

The Colors of Pleasure and Dissent: The Influence of Buddhism  
on Shitao's "Riverbank of Peach Blossoms"

Heather Sheets

## Introduction

As the Manchus invaded the Ming Dynasty in 1644, Zhu Reuji, a Ming royal, ended his political future by committing to Buddhist monasticism and changing his name to Shitao. For the next fifty years, he traveled widely throughout China, absorbing the sights of nature around him while continuing his affiliation with Buddhism through using monasteries, painting, and social connections as checkpoints of his practice and aids in living an enjoyable life.<sup>1</sup> Throughout this time he became a celebrity painter due to his ground-breaking innovations within and beyond the Chinese Landscape genre. He worked as an individualist painter full time starting in 1696 in Yangzhou, where he continued to be bold with his art. As a Ming loyalist (and surviving royal family member) during the time of Manchu invasion and rule, he probably experienced a great deal of entitlement to value his thoughts as an individual. These experiences lay powerful groundwork at the feet of a revolutionary painter.

This paper will argue that Shitao's composition of the album *Wilderness Colors* in 1700 drew on his Buddhist values to help define his own individualist style of painting by using techniques that complemented abstraction, impermanence, and color. This is not to exclude the effects of Daoist values on his paintings, but rather to highlight a lesser researched connection between Buddhism and his work. The methods I will use to intervene with this information are the synthesis of textual and image-based research, and a case study of *Wilderness Colors'* "Riverbank of Peach Blossoms" (Figure 1) located in the collections of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

The connections I will lean on within Buddhism are nature symbolism, implications of the Four Noble Truths (Dukkha, Samsāra, Rebirth, Liberation), and depictions of simplicity and

---

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Hay. *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China*. Cambridge University Press: New York, 2001, 30.

impermanence to promote personal experience. These connections can be seen in Shitao's *Wilderness Colors*, the full compilation of leaves providing good comparison to the case study on the leaf of focus: "Riverbank of Peach Blossoms." In further simplifying the already abstracted images of traditional Chinese landscapes, Shitao points toward an even more comprehensive release of worldly attributes. He does this by uniquely employing color and technique.

In order to be liberated from the world, one must be non-traditional, must see things differently. Thus, Shitao must paint differently because he strives to see things differently. The complexity surrounding his commitment to Buddhism and his conversion to Daoism is evident in *Wilderness Colors*, seeking to reach a new reality through art innovations rather than through any traditional religious ritual.

### **Shitao and Individualist Painting**

In the year 1700, the time of composition for "Riverbank of Peach Blossoms", Shitao was living in the large city of Yangzhou, populated by about two or three hundred thousand people. The city's administrative and commercial prosperity "was based partly on [the] strategic location in relation to transportation networks [and]...the salt fields to the east."<sup>2</sup> Yangzhou was not without struggle though, and at the time of *Wilderness Colors*' composition, the city was just "recovering from the economic depression into which it had been plunged by the fall of the Ming and the pre-1684 Qing ban on maritime trade, its full recovery hampered by a succession of serious floods."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Hay. *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China*. Cambridge University Press: New York, 2001, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Hay. *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China*. Cambridge University Press: New York, 2001, 8.

Shitao's house was small and on a busy, canal-side street in a "cramped, low class area outside the Great East Gate" giving him access to his wealthy merchant clients, but allowing him to live within his means.<sup>4</sup> This area also allowed Shitao to interact with elements of both his Daoist conversion of 1696 and his previous Buddhist monastic commitment of 1644.<sup>5</sup> Although the Daoist Fanli Monastery was close by, the Buddhist Tianning Monastery is what he decided to depict in a 1693 album leaf and in other paintings he composed in 1687 and 1701.<sup>6</sup> Shitao decided on a renunciation of his monastic orders in Buddhism in order to "move into the Dadi Tang, committing himself entirely to the open market."<sup>7</sup> Before this time, he was known for being picky about his patrons, often rejecting a 'vulgar' man's offer to purchase his paintings. "It was not money per se that was unacceptable—only the idea that money was enough in itself to command his services."<sup>8</sup> This intentionality behind his business interactions could be reflecting the Buddhist sentiments in the Eightfold Path including the need for depth of purpose to create right conduct, right livelihood, and right effort.<sup>9</sup>

Shitao's pursuit of Buddhism was initially to avoid massacre by the Manchus by shedding what threatened the Manchus, his royal identity. There was physical security in renouncing his political life in favor of a religious one. This is also why he changed his name from Zhu Reuji to Shitao.<sup>10</sup> Inevitably, Shitao carried the effects of this displacement in his identity and passions, and, in his home in Yangzhou, he "painted a branch of bamboo in his reception room...directly

---

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid*, 8-9.

<sup>5</sup> James Cahill, *Treasures of Asia: Chinese Painting*. d'Art Albert Skira: Cleveland, 1960.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Hay. *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China*. Cambridge University Press: New York, 2001, 10.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid*, 154.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid*, 144-145.

<sup>9</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, "Eightfold Path," Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.: 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, "Shitao: Chinese Painter," Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.: 2018.

on the wall...and then inscribed a quatrain beside it” showing his feelings of “orphaned descendent of the Ming imperial family”:

I have never permitted myself to cultivate this [plant] lightly,  
Icy clouds accompanying torn up roots.  
If, following the thunderclaps, you should take a look  
Its offspring will be growing in the wall’s ruins.<sup>11</sup>

He spent most of his life as a Buddhist monk. “He originally belonged to the intellectual elite of Buddhist religious professionals, men who were, on a certain level, literati in Buddhist robes. As they did in his life, monks in his paintings freely interact with other members of the urban elite and are subsumed there under the shi [gentlemen] formula.”<sup>12</sup> It is an important distinction that Shitao functioned as a literati painter because it matches his moral leanings in both painting and making a living. Through this, he could be innovative and sell paintings without the shame of being a merchant. Furthermore, the literati “often had strong Ming loyalist sympathies” and “[pursued] education and cultural activities with great intensity in the hope of mitigating the stigma of commerce.”<sup>13</sup> Social status and visible display allowed their sold works to still hold value, and even brought “together men whom politics separated.”<sup>14</sup>

Involvement in a more independent movement of artists supplemented Shitao’s individualist attitude in writing his own treatise on painting, “Hua-yu-lu,” especially expressing “painting as religious practice” (in a 1697-8 edit) and methods of painting in general.<sup>15</sup> This treatise was started as a draft of writing on fans and paintings in the time before his Daoist

---

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Hay. *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China*. Cambridge University Press: New York, 2001, 9.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Hay. *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China*. Cambridge University Press: New York, 2001, 159-160.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 272-274.

conversion and was finalized in the time after. His written conclusions of oneness (“self-affirmation”) and freedom (“a ‘free’ cosmological location”) promoted originality and freedom especially through the use of inkwash (promoting dynamics, energy, and strangeness).<sup>16</sup> These conclusions also expressed the need for belonging found in oneself through “an absolute sense of place.”<sup>17</sup> Emphasis on notions of oneness, freedom, and belonging show off his confluence of religious ideology between Buddhism and Daoism since all three ideals are important to both systems of belief.<sup>18</sup>

After a series of stints as an artist in residence in Yangzhou, Shitao decided to pursue the arts solely in 1696, just like many dispossessed Ming affiliates did “as ways of earning a livelihood from the cultural knowledge and skills that defined them socially.”<sup>19</sup> The gamble to pursue a secular life was also appealing to Shitao since he was not always healthy and probably did not have a family to care for and support him.<sup>20</sup> This also created a need for Shitao to connect to the world around him, both in a naturalistic sense and in a social sense. Abandoning monasticism allowed him to network with his patrons without other obstacles. Converting to Daoism also gave him a popular advantage as a marketing agent of his own work.<sup>21</sup> His motives of conversion, like his life, were extraordinarily complex and wrapped by layers of historical complications. His time as a Buddhist monk, however, was not short, and his experiences within Buddhism manifesting as influences in his artwork have been underserved in scholarship.

Inspiration to others as a social and cultural figure from the angle of an individualist painter cannot be understated. Individualist painters of the Ming and Manchu period had “the

---

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 280-281.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 154-155.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 2-3

<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Hay. *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China*. Cambridge University Press: New York, 2001, 3.

most violent departures from visual truthfulness” and “turned back to nature for a reconsideration of the old concept of landscape painting as the outcome of a direct encounter between the artist’s mind and the exterior world.”<sup>22</sup> This is typically symbolized by new practices in technique including “coloristic treatment,” “sparseness,” “sensitive abstraction,” “first-hand interpretation,” and, above all, “personal expression.”<sup>23</sup> Shitao’s new kinds of techniques allowed for new kinds of abstraction including *tien* (“dots of ink clustered or scattered”), his use of color in washes to express a lack of “solid substance,” and his bold, calligraphic outlining that allowed for a landscape to project a naturalistic essence rather than a naturalistic reality.<sup>24</sup> These all provided an air of improvisation, of personal interpretation, of exploration into something new over an imitation of something recycled.

### **Religious Consciousness: Nature**

Shitao used nature in many ways over his career as an artist. His use of mountains, fruit, and color can all be traced back to his multireligious use of Daoism and Buddhism. This section, however, will specifically focus on how elements of Buddhist thought are relevant in such images within in “Riverbank of Peach Blossoms.” Initially notable is the undefined mountain bottom in the top left of the page. In China, mountains shrouded in mist have specific connotations for Chinese viewers regarding immortality. In ancient times, citizens would view the ‘Fairy Isle of Penglai’ and think that ghostly immortal figures resided on the island.<sup>25</sup> This was really a reflection of the people in the adjacent city against the mist which is commemorated in an interpretive sign on Little Yingzhou that reads “The misty view of water with the

---

<sup>22</sup> James Cahill, *Treasures of Asia: Chinese Painting*. d'Art Albert Skira: Cleveland, 1960, 171-172.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>25</sup> Bin Luo and Adam Grydehoj, “Sacred islands and island symbolism in Ancient Imperial China: an exercise in decolonial island studies, *Island Studies Journal*, 12(2), 2017, 31, University of Prince Edward Island: Charlottetown PE.

reflections of the sky and clouds on its smooth surface creates a picture as mysterious as the ‘Fairy Isle of Penglai’, a legendary island in Chinese myths.”<sup>26</sup> Partial concealment gives a mystical visual quality as well as an even hazier reflection in water. This is depicted abstractly as the mountain in “Riverbank of Peach Blossoms” fades away until there are reeds implying its bottom, with no reflection below it except for in one’s imagination. In the middle is white space: Mist.

A Buddhist extension is found in scholarship on an earlier painting by Hui-yiian using mountains as symbolism. The connection between the Buddha and mountains is asserted: “The attribution of mist to the Buddha image assimilates the image to a mountain, ascribing to it the prized mystical quality of a mountain partly concealed by mist.”<sup>27</sup> It is evident that Shitao internalized these concepts of the sacred essence of mountains from his painting treatise, “Hua-yu-lu,” stating:

Mountains and rivers compel me to speak for them: they are transformed through me and I am transformed through them. Therefore I design my paintings according to all the extraordinary peaks which I have sought out. When the spirit of the mountains and rivers meets with my spirit, both their images are transfigured into one, so that in the end, everything leads back to me.<sup>28</sup>

This rounds out both connotations and intentions of Shitao’s use of the mountain as symbol both in his painting and in the “Parrot Island” inscription:

The mist parts and the fragrant breeze from the orchid leaves is warm;

---

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, “Tang Painters and Buddhism,” Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.: 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Marilyn Fu and Wen Fong, *The Wilderness Colors of Tao-Chi*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art: New York, 1973.



The riverbanks are lined with peach blossoms, rising like a brocaded wave.<sup>29</sup>

Throughout *Wilderness Colors* Shitao uses fruit/food imagery including peaches, taro-root, and eggplants. These plants that grow and change from seed to blossom to ripeness to rotting provide Buddhists a metaphor for the process of Samsāra, the cycle of death and rebirth in the material world. Shitao also used the concept of rawness and ripeness to criticize critiques of his painting being “too raw” or “too ripe” due to what his advocates say is his ability to “transcend the limitation of an acquired technique” and his “superb technique” respectively.<sup>30</sup> Part of the inscription of a the “Taro-Root” (Figure 2) leaf of *Wilderness of Colors* reads “...what a laughable, uncouth person I am! This year I greedily obtained some huge taro-roots. They were too large to be roasted in a short time, so I ate them all partly raw. Can you guess what the temperature is inside my stomach?”<sup>31</sup> Instead of being humble in his unique use of the landscape genre, he expresses comfort in the changes he has made. After all, he is the one that must cope with his stomach, nobody else, so he is entitled to consume and produce what he chooses regardless if he is innocent or knows better. This Modern comfort in breaking tradition shows “One of the traditional roles of paintings (and of gardens) was to serve as an antidote to the constraints of urbanism by opening up a space of nature and free movement.”<sup>32</sup> This is related to Buddhism in not only the call for liberation from constraint, but also in the notion of Karma. Karma is defined as how one’s acts bear fruit which “furnishes the basic context for the moral life.”<sup>33</sup> In using not just blossoming flowers but blossoming peaches (fruit), in “Riverbank

---

<sup>29</sup> ShiTao. “清 石濤 (朱若極) 野色圖 冊 (Wilderness Colors).” The Metropolitan Museum of Art: New York, 2018, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/49176>.

<sup>30</sup> Marilyn Fu and Wen Fong, *The Wilderness Colors of Tao-Chi*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art: New York, 1973.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Kathleen Kuiper, ed, *The Culture of India*, Britannica Educational Publishing: New York, 2011, 10.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 165

of Peach Blossoms,” Shitao alludes to “brilliance” and “softness” of such a meaningful link to actions. It seems possible that he could be calling upon a peace that transcends understanding of the life he was living where he lost his family at the hands of other humans, and where he disassociated with that species through religious monasticism.<sup>34</sup> The results of Karma would be, hopefully, much fruit in all the right places.

The reds, oranges, yellows, and black of the peach blossoms have further implications in the representation of fire flames and ashes. This color combination is significant in the Buddhist likening of the process of living to the process of fire. “Its remedy is the extinction of the fire of illusion, passions, and cravings.”<sup>35</sup> The fiery colors used to paint the fruits, link to the seed-to-compost lifecycle previously noted. But if someone can escape this cycle, freedom is possible: “The Buddha, the Enlightened One, is one who is no longer kindled or inflamed. Many poetic terms are used to describe the state of the enlightened human being—the harbour of refuge, the cool cave, the place of bliss, the farther shore.”<sup>36</sup> The cool, water colors and imagery expressing the bliss of enlightenment contrasts sharply with the inflamed passions of earthly living. The direction of the action in “Riverbank of Peach Blossom” goes from bottom to top: Fire to water to mountain; passions to freedom to mystic immortality. This is expressive of the larger cycle of Buddhist objectives containing the smaller cycles of the life of a human on the path to a higher truth (literally with the mountain and figuratively in the context of Buddhism).

### **Religious Consciousness: Technique and Simplicity**

The Buddhist argument of impermanence is one that Shitao would have learned during his time as a monk: That “objects with which people identify themselves—fortune, social position, family, body,

---

<sup>34</sup> Marilyn Fu and Wen Fong, *The Wilderness Colors of Tao-Chi*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art: New York, 1973.

<sup>35</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, “Nirvana,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.*: 2018.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*

and even mind—are not their true selves. There is nothing permanent, and, if only the permanent deserved to be called the self...then nothing is self.”<sup>37</sup> If everything and all experiences are a constantly revolving and evolving truth, then there is a great deal of mystery and abstraction in the reality of the day-to-day. This means that every tree or mountain or person or devastation a person sees or experiences is only a temporary representation. In his treatise on landscape painting, Shitao stated that “the artist becomes aware of the general in the particular, and a relationship between seemingly disparate parts.”<sup>38</sup> This universalization allows his painting “Riverbank of Peach Blossoms” to be representative philosophically of impermanence. More importantly, his painting techniques allow for this landscape to be representative, simpler than what is seen and, thus, truer.

His most effective and revolutionary techniques in abstraction include calligraphic outlining, color, wet ink, and *tien*. Regarding his original technique of using calligraphy paint and brushwork to outline cliffs, rocks, and other landscape elements in “Lakeside Geese,” (Figure 3) he shows his “refusal to fix such limits” so that he is “not so much depicting rocks as presenting to our senses the forces that mold and destroy rocks.”<sup>39</sup> This allows the viewer to experience firsthand “empathically the movements of his hand as it wielded the brush, we take part in an awesome act of creation.”<sup>40</sup> This can be compared to how he uses color in “Riverbank of Peach Blossoms,” in that he presents the scene in bright ripeness, inkwash mist, and blank white space to present not just peaches, mountains, and water, but to present the forces and the transience of the fruit, rock, and, space, especially within the context of the temporary viewer. The wetness of the ink in “Riverbank of Peach Blossoms” shows off how “the stroke was made with a brush unevenly loaded with ink,” which “marked variations in tone [to] appear within it. Spots of ink are sometimes applied so wet that the edges blur as the ink suffuses outward.”<sup>41</sup> It is notable that the wettest element of the painting is the solid mountain, and the place with the driest brushstrokes is the

---

<sup>37</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, “Buddhism,” Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.: 2018.

<sup>38</sup> James Cahill, *Treasures of Asia: Chinese Painting*. d'Art Albert Skira: Cleveland, 1960, 178.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 180-181.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 175.

water. This inverse truth to materials shows just how much Shitao cares about following the rules that someone else's experience may dictate.

*Tien* dots are used in “Riverbank of Peach Blossoms” to concentrate imagery “Laying down shimmering tones of scarlet, blue, and yellow, one over another in a quick succession of dabs and smudges, [to convey] both the brilliance and the softness of flower petals on a misty sunlit day.”<sup>42</sup> This allows intertextuality between the Li Po's “Parrot Island” excerpt and the landscape depicted. These dots simplify what is and allows for fragrance, warmth, and metaphor to do the heavy lifting of access. This *tien* helps “compartmentalize the composition, and divide the ideal, visionary realm from the mundane one.”<sup>43</sup> In extension and as can be seen when looking at *Wilderness of Colors* as a whole, Shitao “adapts his technique to his needs, often avoiding even a complete consistency within a single work.”<sup>44</sup> As “mass and space seem to fuse... worlds of matter and spirit are similarly reconciled by this overpowering vision.”<sup>45</sup> These are all the ingredients said to be needed for transcending the mundane, plus the invitation for the viewer to interpret such spiritualism, such power, for him or herself. This salience of impermanence presented in “Riverbank of Peach Blossoms” ultimately reiterates: “Life is a stream of becoming, a series of manifestations and extinctions. The concept of the individual ego is a popular delusion; the objects with which people identify themselves—fortune, social position, family, body, and even mind—are not their true selves. There is nothing permanent, and, if only the permanent deserved to be called the self...then nothing is self.”<sup>46</sup>

### **Religious Consciousness: Personal Experience**

Shitao was a master individualist painter. He was deeply inspired by his personal experiences, especially from his travels through various Chinese landscapes as a monk. During his travels he also studied the artist Kuo His, “absorbing sensory impressions from nature but trying also to ‘understand the

---

<sup>42</sup> Marilyn Fu and Wen Fong, *The Wilderness Colors of Tao-Chi*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art: New York, 1973.

<sup>43</sup> James Cahill, *Treasures of Asia: Chinese Painting*. d'Art Albert Skira: Cleveland, 1960, 182.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>46</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, “Buddhism: Impermanence,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.*: 2018.

hidden forces of heaven and earth.”<sup>47</sup> This spiritual bend coinciding with his Buddhist value of personal experience allowed his painting inspirations to be separate from previous traditions of imitation and naturalistic reality. When asked to what intellectual school of painting he belongs, he famously broke tradition by saying “ ‘the school of me; I paint in my own style.’ ”<sup>48</sup> Painters used to be explicitly concerned with their emulation and reverence toward ‘The Masters’ that they would self-flagellate their attempts in the painting’s corresponding inscription.<sup>49</sup> But, like Nirvana, a painting worth doing, in Shitao’s opinion, was one that could only be reached through one’s own personal journey and discovery. To pre-empt the connection between personal journey as it is in “Riverbank of Peach Blossoms,” it is important to engage a comparison from *Wilderness of Colors* to show that the connections are not happening in a vacuum. While any of the leaves could be used, “Lakeside Geese” (Figure 3) offers a lot of visual aids to make the connections concrete, and also connects well to the section on technique and simplicity.

“Lakeside Geese” (Figure 3) shows a person on the left side crossing into a dark, enclosed area of the unknown. The “ ‘level distance’ view appears many times in [Shitao’s] work. Here the wintry trees and rocks take on deep emotional significance with the addition of lines from Tu Fu: Wild geese from the lake fly in pairs--/ When the veterans return from the old/ northern campaign.”<sup>50</sup> The geese returning from the north signal a remembrance of hardship and warfare, and the choice and contrast in the use of black and white when color is clearly an option in this series weighs heavily on the mood of isolation. This remembrance, this individual darkness, is reminiscent of Dukkha. This is translated as the suffering of mundane life. To overcome life as suffering, an internal, individual process is required. This is evident in the figure entering the darkness in “Lakeside Geese.” Previous dynasties, especially the Song Dynasty

---

<sup>47</sup> James Cahill, *Treasures of Asia: Chinese Painting*. d'Art Albert Skira: Cleveland, 1960, 176.

<sup>48</sup> James Cahill, *Treasures of Asia: Chinese Painting*. d'Art Albert Skira: Cleveland, 1960, 176.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Sullivan, *The Three Perfections: Chinese Painting, Poetry and Calligraphy*. George Braziller, Inc.: New York, 1980, 36.

<sup>50</sup> Marilyn Fu and Wen Fong, *The Wilderness Colors of Tao-Chi*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art: New York, 1973.

(960-1279), emphasized “flowers, rivers, and trees, executed with sudden, deft strokes, to evoke an insight into the flux and emptiness of all reality.”<sup>51</sup>

Shitao’s “Hua-yu-lu” reflects this perspective-giving through painting stating “The splashing of the ink around the brush comes by instinct, while the manipulating of the ink by the brush depends on spiritual energy. Without cultivation, the ink-splashing will not be instinctive, and without experiencing life, the brush cannot possess spiritual energy.”<sup>52</sup> This emphasis on personal journey both in his treatise and in the level perspective of the painting connects deeply to the Buddhist principles requiring understanding one needs to seek about oneself and the world in order to be liberated from oneself and the world. Furthermore, the ink splashing, the spaces left empty, and the *tien* abstracts the literal reality of the landscape in favor of one in which the viewer must interpret within their own experience. A viewer can relate to the figure in “Lakeside Geese,” especially due to the level perspective, and is allowed to fill in empty spaces with their imagination. The viewer can have personal experience guide them through the understanding of the essence rather than what can only be seen.

“Riverbank of Peach Blossoms” also provides the viewer with human representation so that they can place themselves within the painting. Further, abstract visuals also allow for the viewer’s personal representations. The biggest difference is how color is used to promote personal expression in complement to the negative space. The two ship sails near the center of the page indicate the serene landscape is not being looked out upon and contemplated, but rather that it is being used, traversed. The human action is in the page where people are making a statement with their presence amidst their experience of sailing. What their statement is can be relative, as shown by the lack of detail on the brown sails. What the statement can be is the important part, for each person in their life’s journey has the ability to find for themselves what needs to be said and done. Shitao also marks this by the contrast between “the free and ethereal quality of the present landscape [being] set off by the elegance of the highly controlled

---

<sup>51</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, “Pure Land Tradition,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.*: 2018.

<sup>52</sup> Marilyn Fu and Wen Fong, *The Wilderness Colors of Tao-Chi*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art: New York, 1973.

writing...precisely articulated [in the] brushwork and the exaggerated spacing between the strokes.”<sup>53</sup>

Whatever a person uses to interpret, whether it is structure or freedom, can belong.

Shitao uses the ‘boneless’ method (mo-ku-fa) of “painting in color without ink boundary lines” to allow gradation, contrast, depth, and substance.<sup>54</sup> The people inside the painting cannot even be seen, they are possessed within the peach blossoms. They are fully immersed without boundaries on what they think, feel, look like, and see. This is like the goal of enlightenment, to be unbound by these earthly matters and possessed by something entirely other. Shitao’s use of bright colors implies the beauty or goodness of what is experienced when engulfed by something entirely outside of oneself. His use of *tien* in abstracting the exact form of the blossoms extends that personal experience so that one can input their own image or memory of peach blossoms, or even of something entirely other, as they also seek to be free from similar boundaries. The sailors are free of viewers’ judgement. The actual landscape is free of viewer judgement. Neither can be seen in their form, only in their essence, so the viewer cannot judge, the viewer can only wonder.

## **Conclusion**

Shitao worked boldly on innovations in painting when it was considered most reverent to imitate masters from the past. These innovations challenged his audience to reconsider the definition of meaningful beauty and of value as he drew attention to the act of painting evident on the page. This unveiling of praxis allowed him the space to further abstract and manipulate his painting through using innovative brushstrokes, color use, washes, negative space, and perspective that drew attention to the force or essence of the subject, rather than just its real form. Revolutionary in Chinese landscape painting, his boldness called upon viewers and other painters to be individuals, a concept important to the confluence of many religious practices of the time including Buddhism and Daoism. Shitao often suggested that the viewer input his or her own personal experiences to fill in what was missing, like

---

<sup>53</sup> Marilyn Fu and Wen Fong, *The Wilderness Colors of Tao-Chi*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art: New York, 1973.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*

water, mist, and grassland in “Riverbank of Peach Blossoms,” and to fill in the suggested sizes and spaces with a distance gradient. Aspects of Buddhism not previously highlighted that can be connected to these techniques and purposes engage the Four Noble Truths to be free from a world which can often feel like an attack of staccato, of black *tien*, instead of a fragrant, brocaded wave.



## Bibliography

- Cahill, James. *Treasures of Asia: Chinese Painting*. d'Art Albert Skira: Cleveland, 1960.
- Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.*: 2018.
- Fu, Marilyn and Wen Fong. *The Wilderness Colors of Tao-Chi*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art: New York, 1973.
- Goldin, Paul R. *Confucianism*. Routledge: New York, 2014.
- Hay, Jonathan. *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China*. Cambridge University Press: New York, 2001.
- He, Jinli. "Continuity and Evolution: The Idea of "Co-creativity" in Chinese Art." *The ASIANetwork Exchange: A Journal for Asian Studies in the Liberal Arts*. Open Library of Humanities: United Kingdom: 1943.
- Kuiper, Kathleen, ed. *The Culture of India*. Britannica Educational Publishing: New York, 2011.
- Kwon, Insu; Juil Lee, Ranran Wang, Sand-Joon Kim. "The Role of Confucianism in the Formation of Psychological Contracts: Evidence From China." *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal* 46, (9): 2018, 1,499-1,513.
- Luo, Bin; Adam Grydehoj, "Sacred islands and island symbolism in Ancient Imperial China: an exercise in decolonial island studies, *Island Studies Journal*, 12(2), 2017, 25-44, University of Prince Edward Island: Charlottetown PE.
- Pan, Da'an. "The Beauty Beyond: Verbal-visual intertextuality in traditional Chinese landscape poetry and painting." U.M.I.: Ann Arbor, 1991.
- Sullivan, Michael. *The Three Perfections: Chinese Painting, Poetry and Calligraphy*. George Braziller, Inc.: New York, 1980.
- "清 石濤 (朱若極) 野色圖 冊 (Wilderness Colors)." The Metropolitan Museum of Art: New York, 2018, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/49176>.

**Figure 1**



Riverbank of Peach Blossoms, 10 7/8 x 9 1/2 in. (27.6 x 24.1 cm)

Shitao, *Wilderness of Colors*, ca. 1700

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Figure 2



Taro-Root, 10 7/8 x 9 1/2 in. (27.6 x 24.1 cm)

Shitao, *Wilderness of Colors*, ca. 1700

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Figure 3



Lakeside Geese, 10 7/8 x 9 1/2 in. (27.6 x 24.1 cm)

Shitao, *Wilderness of Colors*, ca. 1700

The Metropolitan Museum of Art