not based on sign relations, and their interpretations lack coherent focus.

One of the most important scholars in this regard is Kenneth Clark (1903–1983), who published an influential monograph in the mid-twentieth century, Landscape into Art (1949). Using the chapter headings, Clark labeled the Western medieval art as the landscape of symbols, Flemish art the landscape of fact, Renaissance art the landscape of fantasy, and so forth. Making labels is Clark’s way to describe the traits of landscape painting in different periods of Western art history. The title of his book, “Landscape into Art,” is also a summarization of the development of landscape painting in the
West, which highlights his interpretation of landscape art. Unfortunately, his paradigms are not consistent; for instance, his “symbols,” “fact,” and “fantasy” confuse with “ideal landscape” and “the natural vision” and do not share the common central focus, or criteria, with “northern light;” they are not based on the same standard and do not share a same norm.

Half a century later, another art historian, Malcom Andrews, offered a similar, yet opposite summarization of the development of landscape art in the West, from “land into landscape” to “landscape into land.” This circular process of development, or historical change, makes Andrews different from Clark. Although the similarity and commonality of the two art historians are found in their effort in figuring out a mode for each period in art history, they did not have a constant and coherent paradigm.

In China, art historians made similar efforts at a much later time. Lu Peng studied the change of esthetic taste in landscape painting from Northern Song to Southern Song. In his monograph *Pure Views: Remote from Streams and Mountains, Chinese Landscape Painting in 10th-13th Century* (2004), he labeled the trait of the Northern Song landscape painting as “real landscape” and the Southern Song “formulaic landscape” (Peng, 2004, p. 41, 89, 125). Lu Peng is the Chinese translator of Clark’s *Landscape into Art* (Chinese version, 1988), and he is no doubt influenced by Clark’s labels. Compared to Clark, Lu Peng is closer to finding the paradigm shift in art history, since he grasped the difference between realism and unrealistic stylistic formula. However, it is still hard to say that the “real” shares the same standard with “formulaic.” Lu’s label is also suggested by the label of another Western scholar on the same subject, Michael Sullivan (1916–2013), who used the label “realism achieved and abandoned” for the change from Northern Song landscape painting to that of the Southern Song (Sullivan, 1979, p. 56). Unluckily, Lu Peng is one step short and missed the point of sign relations, the relationships between art and other elements, such as external world and artist, which define the paradigm shift in art history.

2. The paradigm shift in the art of Li Tang

Scholars have left a gap in the study of Chinese art history, and in the study of landscape painting in particular. On that account, as proposed, I present the notion of sign relation as a paradigm, which is inspired by the Morrisian dimensions of semiosis, specifically his pragmatics.

In this dimension, Morris outlined the relationship between the sign and its user, or interpreter. However, when this relationship is put in research practice, certain confusion occurs: what or who is the sign user? Is it the sign maker (encoder) or the sign reader (decoder)? Since Morris’s sign user (interpreter) refers to both, the communicative relationship between them may become disoriented. In order to fix the problem, based on a close reading of Morris and making sense of it within its context, I propose splitting the sign user from interpreter, distinguishing the encoder from decoder and defining the Morrisian sign user as the sign maker or the encoder. Conversely, I define the interpreter as decoder, though this is not my topic in this article. Accordingly, in my study of Chinese art, the role of encoder is played by the artist. In the specific study of the inwardness of the Southern Song landscape painting, I
focus on the paradigmatic relationship between the artist and his work, or the sign and
the sign maker.

The above specification of Morris is supported by, and also different from, the idea
of a similar paradigm of the American literary theorist M.H. Abrams (1912–2015), since
he also differentiated the artist from the audience. In the mid-twentieth century,
Abrams outlined an influential theory in his study of English poetry, *The Mirror and
the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953). In this book, he drew a
relationship model for a communicative paradigm and placed the literary work in the
center. From the center, he outlined three relationships of the work: with the universe,
with the artist, and with the audience (Abrams, 1953, p. 6). Certainly, this work-
centered paradigm can be translated into Morris’s terms: there are three relationships
of the sign with object, with sign user, and with interpreter. Regrettably, Abrams missed
the relationship between the signs, or the internal relationship of the sign. Nevertheless,
Abrams’ focus was the one between work and artist; he named it “lamp” in contrast to
“mirror.” To Abrams, the lamp refers to the work expressing the artist, whilst the
mirror refers to the work reflecting the universe, or the external world.

Using Abrams to revise Morris, and using Morris to amend Abrams, I now further
lay out a framework for my proposed semiotic paradigm of sign relations: I place the
sign (artwork) at the center of the semiotic hub and develop four relationships of the
sign with (1) the artist (encoder, sign maker), (2) the nature (object of Morris and
Peirce, universe of Abrams), (3) the reader (decoder, interpreter of Morris), and (4) the
other signs (or with the sign itself). Thus, regarding the inwardness of Southern Song
landscape painting, I describe it as the paradigm shift from the mirror-like realist
representation of nature to the artist’s lamp-like self-expression, from the Morrisian
semantic dimension to pragmatical dimension. Certainly, this opinion about paradigm
shift corresponds to the ideological and stylistic change of Southern Song art and,
typically, corresponds to the change in the works of Li Tang (ca. 1066–1150), a
transitional artist who started working as a successful court artist of the late Northern
Song and then became the first master of the Southern Song imperial painting academy.

As far as Li Tang is concerned, his Northern Song representational art followed the
mode of outside-in, and then, his Southern Song self-expressional art followed the
mode of inside-out. Along with the change, his way of art goes from realistic observa-
tion of external world and realistic depiction of the world to nonrealistic observation
and idealist depiction of his internal world. The most well-known masterpiece of Li
Tang’s northern landscape painting is the monumental vertical hanging scroll *Wind
through the Pine Valleys*. This painting is made three years before the fall of the
Northern Song. Therefore, it is not too difficult for us to see that this painting, in
terms of its subject-matter, format, composition, style, techniques of brushwork, and
almost everything, is in the line of Northern Song art. Furthermore, it is not too difficult
either for us to see that this painting follows the tradition of Fan Kuan: the central
image is a monumental frontal peak standing high in the middle of the painting,
flanked by a few much smaller slim peaks and guarded by huge rocks in the front.
The foreground is formed with trees and woods and surrounded by streams and small
rocks. It is undeniable that the influence of Fan Kuan is both ideological and stylistic:
the monumentality of the central peak in Li Tang echoes the same symbolic property of
the gigantic frontal peak in Fan Kuan’s painting, which is for the purpose of imperial
glorification. Moreover, the painstakingly detailed brushwork in Li Tang echoes the same of Fan Kuan as well.

However, after the fall of the old dynasty, Li Tang, a northern man in his old age, moved to the southern city of Hangzhou and joined the Imperial Painting Academy as the leading master; he gradually adapted himself to the southern climate and changed his view of landscape. One of the masterpieces he painted in the south, *Clear Stream with a Reclusive Angler*, is completely different from before. There is no mountain in this painting and no central peak either. Rather, Li Tang presented a much smaller view of scenery. In this horizontal handscroll, the artist depicted a river bank, with trees here and there sheltering an empty thatched house. Behind the curvy bank and far from the house, a fishing boat is half shown, with a lonely angler sitting at one end of it. This is a close-up frame of a possible panorama landscape. In the south, Li Tang no longer depicted the paramount nature but looked into the diminutive sceneries, expressing his subtle feelings in association with the detailed scenes. Needless to say, this northern man became a southern man, who turned inward, encoding his personal thoughts, sentiments, sorrows, and complaints in the subtle southern landscape, and not glorifying his patron emperor.

Why is this so? Speaking on an ideological level, when Chinese culture went outward during the Northern Song period, artists explored the Tao in nature and represented nature by painting it and encoding the Tao in the painted image of nature. However, when Northern Song was defeated by its rival, the Jurchen state in 1127, and lost half of its land to the invaders and land grabbers, the court had to move away and resettle down in the south with a greatly shrunken territory. To the artists of the Southern Song period, consequently, they lost their homeland and had no place to explore the Tao but had to turn to their inner world, as the Tao also resides in the human heart and mind. This is the truth about the inwardness, and this is why Southern Song landscape painting is much less representational and more self-expressional. As for Li Tang, in his southern painting, the meditative lonely angler is very absorbed in and concentrated on fishing, while the imageless fish could be considered a zero-sign, or empty-sign of the Tao. The Tao is hidden from the angler deep in the water, and the angler is placed behind the zigzagging river bank, under the shades of lush trees, hiding away from the external world. Surely, the unseen fish is in the heart of the angler, just like the Taoist image of the yin-yang fish in his mind. The way of Li Tang’s self-expression is to fathom his own reclusive inner world for the Tao and turn the world inside-out to manifest the Tao. Of course, Li Tang’s self-expressional painting is not made for the emperor or anyone else, but for himself. One could say that this artist changed his paradigm from northern representation to southern self-expression.

As has been made clear already, the semiotic paradigm is based on sign relations; it is not only ideological but also stylistic, since the ideological Tao is signified by the painted images of the sceneries. As Sullivan noted, realism was achieved by the Northern Song landscape artists and then abandoned by the Southern Song artists. Why is it abandoned, and how could the style be inward-turning? Although Sullivan did not give a direct or precise answer, I offer the answer that in order to encode the Tao by representing nature, the Northern Song artists turned outward to develop their techniques by observing nature. Conversely, for the purpose of self-expression which is also a way of encoding the Tao, the Southern Song artists turned inward to search the
techniques in their memory of the northern landscape, rather than turning outward to observe the Southern nature for techniques.

The above answer comes from my personal experience of pondering upon art history. When I traveled to the Taihang Mountain area in northern China in the early 2010s, I was amazed by the textures and formation patterns on the surfaces of the rocks and cliffs, differing from place to place, which looked very much like the linear traces left by ax cutting and chopping. Those visual forms reminded me immediately of the linear textures and patterns of brush strokes used to depict the surfaces of rocks and cliffs in the Northern Song landscape painting, such as Li Tang’s *Wind through the Pine Valleys*. Thus, I convinced myself that the ancient masters of Northern Song and before had personally seen these textures and patterns in nature and represented them in their art works. Indeed, Taihang Mountain is the place which Fan Kuan traveled to; he enjoyed the formal beauty of the mountain wildness. The Northern Song landscape masters observed the textures and formations on the rocks and cliffs; they studied these visual forms and explored how to paint them realistically, representing the true look of nature. That being said, a special technique called “ax-chopping stroke” (fupi cun) or “big-ax-cutting” (da fupi) was developed, which was to use the side of a brush for shading, depicting the natural textures and patterns of mountain rocks and cliffs.

Once the Southern Song artists turned inward to explore the Tao in their heart and mind, they did not need to explore the outside world. As just noted, they did not need to observe nature for techniques but turned inward to their memory for the techniques that they learned from the Northern Song naturalist artists. In this regard, Li Tang is once again a perfect example for discussion, since he was from the North, he had observed nature there sufficiently to learn techniques. In his northern masterpiece *Wind through the Pine Valleys*, he demonstrated his excellence in using the “ax-chopping stroke” to shade the texture and patterns on the cliff surface. Then, when he moved to the south, he used the same technique to make his southern landscape, including the masterpiece *Clear Stream with a Reclusive Angler*. Although there is no mountain, no cliff, and no rock in this southern scenery, Li Tang applied the same brush strokes to depict the shades on the surface of the river bank. In this work, without observing the nature of the northern mountains, Li Tang formulated his old technique for this southern scenery. Not only did he use it for his own works, he also passed it on to his students and followers. Whence, the formulaic southern techniques of painting from memory came into being.

Li Tang is certainly responsible for the formularization of the southern techniques, and for the southern stylistic esthetics as well. When the Jurchens defeated the Northern Song, they captured the emperor, his family, his inner circle officials, and court ladies and looted the imperial collections, composed of archives, documents, books, calligraphy, paintings, antiques, and all kinds of treasures. While the escapees went to the south, the Jurchens brought the spoils of war, including the emperor and court artists, to the Jurchen homeland in the far north. Li Tang was one of the captives, but on the way to the far north, he somehow managed to slip away and eventually wandered to the south. At first, he survived by selling paintings on the streets of Hangzhou, capital of the South, and then he was recognized by a court official and summoned by the new emperor to court, assuming the position of headmaster for the new imperial painting academy. In the academy, Li Tang was a rare great master from
the Northern Song, and there were no Northern Song masterpieces that had been rescued and brought the Southern Song academy. As a result, in the early Southern Song period, Li Tang was the only one for students to learn art with, and his paintings became the only source for students to learn techniques. Unlike the northern artists, the southern students did not need to observe nature for techniques but turned to Li Tang’s studio and classes. They attended his lectures, joined his workshops, and copied his paintings. In order to teach, to learn, and to use the techniques, the master had to formulate them, making a step-by-step procedure for students to follow. When the students completed their study and became court artists, they just needed to use the formulated techniques, which were stored in their memory. In the early Southern Song period, almost all the court artists, including some masters, were students of Li Tang.

The formularization of techniques does not require artists to observe and represent nature, but to make use of what is stored in their memory. In this sense, speaking at a stylistic level, the formularized techniques also signify the inwardness of the Southern Song culture.

3. The pragmatical dimension and the two levels of self-expression

In Morrisian terminology, the change from Northern Song representation to Southern Song self-expression corresponds to the shift from the semantic dimension to the pragmatic dimension. At the beginning of this article, I pointed out that the Tao is not only embodied in nature but also in the human heart and mind. In the Southern Song, due to the prevalence of Neo-Confucianism, which emphasized spiritual and moral interaction based on Confucian teaching, Chinese artists believed that the Tao was embodied mainly in the heart of the artist. In Western culture, it is clear that the heart is not the mind, they are different. In traditional Chinese culture, generally speaking, there is no difference between heart and mind. In Neo-Confucianist terminology, the word “heart” is used for both, and hence comes the word “xin-xing,” the nature of the heart. In the specific context of the topic of this article, “xin-xing” could be rendered into English as “spirituality,” which bears a Christian connotation in the West, whereas it is also Taoist- and Buddhist-minded in Chinese culture, except for its Neo-Confucianist inclination.

With regard to the paradigm shift from representation to self-expression, or the change of artistic mode from outside-in to inside-out, while the question to an artist is how to reach his heart, the question to me is a consecutive one, or two: what is the self and how can one be self-expressional?

The Morrisian pragmatical dimension could help with answering these two questions because this dimension concerns the relationship between art work and the artist. In a simple sense, the “self” is the artist, and its relationship to his work is “self-expressional.” Beyond this, however, the artist’s encoding process is a process of conceptualization, and the codification serves his purpose of self-expression at a higher level, not the superficial one. As Morris observed,

The sign expresses but does not denote its own interpretant; only at a higher level is the relations of the sign to the interpreter [artist] itself made a matter for designation. When this is done and a correlation found, the sign becomes of individual and social diagnostic value, and so a new sign at a higher level of semiosis. (Morris, 1971, p. 51)
Inferring and developing from Morris, I consider that, if representation is the function of the old sign in Northern Song landscape painting, then self-expression is the function of the new sign in the Southern Song. The new sign expresses the artist at two levels: at the formal level, it functions like the old sign of representation, depicting images of landscape, but at the conceptual level, the self-expressional function works for spirituality. The formal level is visual, and the conceptual level is, in Morris’s words, psychological, biological, and sociological. Also in Morris’s words, representation could be considered the mask or masquerade of the sign. Thus, with the mask off, self-expression reveals the true face of the artist, or the heart of the artist.

Therefore, reading landscape paintings of the early Southern Song period at the formal level of representation, we can find that they are not completely Southern, but rather Northern. In the above discussion of Li Tang, I called attention to the change from his northern paramount landscape to southern small scenery. What is behind this change? The answer has to do with the memory of everything northern, just like the specific technique of the so-called ax-chopping stroke. As remarked, living in the South, Li Tang turned away from the surrounding nature and looked inward toward the northern mountains and water, as well as painting techniques, in his memory. This is also true for many other artists of the early Southern Song.

Comparing a landscape painting of the early Southern Song artist Zhao Boju (?–1173) to a similar composition of the late Northern Song artist Wang Ximeng (1096–?), we can be certain that the Li Tang case is not a unique one, but more common. A seventh-generation descendant of the first emperor of the Northern Song, Zhao Boju, escaped to the South at the end of the dynasty and became a court official to the new Southern Song emperor. The only painting of Zhao Boju that survives today is the panorama landscape masterpiece Autumn Colours over Streams and Mountains. A counterpart for comparison, Wang Ximeng was a child prodigy discovered by the Northern Song emperor-artist Huizong (1082–1135). The emperor himself personally taught the young man art and then made him a court artist. At the tender age of 18, Wang Ximeng painted a masterpiece of a panoramic landscape, his only surviving work, A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains. In terms of authorial intention, both artists made the paintings for their emperor-patron to glorify the greatness of the emperors and the empire. In terms of format, both paintings are massive horizontal handscrolls, and in terms of coloring, both belong to the “blue-and-green landscape” category.

How did they glorify their patrons? Let’s compare their composition, which is a crucial way to represent the image of the great empire. In the horizontal landscape of Zhao Boju, five mountain ranges extend zigzagging from the near to the far distance, each formed with peaks high and low. Parallel to one another, these mountain ranges are grouped into two. On the left and middle, one group of four ranges takes two-thirds of the entire compositional space, and on the right is the fifth range as the other group. Among the five mountain ranges, the highest peak stands straight up in the middle of the third range, flanked by smaller peaks and other ranges on both sides. Between the two groups, a flat main valley with a big river runs zigzagging through the mountains. Smaller rivers and streams also flow zigzagging between the mountain ranges, parallel to one another. Unsurprisingly, trees and woods are everywhere, small figures on roads are dotted here and there in the river valleys, and so are the paths.
The above composition of Zhao Boju resembles that of Wang Ximeng, with two exceptions. In Wang’s painting, there are four mountain ranges, not five, and the arrangement is switched from left to right. Due to the resemblance, along with other similarities of the two paintings, a twentieth-century art historian in China argued that the Zhao Boju painting should be considered a work of Northern Song and not Southern Song (Jianrong, 1998, p. 379). Although some scholars did not agree, I hope to make a point based on the comparison that the early Southern Song landscape painting did not have to represent the true image of southern land, but to present the artist’s memory of the North. Ironically or not, some scholars of today have pointed out that the Wang Ximeng painting depicted the image of the South, not the North, though Wang is a Northern Song artist. Nonetheless, this is not an important issue to me, and the important issue is that the Zhao Boju painting looks like that of Wang Ximeng.

What is the significance of this comparison? According to Morrisian pragmatics, the encoding process starts from the artist’s point of view, and the artist looks not beyond but at himself. Accordingly, at the formal level, the image of the mountains and streams in the Zhao Boju composition represents the lost northern land, which is found in his heart only. However, such representation is just a superficial masquerade. Underneath the disguise, speaking at the conceptual level, the landscape image expresses the artist himself, namely, his memory of the northern landscape and the belle époque of the North, as well as his sentiment and sorrow for the loss of the northern land. In other words, the Zhao Boju painting serves not only as an imperial glorification but also a hidden personal lamentation. As a new sign, the image of the Zhao Boju landscape signifies the artist himself and his feelings and thoughts, but not the southern landscape. Speaking of the artist himself, this is where the spirituality is embedded, as the Tao is in his heart.

Surely, in the heart of the artist, spirituality has everything to do with the embodied Tao. As an ultimate Way, the Tao is interpreted differently in the three Chinese philosophical thoughts. To a Taoist, the Tao is the way of nature and life; to a Confucianist, the Tao is the way of social order and personal virtue; to a Buddhist, the Tao is the way of cultivation and enlightenment. All three ways are embodied in the heart of the artist, and for an artist, the way to reach the Tao in the heart is divided into three phases. First, observing and representing the external world for the purpose of understanding nature; second, examining and expressing internal subjectivity for the purpose of understanding one’s own heart, which is a response to the first; third, realizing and encoding the Tao through self-expression by making a landscape painting. The three phases could be described as a process from physical to psychological and then to philosophical or metaphysical.

Comparatively, Northern Song representation cares more about the external image of nature at the formal level of visuality, whereas Southern Song self-expression is more concerned with the internal feelings and thoughts of the artist at the conceptual level. Although this is the paradigm shift from Northern Song to Southern Song, the root of this change can be found in an early time, as Fan Kuan, the Northern Song artist, declared that he would rather learn art from his own heart than from nature or from old masters (Jianghua, 2007).
After Li Tang and Zhao Boju, this change is strengthened by the works of some important artists of the mid Southern Song; among them, Ma Yuan (ca. 1140–1225) is influential. Ma was from a family of professional artists. His great grandfather was well known for art in the Northern Song period under the Huizong reign (1101–1119), his grandfather was a court artist of the early Southern Song, and his uncle was a court artist as well. Ma Yuan himself and his son, Ma Lin (dates unknown), were both well-respected court artists. Ma Yuan carried on the heritage of Li Tang, but his art is more self-expressive at the conceptual level and much simpler at the formal level.

Discussing Ma Yuan’s self-expressiveness, I would point out an important difference between the old northern sign and the new southern sign. Attributed to Ma Yuan, the massive handscroll landscape painting, Composing Poetry on a Spring Outing, is more figure-centered, and relatively less landscape-centered. Although this is a depiction of spring scenery on the outskirts of Hangzhou, there is no paramount or panoramic view of nature, but rather much smaller narrative sceneries organized horizontally, frame by frame. The focal frame is a group of poets, artists, scholar-officials, their family members, and servants gathering outdoors around the master of a country villa, who is writing a poem on a handscroll with a brush. The figures in this painting are much bigger, and more outstanding, than those in Northern Song landscape paintings. Although Ma Yuan was hired by the villa master, a high ranking official of the Southern Song court, to make a painting for this gathering, Ma Yuan, in the meantime, is also an invited guest of this occasion since he is a privileged court artist. Thus, in this painting, Ma Yuan identified himself as a scholar-official at this event, making paintings, composing poems, and demonstrating calligraphy for self-expression. Due to this implied authorial intention, the scenery depicted in this painting does not need to be paramount or panoramic, and the figures have to be bigger so that they can occupy the central focus.

Abandoning paramount and panoramic view in other smaller landscape compositions, Ma Yuan went to an extreme. He usually placed the focal image of woods or pavilions at one corner of the frame and thus earned the nickname of “One-Corner Ma.” Some art historians interpreted his cornered composition at the conceptual level and regarded this kind of southern scenery as a left-over subject from the North, or the remaining land. Although I do not oppose such political overinterpretation, I would interpret the one-corner composition as a stylistic change at the formal level, just like Ma’s use of the “big-ax-cutting stroke” for the peaks and rocks, which has a strong association with the memory of Northern Song technique.

Taking advantage of simplicity is another big move that Ma Yuan made for the paradigm shift in Southern Song landscape painting. He even simplified the image of scenery to a minimum so that the only image left is the central figure in the landscape. In this way, he broke the boundary of landscape painting and figure painting, and the boundary between formal level and conceptual level. In his famous painting of this kind, A Lonely Angler Fishing in the Middle of a Cold River, an old hermit is framed in the middle of an empty river, sitting quietly on one end of a tiny boat, concentrating on fishing. The boat is so small and the man is so much bigger that the other end of the boat even tips up. With a few flowing brush lines drawing the fast moving waves around the boat, the artist grasped the sense of danger and grasped the sense of stillness of the man in the cold air. Except for a few wavy lines, nothing else is to be found on the water surface; there is no islet, no sandbar, and no suggestion of a river shore, not
even a single piece of weed. Against such a vast and cold emptiness, the loneliness of the angler becomes the focus of the painting, and he also focuses on not only his own loneliness but fishing. Since the fishing line is loose, not taut, I assume he is waiting for a fish which is not yet there at that moment. In this painting, the fish could be interpreted as the enlightenment in expectation. Thus, the loneliness and stillness signify the state of mediation. In this sense, this small landscape painting represents nothing but expressing the artist’s self-awareness.

That being said, the artist is the designatum of the new sign. In the terminology of Morrisian pragmatics, a sign is designed by and for its user to express the user himself, and thus, the sign relation is decided by the user. This is a contract made between the sign and its user, which rules their relationship, Morris termed it stipulation (Morris, 1971, p. 45). In the case of Ma Yuan, the simplified image and the minimalist composition excellently showcased the pragmatical stipulation and showcased the paradigm shift in Southern Song landscape painting which turns away from representation and focuses on self-expression.

4. Simplicity, Zen, and spontaneity

Along with the development of Southern Song landscape painting, the shifted paradigm gradually became a stipulation, governing the relation between artists and their works, and this relationship became finalized at the end of Southern Song. In the process of solidifying the new paradigm, three types of artists formed the main force of Southern Song art: the court artists, the literati artists, and the Zen Buddhist artists, though their styles and views about art are different and even opposite to each other.

Throughout the Southern Song, court artists played the leading role. Later art historians usually discuss the court artist Xia Gui (dates unknown, early thirteenth century) together with Ma Yuan due to their similarities. This is not just because they were contemporaries but because they followed the same tradition of Li Tang in developing techniques, and also because they preferred similar compositions for small sceneries. Dealing with this kind of new composition, when Ma Yuan placed subject-matter at one corner and earned the nickname of “One-Corner Ma,” Xia Gui placed his subject-matter on one side, occupying a half frame, and earned a nickname “One-Side Xia” or “One-Half Xia.” However, the difference with Xia Gui is that in terms of the subject-matter for his massive horizontal handscroll, he turned away from the northern landscape in memory but depicted southern scenery, as his ancestral hometown is Hangzhou, the capital city of the Southern Song. His best known work of this kind is Pure and Remote Views of Streams and Mountains. Later, scholars often praised the composition for how well the images of mountains and streams are grouped and arranged, and praised the techniques for how the “big-ax-cutting stroke” is renovated and executed in making this painting. I agree with these scholars, but I stress the way Xia Gui applied the yin-yang principle to his composition for visual musicality. Xia Gui meticulously depicted the details of the key images, such as the densely wooded Buddhist temple compound near the river shore, and then left the river almost empty as a simplified space transitioning to another frame of space with detailed depiction of the next subject. This is the movement of yin-yang in arranging the heavy depictions and light depictions at the rhythmic pace of music, which sounds in the heart of the artist.
Regarding the musical rhythm in composition, its way of simplification, and simplicity, another massive horizontal handscroll by Xia Gui, *Twelve Landscape Views*, went even further. In this painting, the images are simplified to three flat layers, step by step, in a rhythmic pace of musical fading away. The first layer, composed of rocks and trees in the foreground, is depicted with little detail. The second is the images of sandbars, river shores, trees, and villages near the shores in the middle ground, depicted with no detail but reduced to a sheer shadow. The third is the mountain silhouette against a vast, empty background. In comparison to *Pure and Remote Views*, I would say that the *Twelve Views* is not a depiction of landscape or scenery at all, but a projection of the artist’s inner image of the Tao, comparable to the shadow image in the cave of Plato. Regarding the simplicity, scholars may argue that this is how the artist perceived and portrayed landscape. However, I argue that since the Tao is embodied in nature, when nature is perceived by the artist, the Tao is embodied in the heart of the artist as well. As for projection, just like Abram’s lamp, the artist presented the Tao to his audience directly, without depicting the details of the landscape, which could shadow the lamp and block the presentation of the Tao.

Speaking of self-expression, the literati artists of the Southern Song are more obsessed with their own mind-state. Accordingly, the paradigm shift in their landscape painting is unique. In the early Southern Song, Mi Youren (ca. 1072–1151) carried on the artistic heritage of his father Mi Fu (1051–1107) and developed a very innovative style of landscape painting which has nothing to do with the Northern Song tradition, although the father and son certainly studied enough of the old masters’ work. In respect to techniques at the formal level, Mi Youren did not use the northern “ax-chopping stroke” at all but developed his own “Mi-family dots” (Midian shanshui) based on his father’s experiment. While the northern “ax-chopping stroke” uses dry brush to depict the dry mountains in the dry north, as a contrast, the “Mi-family dots” are made by using a watery brush to apply tonal-rich dots to depict the southern hills in their rainy climate. Since the brush and paper are wet, there is no clear trace of brush lines left to be seen, whereas the northern artists used dry and clear lines to draw the contours and shapes of the peaks and rocks.

Mi Youren’s landscape is also simple, but his method of simplification is unequaled. In his panoramic handscroll, *The Miraculous Image of Xiao and Xiang Rivers*, the artist blurred the brush lines and diluted the sharpness and clarity of images with watery dots and tones. In this painting, there is no clear border line separating mountains, water, and air from one another, and the scenery images are harmonized into a misty southern world. Later art historians considered that Mi Youren’s technique was not meant to represent nature realistically, but to play with ink and brushwork; thus, they labeled his art “playful work” (Qiaobin, 2006, p. 406). This label is half correct. On the one hand, the artist did not want to imitate the landscape, and on the other, he wanted to express himself by playing with the watery brushwork. This is a change in the literati art, which could be traced back to his father. When commenting on paintings by a famous poet, the father said “the work is for his unhappiness in deep heart” and claimed that art is for the artist’s intent (Chuanxi, 2006, p. 151, 152). The son was the same; he depicted landscape for self-expression, called his work “image of heart,” and regarded depicting landscapes as a journey to his inner world; he said “painting is for thoughts and feelings” (Chuanxi, 2006, p. 155, 157). At this point, Mi Youren has reached the
conceptual level, at which, the likeness of realist representation is not a relevant issue for the artist.

The above claim is also true with regard to the third type of artists, the Buddhist monk artists and their Zen art, which tells clearly what the heart of the self is, and what is in the heart of the self. Generally speaking, Zen is about enlightenment and truth, and there are two ways to reach it. In the development of Buddhism in China, the Northern School of Zen emphasized the gradual realization of truth through daily reading of sutras and routine contemplation of the surrounding world. The Southern School did the opposite; it emphasized sudden realization, or epiphany, by focusing on one’s own heart to find truth. According to this school, one can reach enlightenment at any moment, as long as one meditates, and doing anything could be considered meditating. Metaphysically mysterious is the Zen; no wonder why some artists are fascinated and even bewitched by the Southern School. For an artist, making art is a form of meditation and artwork is a personal manifestation of spiritual enlightenment.

Zen art has a long history which can be traced back to the beginning of Buddhism in China and the beginning of Chinese landscape painting. However, it was recognized as an important type of art only in the Southern Song, and it bloomed in the late Southern Song. Unfortunately, since the conservative court artists and literati artists considered Zen painting to be coarse, undisciplined, and unsophisticated, art critics and the scholar-official elite of Southern Song did not pay real attention to Zen art. What is more, in the general narratives of Chinese art, later art historians did not even give a clear definition for Zen art. Scholars of today define Zen art differently; some consider the works of Buddhist monks Zen art, and some consider the works with Buddhist subject matters Zen art (Barnhart, Wu, & Cahill, 1997, p. 133). Relevantly, certain words are often used to describe Zen art, such as directness and immediacy. With no specific explication, these words have become meaningless cliché.

Defining Zen art, I consider not only the artist’s identity, nor simply the subject matter, but mainly the sense of Zen and the Zen spirit embedded in the work at both formal and conceptual levels. In other words, as long as the work communicates with Zen and is self-expressive, I regard it as a work of Zen art. In this sense, the court artist Liang Kai (dates unknown) is a great master of Zen art of the late Southern Song. Next to him, the two great masters of Zen art in Chinese art history are the late Southern Song Buddhist monks Mu Qi (or Muqi and Mu Xi, dates unknown) and Yu Jian (or Jujian, dates unknown); both are well-known for their landscape paintings with southern motifs.

As far as the formal level is concerned, Zen art is playful with brushwork, and simplicity is the key characteristic of composition and technique. Similar to Mi Youren, the two Zen artists, Mu Qi and Yu Jian, used watery brush to apply diluted ink to wet paper for an atmospheric landscape; yet different from Mi Youren, they also used dry brush with undiluted ink to highlight the key images. Speaking at the conceptual level, the highlighted part of the image is the focus of the landscape where Zen spirituality, or enlightenment, is encoded. At this point, a scholar of today studying Southern Song culture, Alfreda Murck, has aptly remarked of the two artists, “[T]heir quiet landscapes, punctuated with an occasional ink splash, perfectly complement Buddhist metaphors of delusion, illusion, and enlightenment” (Murck, 2000, p. 252). Although the two artists are similar in this respect, they are also different from each other. Mu Qi made his landscape misty by showing as little of the brush strokes as possible. Unlike him, Yu
Jian is more spontaneous with his bold handling of striking brush strokes. The uniqueness of each artist is precisely where the realization of Zen lies.

Painting the same southern landscape motif, *Eight Views of Xiao and Xiang Rivers*, the two artists demonstrated their spiritual sensitivity and sensibility toward Zen in simultaneously compatible and incompatible ways. Mu Qi took all kinds of motifs as metaphors for Zen: not only birds descending to river shore in vast landscape but also meditative fruit in minimalist still-life, such as *Six Persimmons*. Yu Jian turned to abstract expression and focused dry brush with pure ink on pinpointing the enlightenment directly, against the massive wet background depicted with watery brushwork. In each case, the two artists built their own spiritual world of Zen at two levels, the formal level of the simplistic image of misty and atmospheric mountains and rivers with minimalist or abstract brushwork, and the conceptual level of enlightenment, realizing the relationship between the artist and his artwork, which is the ultimate truth of the Tao, since the Tao is not only embodied in nature but mainly in the heart.

The simplicity and abstraction of Zen art come from the artists’ spontaneous response to their own feelings and thoughts. However, as mentioned earlier, their spontaneity might have gone too far to receive approval from traditional artists and critics. On this topic, James Cahill remarked:

Paintings of this kind violated the traditional requirement that readable forms be rendered in distinct brushstrokes. For the Confucian literati painters and critics, the ideal of spontaneity had to be reconciled with disciplined brushwork; real freedom from conventions could not be tolerated. (Cahill, 1988, p. 85)

Nonetheless, the point of unruly extreme spontaneity with wild brushwork is precisely where the Zen artists intended to reach for self-expression. This is the personal point of enlightenment and realization through mediation with art. In one word, this is the key to understanding Zen art.

Discussing the relationship between the sign and the sign user, or artwork and artist, Morris holds the crucial opinion that the sign user may need to build a system of semiosis to interpret the semiotic world (Morris, 1971, p. 53). Certainly, along with other dimensions, the pragmatical dimension of self-expression plays a key role in constructing the world, which is centered on the sign relation of the artist and his work. From early Southern Song to late Southern Song, the court artists, literati artists, and Zen artists gradually completed the construction of the semiotic world by moving away from realist representation and turning to self-expression. Thus, these artists eventually reached the innermost point of selfness and realized the spiritual Tao.

5. Conclusion

In the above discussion, the term “selfness” is a relative notion, used in the specific context of self-expression in Southern Song art and the Morrisian pragmatical dimension of semiosis, referring to the relationship between art and artist. In this sense, selfness is self-awareness; it is about personal cultivation in relation to inwardness and to the Tao as well. With this clarification in mind, I draw the following conclusion from this study: when Chinese art history moved forward from the period of the Northern Song to the Southern Song, landscape painting experienced an important change from
representation to self-expression, which decisively redirected the mainstream of Chinese landscape painting from being external-sensitive to more internal-sensitive, and thus cast a crucial impact of self-expression, with spirituality, on future Chinese art, and set up a new paradigm ever since for the development of Chinese landscape painting at formal and conceptual levels.

In return, this study also gives me a chance to reinterpret the Morrisian semiotic dimensions as sign relation-based paradigms and examine the paradigm shift at the two levels. In short, my revision of the Morrisian theory could be presented as follows:

To Saussure, the sign relation is that of the signifier and signified. If one holds the Saussurean theory fast, then one has to fit “self-expression” into this relationship and thus may miss the importance of the maker of the signifier. To Peirce, the sign relation could be the relationship between the sign and object. However, Peirce is different from Saussure; he noted a third party in between, the interpretant. Unfortunately, Peirce didn’t specify whether the interpretant is the sign maker, i.e., encoder. In fact, his interpretant is not even necessarily a sign user. Morris developed Peirce by distinguishing the interpreter from the interpretant and specified it as a sign user, which could be an encoder, a decoder, or both. Based on all this, I reinterpret the Morrisian interpreter, or sign user, as the sign maker, or encoder, and hence my adaptation of Morris’s pragmatics.

At this point, moreover, I reiterate my further reinterpretation of the Morrisian theory of semiosis. Morrisian pragmatics is not about the relationship between the Saussurean signifier and signified, and not about that of the Peircian sign and object either. Beyond the Peircian interpretant, Morris proposed a new party for his pragmatics in a completely different mode, the sign user. In my opinion, this is the maker of the Saussurean signifier and the maker of the Peircian sign or representamen. Thus, it is Morris who provided me with a new paradigm for my study of self-expression in Southern Song landscape painting and provided me with the chance to push his pragmatical thesis one step forward.

This step is to claim that, first, the three Morrisian dimensions are sign relation based, which laid the foundation for his semiotic system and semiosis process and constructed his semiotic world. Second, the change of dimension is a paradigm shift, happening at the formal and conceptual levels. Employing the Morrisian theory in my study of Southern Song self-expression; third, the paradigm shift from semantic dimension to pragmatical dimension defines the function of art, such as the purpose of making landscape paintings. Accordingly, this shift happens at two levels. At the formal level, the shift is involved with the visuality of styles and techniques, which are developed for image making. At the conceptual level, the shift is involved with the ideology of selfness and spirituality, which are directly associated with the way of image making. Bearing this opinion in mind, I finalize this article with the statement that Southern Song landscape painting depicts images of sceneries for the artist’s self-expression of his own feelings and thoughts about the Tao, which is embodied in the heart of the artist, and not only in nature.

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Notes on contributor

Lian Duan, Ph.D. in Literary theory and Ph.D. in Visual Art, is a senior lecturer and coordinator in Chinese at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. His research interest covers comparative literature and narratology, as well as art history and visual semiotics. He has published extensively on literature and art and presented on cross-cultural topics at international conferences. As an essayist and art critic, he has also published collections of travel journals and art reviews.

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