

A Connection to Home:
The Influence of Chinese Painting on the photographs of
Don Hong-Oai

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History of Chinese Painting

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Throughout the history of art, artists have studied previous masters to make their own images. In Chinese art history the study of old masters has always been a practice. This was seen as necessary to making good imagery. Artists today even study other mediums to incorporate those styles into their art. One such artist is Don Hong-Oai; he is a photographer that uses Chinese painting styles and themes to create his art. An understanding of Chinese painting is mandatory to understand his photographs completely. This paper will explore Chinese landscape painting techniques, styles and themes in an attempt to better understand Don Hong-Oai's photographic work.

Don Hong-Oai's Life and Artistic Style

Don Hong-Oai was born in Canton, China to a large family. He had 24 siblings. As a young child both of his parents died and he moved to Saigon with his nursemaid. At the age of thirteen he began an apprenticeship at a photography/portrait studio. There he learned how to use glass plate negatives and large format cameras. His main task was the processing of plates and prints; because of this he became a master printer. He then went on to the Vietnam National Art University, where he also taught drawing. After graduation, he traveled to France and then to Malaysia to make photographs for the Red Cross. Between 1978 and 1979 he moved to San Francisco where he spent his remaining years living in Chinatown. He would occasionally travel back to China to make more negatives.¹

As an artist, Don Hong-Oai makes use of a composite technique to make his images. This means he would use multiple negatives in each image. In this process he would print each negative to isolate the part he wanted to use. Then he would take these composites and register

¹ Hong-Oai, Don and Ruth Silverman. *Don Hong-Oai Photographic Memories: Images from China and Vietnam*. (New York: Custom & Limited Editions, 2000), 14-15.

them and print them together. He would use up to four negatives in one print, usually isolating trees, mountain forms, and animals. The use of one tree in multiple images can be seen in figure one.

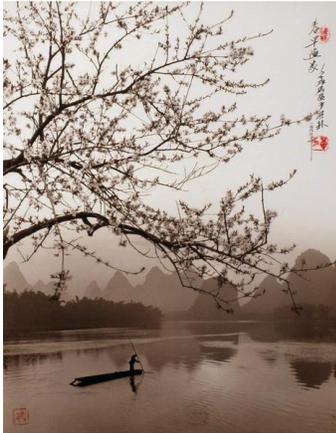


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

This compositional technique shows a blend of eastern and western style. According to Emperor Huizong a painter should never paint exactly what he sees but a likeness; as if drawing on this idea, Don's use of multiple negatives produces an image that could never be found in nature. The photographic technique of composite images was pioneered by Oscar Gustav Rejlander, a late 19th century photographer who perfected the technique of combining negatives. Rejlander was also trying to emulate painting and he argued, "the labor involved, combined with image's inspiration from a Renaissance source and the morally uplifting theme, distanced the work from ordinary photography and aligned it with painting."² He made this statement about his image, *The Two Ways of Life*, seen in figure 2. Even though Don used this western photographic technique to create his images the subject matter is purely Chinese.

² Mary Warner Marien. *Photography: A Cultural History*. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002), 155.

Northern Style Influences

The northern style of painting started during the Five Dynasties period (906-960) and it continued through the Song period (960-1276). The main attributes of the northern style techniques are vertical images almost always of mountains, streams and trees, with occasional animals, humans or architectural forms. However, when animals, humans, or architecture is involved, they are extremely tiny compared to the landscape. The painters would use a variety of brush strokes and ink wash techniques, thereby producing a wide tonal range. The goal of these landscape paintings was to show the viewer how small they were compared to nature and to give them a point of mediation.

One of the most well-known Northern Song painters is Fan K'uan. Fan K'uan lived a solitary life in nature where he would observe it.³ It is said that, "he would sit all day in a precarious spot letting his eyes roam about in all directions in order to absorb the mood of the scene."⁴ This had to also be true for Don because he would want to get the best shots possible. Furthermore, Fan, "did not go after superficial appearances but delineated a mountain's true bones," which can also be seen in Don's work. Don's image *Morning Melody* (fig. 3) and Fan's painting *Travelers amid Mountain Streams* (fig.4) will be used for comparison.

³ Liu Tao-Ch'un, and Charles H. Lachman. *Evaluations of Sung Dynasty Painters of Renown Liu Tao-Ch'un's Sung-Ch'ao Ming-Hua P'ing*. T'oung pao, v.16. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989). 58.

⁴ Ibid, 58.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

The mountainous landscapes in both works have strong similarities. Rocky, bulbous mountains are jetting up the frames. In the foregrounds are smaller rock formations and trees and rivers run through both images. The use of mist is also a prominent feature. In the painting, brush strokes are also used to enhance the verticality. In the mountain forms thin vertical open spaces can be seen in both works. As for differences, the streams are placed in different locations. The river in the photograph runs diagonally through the bottom of the frame while the river in the painting runs horizontally. There are, also, more mountain forms in the photograph than in the painting. In the painting, the mountain looks like a massive rock, but in the photo the viewer can observe the different peaks. There is life in both of the works other than vegetation. The photograph has birds and the painting has very small horses and a few tiny people. In spite of these differences, both give the feeling of a massive landscape that would take a human on foot a long time to cross.

Another comparison can be made with Kuo His, who was also a landscape painter at this time. There are two main similarities in his painting *Early Spring* (fig. 5) and the photograph *Morning Melody*. The first is the use of atmospheric perspective, which means that as the objects in the image recede in space they become lighter. This is how the human eye sees things in the

distance compared with what is in the foreground. Kuo also uses mist in an interesting way; he uses it to cut off the bottom of the cliffs to make them appear taller. Don uses the same technique by cutting off the bottom of the photograph all together.

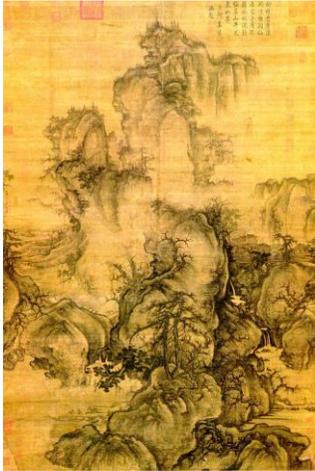


Fig. 5

Comparing Fan K'uan and Kou Hsi's paintings with Don's images shows the strong correlation between the landscape photograph and northern style painting.

Ni Tsan Style

One of the four great masters of the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368) is Ni Tsan. He was from a wealthy family and lived as such until he was about the age of 40. Around this time, the Mongols invaded China and overthrew the government there. At this time Ni Tsan began the life of a wanderer.⁵ Throughout his life he made paintings and derived his own style. Anyone who is familiar with it could pick it out of a line up. His style was simple and formulaic. His images are always cut into three sections, a foreground, middle ground, and background. In the foreground, there will be an island with a few sparse trees. The middle ground will be composed of a body of

⁵ James Cahill. *Hills Beyond a River Chinese Painting of the Yuan Dynasty, 1279-1368*. (New York: Weatherhill, 1976), 114.

water, while the background will have a mountain form (see fig. 6). His images almost never depict humans or animals. Ni Tsan's compositional choices of strong horizontal and strong vertical planes make the image very stable but, as Cahill argues, it is also responsible for its weakness, "the awkward transitions from land to water to land."⁶ Ni Tsan's compositions do not give the viewer a direct path to follow through the image. Don's image that is in the spirit of Ni Tsan's fixes this problem by having the tree obscure the view of the mountain. Ni Tsan's compositions never do that; the tree branches always stop before reaching the hills in the background.



Fig. 6

These images are also an interesting comparison of Don's uses and knowledge of Chinese master painters.

Fisherman Theme

The Yuan dynasty (1279-1369) produced a change from landscape painting to an infusion of the landscape painting with human figures. During this period, painters wanted to depict themselves as leisurely scholars. One of the main motifs was the fisherman; however, usually

⁶ James Cahill. *Hills Beyond a River Chinese Painting of the Yuan Dynasty, 1279-1368*. (New York: Weatherhill, 1976), 114.

there were just men on boats relaxing, not actually working. This theme was also used in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Sheng Mou worked during the Yuan dynasty and T'ang Yin worked during the Ming period; comparing their work with Don's makes more similarities obvious.



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

Napping Under the Tree (fig. 7) by Don Hong-Oai, *Boating on the River in Autumn* (fig. 8) by Sheng Mou and *Secluded Fisherman on an Autumn River* (fig. 9) by T'ang Yin have two strong similarities. All of these images have men on boats and tree branches jetting into the composition. Men are taking it easy on all three of these boats. In the paintings the men are relaxing by playing music and conversing, while in the photograph the man is taking a nap. The branches in all of these images creates a strong line which leads the viewer right to the boat. This strong use of line has always been used in Chinese painting whether it is a leading line or just a design element. This use of the delicate line brings Don's photographs closer to their painted cousins.

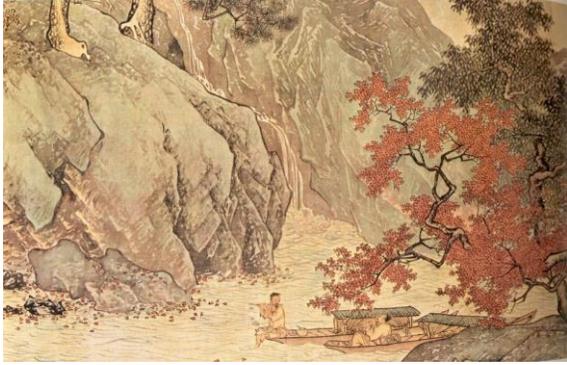


Fig. 9

Vermilion Impressions

Vermilion impressions are seal impressions found on paintings and calligraphy that represent the signature of the artist or the owner of the painting. To make his photographs more authentic Don used the seals. On all of his photographs there is Chinese text accompanied by two vermilion impressions. The one at the top of the text is oval shaped with two characters inside. The other is at the bottom of the text and is square with two characters inside. These texts and seal impressions are strategically placed on each photograph to not distract from it. Furthermore, on many of the photographs is a third vermilion impression. These are all square but vary in the characters they hold.

In China the use of seals for identification started during the Warring States period (465-221 BC). However, they were first applied to paintings and calligraphy during the Tang period (618-907 AD). During the Song dynasty the seals became very popular and now they are seen as unique to Chinese art.⁷

⁷ http://www.lcsd.gov.hk/CE/Museums/Arts/english/news_20031001_2.html (Hong Kong Museum)

There is not written information about what the seals on Don's photographs stand for, but the assumption would be that one seal is his name, one may represent his studio and the other one was probably added to suggest an owner. These seals are a great addition to the photographs to connect them to Chinese painting and Don's heritage.

In conclusion, Don Hong-Oai's photographs have been strong resemblances' to Chinese paintings. Seeing these photographs and paintings next to one another show these similarities in a new light and bring the two mediums together. These comparisons show that new artworks can inform old works, while old works of art give further meaning to new works.