

Of Moon and Man A Close Look at Chinese Landscape Painting

Review >
China

Since antiquity the moon has been considered one of the most attractive elements of nature, and men have often been depicted pondering its light. In China, the 'literati viewing the moon' is an often-cited stereotype in works of art. Jeonghee Lee-Kalisch, an expert in East Asian art history, discusses this specific genre of poetry and landscape painting.

By Ricarda Daberkow

The moon has long held special significance in Chinese popular mythology, and as such has been depicted in numerous works of literature and art. Its smooth, reflective surface was said to be the home of animals like the rabbit and the toad. It was also considered an island paradise floating in the skies – a dreamland. In the eighth century the imagery of the moon changed, becoming a residence of the legendary Queen Mother of the West, perhaps under the influence of Western ideas that came to China by way of Buddhism.

Based on an investigation of poetry, and ninety landscapes from the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, Jeonghee Lee-Kalisch's *Das Licht der Edlen (junzi zhi guang)*; (English: Light of Nobles) gives an insight into the relationship between the illuminated celestial body and its male observers. The primary aim of this study is to pursue this relationship, and as a result the author deals with questions that revolve around men. What were the noblemen pondering on, or dreaming of, while gazing upon the moon? What kind of associations with the moon did they have? Lee-Kalisch also examines the stage names



Taken from the book under review.

(bi) of individual painters and literati, in order to communicate an idea of their relationship with the moon.

Through an investigation of literary patterns, mainly from Tang period poetry, the author shows that the purity of the moon is associated with the pure and chaste heart of the noble. Du Fu, Li Bai, and Tang Taizong describe typical situations whereby literati gather together on a terrace near the water, watching the moon, drinking wine, and playing the flute or zither. They describe solitary men viewing the moon, sitting in a boat floating on the river. These people are portrayed dreaming of leaving society and its rigid structure behind, searching for freedom of spirit and body, and even immortality.

The second part of this study accentuates the formal composition, and focuses on the characteristics of moonlit landscapes, with and without men viewing the moon. Lee-Kalisch concentrates on the compositional element of an invisible line between the person and the moon. By using schematic drawings the author is able to show the clear preference of painters, up to the Ming period, for a diagonal line between the viewer and the moon. This stereoscopic effect enables art works to become more vivid. A vertical line between the moon and its viewer is often used to intensify the distancing effect of the composition. Frequently, depictions of literati, the moon and a third element, such as flying birds or another person, form a triangle.

Ill. 13 from Sun Kehong (1532-1610). *Yueshang (Rising moon)*. Section of a hanging scroll 'Delectations for leisure hours'. Ink and colour on paper. 28 cm. Gugong Bowuyuan, Taipei.

How the moon and its emitted light are represented in the paintings is another important part of this research. Is there reflection of the moonlight? How are shadows dealt with? The author points out that questions such as these, that European painters stress, are neglected by Chinese artists. They emphasize, not a naturalistic representation of a moonlit landscape, but rather the manifestation of the essential, the *qi*, of the moon. In comparison with Western realism with its representations of changing light, Chinese artists use synaesthesia: In Chinese art, inscriptions on the painting or the title are used to highlight the intention of the painter. A circle in a fair sky will evoke the perception of a moonlit landscape at nighttime. The means of representation – be it colour, ink or lavis – is secondary. Nonetheless, the publication would have been more complete if it had provided the reader with colour, and not only black-and-white illustrations.

As a whole this work, although interesting, unfortunately is too narrow. The whole complex of animals, plants, and beautiful women in moonlight, as well as representations of the moon in religious paintings is omitted in this study. This is unfortunate but understandable considering the enormous range of material researched in undertaking this analysis. As such this text can only be intended as an overview or an introduction to the topic. It provides the reader

with a wide range of material and is a solid basis for further research. <

- Lee-Kalisch, Jeonghee, *Das Licht der Edlen (junzi zhi guang)*. *Der Mond in der chinesischen Landschaftsmalerei*, Monumenta Serica Monograph Series XLVIII, Sankt Augustin, Nettetal: Institut Monumenta Serica (2001), pp. 266, ISBN 3-8050-0457-5, German.

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