

Article

Visualizing the Invisible Body: Redefining *Shanshui* and the Human Body in the Daoist Context

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Abstract: This paper addresses the “invisible body in *shanshui* paintings” by redefining the correlation between *shanshui* and the human body in the Daoist context. I argue that the human body is not invisible in *shanshui* painting—it is ever-present through the agency of the *shanshui*. The correlation will be unpacked in two aspects. Firstly, *shanshui* is ontologically connected and shares a “corporeal” affinity with the bodies of human beings. Secondly and more importantly, with the development of inner alchemy (*neidan* 内丹), *shanshui* and the human body are identified as representative of one another. *Shanshui* becomes the body through the lens of the unique concept of *neijing* 内景 (inner landscape). As the powerful and redemptive mediation between human beings and the Dao, *shanshui* reveals not only the inner body but also the mechanism of inner energies. Furthermore, it offers a solution to solve the Daoist anxiety over the body’s physical limitations by breaking down the constant confrontation and opposition between the “I” and the cosmos and reactivating one’s primordial dependency on nature. *Shanshui* painting, in this vein, transcends the mundane body and provides access to the sacred truth and reality of the Dao.

Keywords: body; *shanshui*; Daoism; inner landscape; inner alchemy; self-cultivation



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“[One must take] the body as the mountain-stream to discover it. The significant aspects of the mountain and water will then be apparent.”¹

—Guo Xi 郭熙 (1279–1368)

Shanshui xun 山水訓 (*Mountains and Waters Treatise*)

1. Introduction

The absence of the body has been a constant inquiry in the study of Chinese art. Why—John Hay (Hay 1994, p. 77) asks in his article “The Body Invisible in Chinese Art”—does the body seem to be almost invisible in a figurative tradition that flourished for over two thousand years? Why does *shanshui* 山水 (mountain-water) painting², the pre-eminent art form in China, appear to exemplify an absence of the body? While the nude seems to be the starting point for Western bodily perceptions, a human body in the anatomical sense is absent in Chinese art traditions.³ In *shanshui* paintings, we see small human figures amidst the immense nature—contrasted by the grandeur of the universe, human presence seems humble. However, we do not see the volume and structure of the human body. How should we understand such “absence”?

Hay answers these questions by explaining that the “invisibility” is not an absence but the West’s *inability* to recognize bodies presented utilizing non-Western artistic indicators. A Chinese body was dispersed through metaphors locating it in the natural world by transformational resonance and brushwork that embodied the cosmic-human reality of *qi* 氣 (vital energy). He further demonstrates that the Chinese term for visceral system *zangxiang* 臟象 (visceral image) appears to have incorporated a perception that the universe is a process of self-imaging, and it represents the processing, storage, and distribution of vital *qi* associated with the substances. On such ground, he concludes, all phenomena are images generated by an autonomous process out of potentiality, and the notion of “the

representation of the body” may be descriptive rather than analytical (Hay 1994, p. 77). Hay’s definition of “the representation of the body” invites us to think of the body in a more macrocosmic dimension. The gestures of natural objects can be read as dispositions of the human body. A bending pine tree is symbolic of a dignified salute. However, Hay’s points are insightful but far from being sufficient. In his understanding, the body is only present through anthropomorphizing natural objects.

This paper will address Hay’s question from a Daoist perspective by redefining the correlation between *shanshui* and the human body. I argue that the body is not invisible in *shanshui* paintings—it is ever-present through the agency of the *shanshui*. The correlation will be unpacked in two aspects. Firstly, *shanshui* is ontologically connected and shares a “corporeal” affinity with the body of human beings. It is the macrocosmic body that shares the most resemblance with human beings regarding body composition and structure. The affinity is further illustrated through the concept of *dong* 洞 (grotto, cave), which exists not just as a geographical or cosmological concept but also exists within the human body. Secondly, and more importantly, with the development of inner alchemy (*neidan* 內丹), *shanshui* and the human body are identified as representative of one another. *Shanshui* becomes the body through the lens of the unique concept of *neijing* 內景 (inner landscape). *Shanshui* reveals not only the inner body but also the mechanism of inner energies. As Daoist painters transform the inner alchemical vision into *shanshui* paintings, the boundary between the body and the cosmos has been dissolved. Nature and humanity fuse under the single agency of the *shanshui*, creating a unified image of the macrocosmos and microcosmos.

Through this analysis, this paper reestablishes the crucial link between *shanshui* and the Daoist body. I argue that *shanshui* is the powerful and redemptive mediation between the human body and the Dao and offers a solution to solve the Daoist anxiety over the body’s physical limitations. It breaks down the constant confrontation and opposition between the “I” and the cosmos and reactivates one’s primordial dependency on nature. *Shanshui* paintings, in this vein, transcend the mundane body and provide access to the sacred truth and reality of the Dao. Furthermore, this paper will provide a theoretical foundation for the emerging discourse on inner alchemical *shanshui* paintings, a unique genre of Daoist paintings that has been “rediscovered” in recent years.

2. The Corporeal Affinity between *Shanshui* and the Human Body

Shanshui as a compound can be traced back to as early as the 4th century in Zong Bing’s 宗炳 (375–443) *Hua shanshui xu* 畫山水序 (*Introduction to Painting Mountain and Water*). It is the earliest extant theoretical formulation that has come down to us. In this short essay, Zong Bing remarks, “Sages model themselves on the Dao through their spirits, and the virtuous comprehend this. Mountains and water display the beauty of the Dao through their forms and the benevolent delight in this”⁴. We can see that the meaning of *shanshui* was closely related to Dao from its birth. Mountains and water, with one representing the strong force of *yang* and the other representing the soft energies of *yin*, work in balance as the symbol of the natural world. Their dynamic interaction resonates with the cosmic principle. Since the Dao is formless in nature, *shanshui* approaches Dao through its concrete form. *Shiming* 釋名 (*Explanation of names*) defines *xian* 仙 (immortality) as “moving into the mountains”⁵. Another treatise in *Songshu* 宋書 (*Book of the Song*) records how Zong Bing appreciates *shanshui* paintings: “All I do now is purify my heart and contemplate the Dao by wandering in the paintings from my bed”⁶. Away from the real *shanshui*, Zong Bing immerses himself in *shanshui* painting and uses it as a medium to access the reality of Dao.

On a spiritual level, even though human beings are the most advanced living creatures in the world, Daoists consider the natural and unspoiled *shanshui* closer to the Dao. While humans constantly consume their original essence, *shanshui* can maintain its most genuinely natural form endowed by the ontological entity Dao. *Shanshui*, as something unspoiled and uncarved, in such a context, sets a paradigm model of *zhen* 真 (true and real) for human beings. It is the manifestation of the Dao, the effective and redemptive

mediation that connects man to the Dao. *Shanshui painting*, as the visual representation of the *shanshui*, provides access to the truth and reality of Dao.

But the connection between the *shanshui* and human beings is not only spiritual. The significance of *shanshui* also lies in the Daoist view of existence as a form of being that shares a cosmic connection between all things. In this vein, the macro-cosmos is inherently connected with the micro-cosmos; worldly things with bodily things; and physical things with “non-physical” phenomena such as time, space, spirit, and so on. The body of human beings as the microcosm is analogous to *shanshui*—the macrocosmic body of the universe.

2.1. *Shanshui as the Macrocosmic Body*

There is a homogeneous connection between the body of the *shanshui* and the body of human beings engrained in Chinese tradition. Compared to other natural landscapes, the mountain-water compound shares the most resemblance with human beings regarding body composition and structure. The Northern Song painter Guo Xi 郭熙 (fl. 1060s) captures this resemblance in his famous treatise *Shanshui xun* 山水訓 (*Mountains and Waters Treatise*), in which he describes the mountain-water as a living, organic cosmic body:

Mountain has water as blood, foliage as hair, mist, and clouds as its spirit and character. Thus, a mountain is said to gain its life through water, its external beauty through vegetation, and its elegant charm through mist and clouds. Water has the mountain as its face, huts, pavilions as eyes and eyebrows, and anglers as its soul.⁷

There are high mountains and low mountains. The arteries of the high mountain run low. Its limbs spread wide; its feet are powerful and solid. Ridgelines of creviced peaks and rounded crests crowd together and interweave in unbroken, gleaming links. Such is a high mountain. Thus, this type of high mountain is called not solitary and called not reclining. The arteries of [a] low mountain run high. Its head summit comes halfway down, merging straight into its neck. The base is broad spread, and earthen mounds erupt in profusion. It extends deep down into the earth; none can measure how far. Such is a low mountain . . . Such are the configurations of mountains and water.⁸

Guo Xi compares the natural landscape to the physiological body. As an organic cosmic body, *shanshui* encompasses rocks, rivers, grass and trees, soil, and so on. They are the mountain’s bones, veins, hair, and flesh. These correlations, in terms of structure and composition, are rather straightforward. It is close to Hay’s understanding that the body is only present through anthropomorphizing natural objects. In a more sophisticated manner, *Yunji qiqian* 雲笈七籤 (*Seven Tablets in a Cloudy Satchel*), the miniature Daoist Canon⁹ of the Song dynasty, recorded the mythical cosmogonic story of Pan Gu 盤古:

When the primordial breath burgeoned forth, the heaven and earth divided and formed the trigrams *qian* and *kun*, *yin* and *yang* came into force by dividing. It was then [that] the primordial breath engendered the central harmony which is none other than a man. It gave birth to Pan Gu, who, at his death, transformed his body. His respiration yielded the clouds and the wind, his voice the thunder, his limbs the four extremities of the world, his left eye the sun, his right eye the moon, his internal organs the five peaks, his blood the rivers, his veins the earth, his muscle the soil, his hair the stars, his skin the grass and wood, his teeth the metal and stone, his marrow the jewels and jades, his sweat the rain. All the worms he carried, roused by the wind, metamorphosed into humans. (Lévi 1989, p. 109)¹⁰

The body of the primordial giant Pan Gu transforms into a natural phenomenon. Compared to Guo Xi’s treatise, the correlation between the natural landscapes and the body is made systematic and tight through the system of *yin* and *yang* and five elements, where the body parts are associated with different elements and form an organic whole. Furthermore, contrary to Guo’s anthropomorphizing natural objects, Pan Gu’s body becomes

nature itself. The death of his body marks the differentiation of the undivided cosmic unity.

It is noticeable that the Pan Gu myth gives a detailed description of how the giant, as the first-born human being, transforms into nature but uses minimal words to describe the birth of other human beings—they are just trivial worms that Pan Gu carries. There is an apparent division between Pan Gu and other human beings. The myth suggests that while Pan Gu's body can transform and become *shanshui*, an ordinary human body is not able to attain such transcendence. In between the transformation of the microcosmic and macrocosmic body, there is a clear prerequisite for the human body. Pan Gu, born out of the harmonious interaction between the primordial *yin* and *yang qi*, is the ideal form of human being, or the "superman." His physical body does not limit him. In this sense, Pan Gu is close to what *Zhuangzi* calls the *zhenren* 真人 (authentic/perfected being), who can "go into the water and not get wet, enter the fire and not be burned" (*Zhuangzi and Watson 2013*, p. 42). *Zhuangzi* has made many distinctions between the *zhenren* and ordinary human beings; for instance, a *zhenren* breathes through his heels, whereas the ordinary man breathes through his throat (*Zhuangzi and Watson 2013*, p. 42). That is to say, the difference between Pan Gu or the *zhenren* and the ordinary is not only spiritual but also corporeal. The former can break through the determinate functions of the body parts and allow the body to meld into one whole and be fully integrated by the vital *qi*. Therefore, in order to transform the mundane human body into the macrocosmic body, one needs to overcome physical limitations to join in great unity with the Dao.

Now it becomes clear that for the Daoists, nothing seems to be more limiting than the physical body. The body marks the boundary of a human being and separates him/her from the natural flow of the cosmos. As Yuan Daoist Zhang Ziqiong 张紫琼¹¹ said:

Heaven and human beings are originally [formed] by one homogenous *qi*,
It is the form and body [of the human beings] that stand in between them.
Cultivate until one's form and spirit are deeply united.
Then [one] will realize that form is true emptiness.¹²

The physical body is eventually to be transcended. Lao Zi's famous saying, "the reason I have great trouble is that I have a body. When I no longer have a body, what trouble have I?" (*Lau 1963*, p. 17) echoes the anxiety with the body. In a similar vein, *Zhuangzi* advocates that in the process of Dao-embodiment, firstly, one must smash one's limbs and body to disintegrate perception and rationality (*Zhuangzi and Watson 2013*, p. 53), as mentioned above. Here *Zhuangzi* discards the limbs not to disable the body but to stress how the physical body could stand as an obstacle in arriving at a state of equivalence (*tong 通*) with the Dao. In inner alchemical practice—which turns the whole body into a laboratory to produce the elixir, the physiological function of the body parts is less important compared to the emblematic functions of the body.

For the Daoists, the body is a paradoxical complex. On the one hand, it is the field of life and contains the true form of the symbolic body. On the other hand, the limitation of the physical body has become the source of Daoist anxiety, for it imposes the constant confrontation and opposition between the "I" and the cosmos. Therefore, reconnecting the opposition and reactivating one's primordial dependency on nature become the locus of the transcendent quest.

2.2. Dong: Connecting the Space of Shanshui and the Human Body

The corporeal affinity between the mountain-water compound and the human body might be best exhibited through the concept of *dong* 洞. *Dong*, as an empty space or a natural void, echoes with the source of Dao—a deep and murky great void or emptiness. The void is the realm of nothingness, or "non-being." In other words, the Dao is the unmanifested void or emptiness. Since it is uncreated and unmanifested, it harbors endless potential and will not die. Therefore, the image of the void possesses the features of the Dao. *Dong*, in this sense, suggests a cosmological beginning.

The concept of the *dadong* (Great Grotto 大洞) was adopted in medieval religious Daoism. It lies at the heart of Upper Clarity cosmology, a tradition from the fourth century onwards. In the mysterious cosmic process, human beings and the celestial realm fuse through the vast void of the Great Grotto. The *Preface to the Upper Clarity Perfect Scripture of the Great Grotto* (*Shangqing dadong zhenjing xu* 上清大洞真經序) demonstrates the Great Grotto as such:

The Dao is born from nothingness, secretly harboring a multitude of numinous powers, which no one can fathom. Spirits condense in the void, marvelously transforming in myriad ways without bounds. In the darkest depths, there is an essence, serene and stable, which shines out the light. This great mystery is infinite, reaching across the void and preserving stillness. This is called the “Great Grotto”. (Miller 2008, p. 53)¹³

In this passage, the Great Grotto is identified with “the great mystery.” It is the harbor of Dao, boundless and limitless. Moreover, we find new dimensions of the Great Grotto: it is the source of spirits (*shen* 神) and essence (*jing* 精). That is to say, the purest form of spirit and essence is born and located in the empty void of the Great Grotto. The void of nothingness is the source of “being,” from which the creation of myriad things has emerged. This quality reminds us of another popular image in *Daode jing*—the valley (*gu* 谷). Hans-Georg Moeller demonstrates that the valley—the open void of the mountain—possesses the positive quality of fertility (Moeller 2006, p. 28). The valley is a negative form (compared to the “full” mountains that surround it) and is mere potential (a potential that has not yet materialized). But due to its emptiness and featurelessness, it guarantees its inexhaustibility and constant fertility. A couple of similar images—“a negative, merely potential, and imperishable void” (Moeller 2006, p. 10)—share the same characteristics with the valley, including the grotto.

Grotto-heaven is a unique geo-religious phenomenon in Daoism. As the quintessence of the mountain (Raz 2019, pp. 1409–52), it is a place of transcendental passage and revelation and is interconnected with other supernatural realms (Verellen 1995, p. 271). The Daoists, not intimidated by the mysterious and the unknown, are always willing to go into the mountains and seek the grotto-heavens and the blessed land (*dongtian fudi* 洞天福地). However, the grotto-heavens do not guarantee transcendence. The tale *guanqi lanke* 觀棋爛柯 (“Watching Chess While the Axe Rotted”) recorded in *Shuyi ji* 述異記 (*Records of Strange Things*) tells an interesting story. Due to its broad reception, the mountain where the story happened was renamed Lanke Mountain, which the late Tang court Daoist Du Guangting 杜光庭 (850–933) labeled as the Eighth Grotto-Heaven of Turquoise Clouds.

During the Jin Dynasty, Wang Jin from Xin’an County was chopping wood at Stone Chamber Mountain. He saw several youths playing the game of Go and singing. Zhi stopped to listen. The youths gave an item to Zhi, which was similar to a jujube core. Zhi kept it in his mouth and felt no hunger. A moment later, the youths said: “Why are you not going?” Zhi stood up and saw the axe had completely rotted. When he returned, there was no one from his time. (Ren Fang 任昉, *Shuyi ji*)¹⁴

In this tale, Wang Zhi is a curious man, drawn to the youths by the board game¹⁵ and their singing. The youths, knowing that he is not an immortal, give Zhi a jujube core to keep him from being hungry. Jujube is considered the food of immortals. It is also the food Daoists have during *bigu* 辟穀 (avoiding grains) fasting. Here, it is noticeable that the youths give Zhi a jujube core rather than juicy jujube with full flesh. Daoists often contain the jujube core in the mouth to stimulate saliva flow. In inner alchemical practice, the mouth is often referred to as the Flowery Pond (*huachi* 華池), while the liquor of the mouth is called Nectar Spring (*liquan* 醴泉) or the Jade Secretions (*yujin* 玉津). Daoist Tao Hongjing said in *Yangxing yanming lu* 養性延命錄 (*Records on Preserving One’s Nature and Lengthening Life*) that “Drinking at the Jade Spring, we can live longer and eliminate the disease.”¹⁶

The saliva the jujube core stimulates would eventually help nourish the cinnabar field, the main areas the adept concentrates on during his/her breathing or visualizing exercises.

The rotted axe shows us that time is still passing in the cave. However, the axe experiences a different length of time from Wang Zhi. Thanks to the jujube core, Zhi can share a “being in the present” with the immortals. He is experiencing the immortal’s perception of time in the grotto—things happen within a moment (*e’qing* 俄頃). But for the axe, many years have passed by. There is a saying related to this story—“only one day one has been in the grotto, while outside millennia have passed” 山中方一日，世上已千年。

Apparently, the grotto heavens do not guarantee transcendence. The adepts must find their own “jujube core” to transcend their physical body. Nevertheless, the grotto heavens contain passages to the Dao, and the journey through the grottos is a journey beyond our world. A mountain is a place of life—“the locus of sustenance and transcendence” (Raz 2019, p. 1409). *Dong*, as Verellen eloquently summarized, has the meaning to “penetrate” or “communicate” both physically and intellectually.

Following the macrocosmic-microcosmic model, we should notice that *dong* is not just a geographical or cosmological concept; it also exists within the human body. One of the earliest examples of esoteric hagiography (*neizhuan* 內傳), the *Esoteric Hagiography of the Perfected Being of Purple Solarity* (*Ziyang zhenrenneizhuan* 紫陽真人內傳) provides a detailed account on different dimensions of the *dong*. This text records the spiritual journey of Zhou Yishan 周義山 (b. 80 BCE), detailing the methods he used to become a Perfected being. The text reads:

“The [part of] heaven [where there is] nothing is called space. The [part of] a mountain [where there is] nothing is called a grotto. The [part of] a human [body where there is] nothing is called a [grotto] chamber. The empty spaces in the mountains and organs of the body are called grotto courts. The empty spaces in human heads are called grotto chambers. This is how the perfected take up residence in the heavens, the mountains, and human beings. When they enter the place of nothingness, a grain of rice could contain Mt. Penglai and embrace the sixfold harmony [of the cosmos], yet heaven and earth would not be able to contain them. Only those who meditate on and visualize the perfected, preserve the three palaces, have an audience with the one spirit, and make an effort to meditate on them will definitely be able to see Lord Wuying, the White Prime Lord and the Yellow Venerable Lord in their grotto chamber.¹⁷ The chariot of clouds with a canopy of feathers will then come, and they will become perfected persons.” (Miller 2008, pp. 152–53)¹⁸

The above passage shows that a grotto exists in heaven, a mountain, and a human head. *Dong* suggests simultaneously primordial cosmological grottos, grottos in a mountain, and within the human body. The grotto chamber in the human head is the residence of the spirits. It is noticeable that the human body is again compared to the body of the mountains, attesting to the former argument about corporeal affinity.

The passage tells us that a Perfected being can walk freely in these empty spaces. The real question here seems to be how to reach the state of the Perfected being. James Miller explains that since the Perfected dwell in vacuity, they can forge the connections between the emptiness of outer space and the inner space of mountains and brains (Miller 2008, p. 152). Miller’s explanation suggests that the emptiness in heaven, the mountain, and the human head should not be taken as “void of the space.” It is instead an ontological condition that precedes the materialization of things. Only the Perfected beings could dwell in these empty grottos, for they are able to withdraw from the physical and return to their source in the great void or emptiness. This understanding aligns with the following passage from *Annotations to the Scripture for the Salvation from Distress* (*Taishang dongxuan lingbao tianzun shuo jinku miaojing zhujie* 太上洞玄靈寶天尊說救苦妙經註解) by Dongyang zi 洞陽子:

Dong (cavern or grotto) is *tong* 通 (to “connect/penetrate/communicate”). It is connected with heaven and earth. Spirits and immortals secretly commute in

between these grottos. Under heaven, there are ten greater grotto heavens, and thirty-six lesser grotto heavens dwell in the tremendous boundless void, and they are all interlinked. Only the immortals and sages who assemble to form and disassemble into *qi* can go through the void without obstacles. Therefore, the sage [understands the patterns of things] from various parts of things and nearby from his own body. Within the human body, there are also grotto heavens. There are nine palaces in the head. Counting the empty heaven above, there are ten greater grotto heavens. The spine has twenty-four sections, and [the throat] has twelve stories. There are thirty-six lesser grotto heavens in total. They connect with the nine heavens of the Muddy Palace above and the nine places of the Caudal Pass below. True *qi* secretly commutes in between these grottos. Therefore, the stage operates the polar stars in utmost emptiness and silence. Their spirit communicates with the *qi* of the grotto heavens and the heaven above. That is so-called the rising and descending of the three palaces. They go up and down, and it is infinite.¹⁹

This passage adopts the ten greater grotto-heavens and the thirty-six lesser grotto-heavens system that was organized in the Tang Dynasty by Sima Chengzhen 司馬承禎 (647–735) and Du Guangting into the human body. Just as the geographical grotto-heavens are interconnected, the grottos within the human body are also interlinked. Yet, the author reminds us that only the immortals and sages can go through these places freely. That is because they can transform between form and formlessness and attain an all-pervading (*tong*) unity with the Dao. However, for ordinary human beings, the physical body stands between them and the *datong* 大通 (Great Thoroughfare). The grottos within the body are blocked. Hence the lived body is not able to merge with the vital energies of the outer cosmos.

To put it in a nutshell, *shanshui* is ontologically connected and shares a “corporeal” affinity with the bodies of human beings. The human body as the microcosm is analogous to the macrocosmic body of the universe. *Shanshui*, as the macrocosmic body, shares the most resemblance with human beings regarding body composition and structure. This correlation was made systematic and tight through the system of *yin* and *yang* and five elements, as well as Daoist practice. The affinity is further illustrated through the concept of *dong*, which exists not just as a geographical or cosmological concept but also exists within the human body. In this way, the body is not invisible in *shanshui* paintings—it is ever-present through the agency of the *shanshui*. However, the connection is undermined by the limitation of the physical body, for it imposes the constant confrontation and opposition between the “I” and the cosmos. Only through the transformative process—by letting go of regular vision and transcending awareness of human form—can one attain recognition of the Great Thoroughfare between the human body and *shanshui*.

3. The Inner Landscape: *Shanshui* as Human Body

With the development of Quanzhen Daoism and inner alchemy, Daoists start to visualize the “inner landscape” of the body as a microcosm containing the natural phenomenon of the macrocosm. Even though the correlation between *shanshui* and the human body goes way back in Chinese philosophy and aesthetic discourses, the visual representation of the mountain as/inside the body is an inner alchemical invention. The history of inner alchemy can be traced back to the second century AD, to the inner cultivation methods recorded in the scriptures of *Laozi zhongjing* 老子中經 (*Central Scripture of Laozi*) and *Huangting jing* 黃庭經 (*Scripture of the Yellow Court*). We could even find its sprouts in much earlier scriptures such as *Neiye* 內業 (*Inward Training*). Yet it is from the Tang Dynasty (618CE–907CE) and Song Dynasty (960CE–1297CE) onward, especially with the establishment of Quanzhen Daoism, that inner alchemy has gained wide acceptance among Daoists and established itself as the major and orthodox practice for nourishing life and achieving Dao within one’s own body.²⁰ The goal of inner alchemy is to join the “natural ingredients” in a symbolic crucible and purify them in the fires of a symbolic furnace in the body. The

adepts are expected to visualize a combined image in which the cosmic body and human body are orchestrated into a unified rhythm.

Inner landscape refers to the inner alchemical vision that the interior of the human body is a microcosm, and it contains the natural phenomenon of the macrocosm, as Zeng Zao 曾慥 (–1155) elaborates in *Daoshu* 道樞 (*Pivot of the Dao*):

What is called the inner realm? It is the realm of the body. The real image is the furnace within my body, which contains heaven and earth, sun and moon, stars, wind and clouds, the milky way, mountains, rivers, grass, and wood. Heaven is [associated with] *qian* hexagram, [with] gold; it is the canopy situating above the myriad of things, and it is, therefore, the lung of the inner realm. The stars, sun, moon, and so on are the upper burner²¹ of the inner realm, it is the measurement system of blood circulation. The Great Void mysterious realm above is where the lucid *qi* coagulates; below the mysterious realm is where the turbid *qi* unites and separates. The division between the lucid upper part and the turbid lower part is the middle burner, and it is the separation between the thorax and the abdomen. The area above the separation is translucent, and the down below is filthy. The five mountains and the mountain ranges are the head; the valley is the mouth and nose; the wellspring is the saliva, and the food and the drink; the river running to the sea is [similar to] the food and drink coagulate in the springhead; the cloud and rain generated from the mountain and stream is the hair.²²

Since the macrocosm is inherently connected with the microcosm, and the process of inner alchemy imitates the circulation of the *qi* between heaven and earth, the natural landscape seems to be the perfect medium to illustrate the inner operation of the body. In the inner alchemical visualization process, human bodies and natural landscapes are identified as representative of one another. The cosmic body is the human body, and the vital energy roams in between heaven and earth the same way it circulates within the human body. The space and structure of the natural world becomes integral to understanding the human body. The material representation of the natural world—the *shanshui*—hence becomes a powerful visual tool connecting the spheres of the body, the natural world, the cosmos, and the mental world. The externalization of the inner alchemical progress in the likeness of the macrocosm manifests the divine identity of the practitioners. For them, the ultimate reality is not the actualities of everyday life but the vision they acquire through inner alchemical practice.

Consequently, inner alchemical graphic representations of the body often depict the human body microcosmically with an inner landscape. Anna Hennessey demonstrates that just as internalization in the form of internal alchemy was becoming a focal component of Daoism, externalization in the form of alchemical representation was also rising as a tool through which this process of internalizing the religious experience could be actualized (Hennessey 2011, p. 16). In other words, the practice of inner alchemy focuses on visualizing the inner landscape, a virtual microcosm of the external cosmos manifested in the Daoist body. Visualization is a practice that actualizes the presence of the deities or inner landscape according to painted or textually described icons through concentration and imagination. The interaction with the divine stimulates and increases the body's energy, improving both physical and spiritual conditions and unclogging the blockage between inner "grottos." The eventual goal of visualization is to see the inner and outer dimensions as one.

Representations of the inner alchemical body were rarely found prior to the Song dynasty (960–1279), but the Song period marks a turning point in the graphic representation of the body along with graphic representation (*tu* 圖) in general. As Catherine Despeux elaborates, from the Song onward, visual imagery comes to play a more significant role, not only as a record of knowledge but also as a teaching aid, a mode of transmission, a mnemonic device, a visual translation of a text, and a representation of a certain reality (Despeux 2005, p. 47). These body-mountain charts could be roughly divided into two categories: representation of the body in the form of a mountain, such as *Chart of the Rise*

and *Fall of Yin and Yang, Image of the Body* (*Tixiang yin yang shengjiang tu* 體象陰陽升降圖) and *Image of the body of Original Qi* (*Yuanqi tixiang tu* 元氣體象圖) and representation of landscape within the human body such as *Neijing tu* 內經圖 (*Chart of Inner Landscape*) and *Xiuzhen tu* 修真圖 (*Chart for the Cultivation of Perfection*). In these body charts, the visual representation of inner alchemy blends in patterns of cosmological emblems, laboratory alchemy, Daoist deities²³, Buddhist terms, and other metaphorical images such as natural landscapes, animals, human figures, buildings, and so on. The key to deciphering the meaning of these images is to understand the dynamics between them and how these images, through the interplay of the five elements and *yin* and *yang*, contribute to the whole alchemical process. Whenever we look at inner alchemical charts or images, we look at (part of) a transformative process, both spatial and temporal.

The visual representation of inner alchemy inspires Daoists to transform the inner vision into *shanshui* paintings. The visual iconography, metaphors, and principles of inner alchemy are incorporated into the representation of *shanshui*. Since *shanshui* can stand for the human body or body parts, and *shanshui* painting, in its nature, embodies the element of time, *shanshui* paintings seem to be the perfect medium of the field of life or transformative progress. That is to say, *shanshui* reveals not only the inner body but also the mechanism of inner energies. Daoist literati Huang Gongwang 黃公望 (1269–1354) was a pioneer in waving the inner landscape of the body into the fabric of the cosmos. As the head of the acknowledged “Four Masters” of the Yuan period, he was also a renowned practitioner of inner alchemy whose teachings are recorded in the Daoist Canon.²⁴ In his later years, he withdrew from public life and joined Quanzhen Daoism. In recent years, scholars have noticed the connection between Huang’s *shanshui* paintings and inner alchemy visuality. By comparing the graphs and illustrations from Daoist Canon with Huang Gongwang’s *Sunny after Sudden Snow* 快雪時晴圖, Susan Huang claims that the painting is of significant inner alchemical connotation (Huang 2014, pp. 121–204). The two elements from the painting—the usual red sun and the cliff in the shape of a platform—are iconic visual language in inner alchemy. While the red sun represents the spirit of pure *yang*, the platform could be either the Palace of Muddy Pellet in the head or the practitioner himself. In 2017, Lennert Gesterkamp gave a lecture at the Chinese Academy of Fine Arts titled “Huang Gongwang’s ‘*Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*’ as a Daoist Inner Landscape.” In this lecture, he argued that the landscape in this painting symbolizes the various stages and processes of Daoist inner alchemy, which Huang’s friend and fellow disciple undoubtedly understood. Furthermore, Xie Bo offers a thorough inspection of Huang Gongwang’s painting in her book *The Visualization of Daoist Elysium: Huang Gongwang and His Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* (Xie 2018). Built on Susan Huang’s concept of the inner landscape, Xie forwards the idea of “Visualization of Daoist Elysium.” She believes that Huang’s *shanshui* painting is essentially an exteriorization of his ideal *shanshui*, a mixture of the inner alchemical landscape with Daoist sacred iconography and cosmology. Ziyun Liu’s dissertation *The True Realm of Vision: The Visualization of Inner Alchemy in Yuan Shanshui Painting* (Liu 2021) argues that Huang Gongwang’s later paintings can be read as different stages of the inner alchemical transformative process.

As a Daoist literati painter, Huang transformed his inner alchemical vision into *shanshui* paintings and used art as a proper vehicle to access the truth and reality of Dao. These paintings blur the boundary between the inner and the outer landscape. Nature, the human body, and celestial heaven fuse under the single agency of *shanshui*. Huang Gongwang creates a unified image of the macrocosms and microcosmos, representing an ontologically united realm that is essentially one and the same. Consequently, Huang Gongwang’s inner alchemical visual expression set a new paradigm for his protégés and the following generations. Meanwhile, they created new inner alchemical visual languages and constantly expanded their repertoire. Stephen Little’s suggestion that Wen Boren’s 文伯仁 (1502–1575) handscroll *Spring Dawn at the Elixir Terrace* 丹台春曉圖 is an allegory of inner alchemy is corroborated by the presence of an attached colophon in cursive script, written by the late Ming artist and dramatist Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521–1593) in the classical lan-

guage of inner alchemy, in which the component aspects of the vital energies (*qi*) within the human body are directed toward the creation of the inner elixir (Little and Eichman 2000, pp. 350–51). Gesterkamp reads Wang Ximeng's *A Thousand Miles of Streams and Rivers* 千里江山图 as depicting a story of Daoist self-cultivation. This journey includes the mundane and transcendental world as well as inner alchemical transformation (Gesterkamp 2022). For example, the river chariot in the image is a typical inner alchemical metaphor symbolizing the transportation of the spleen water. Liu believes that Lu Guang's 陸廣 (C. 1300–after 1371) *Spring Dawn at the Cinnabar Platform* 丹臺春曉圖 and Kun Can's 髡殘 (1612–1674) *Green Mountains Rising to the Sky* 蒼翠凌天圖 and *Layers of Rock and Piles of Ravine* 層岩疊壑圖 represent the alchemical paths, and *The Thatched Hut of Dreaming of an Immortal* 夢仙草堂圖, attributed to Tang Yin 唐寅 (1470–1524) embodies the inner alchemical visualized true realm (Liu 2021).

As we can see, inner alchemical *shanshui* paintings exist as a tradition that goes beyond the scope of Huang Gongwang, as well as the Yuan literati circle. It has been passed down from generation to generation and continues to shape the meaning of *shanshui* paintings. In these paintings, the human body does not need to manifest itself through anthropomorphizing natural objects; it is visible and present in the way that *shanshui* becomes the body. The meaning and function of inner alchemical *shanshui* paintings are probably best illustrated by Daoist Liu Chengyin's 劉誠印 colophon to the *Chart of the Inner Landscape*. He miraculously encountered the chart when examining paintings and calligraphies in a mountain study surrounded by pine trees. At first, he thought it was simply a *shanshui* painting. But after he observed the chart for a long time, he said: "I began to realize that exhalation and inhalation (*huxi* 呼吸) as well as expelling and ingesting (*tuna* 吐納) of the human body are the waxing and waning as well as the ebb and flow of the cosmos. If you can divine and gain insight into this, you will have progressed more than halfway on your inquiry into the great Way of the Golden Elixir" (Komjathy 2008, p. 77).

Through his Daoist gaze, Liu syncretized his exhalation and inhalation with the dynamism of the cosmos. The cosmic body becomes his body. The world as lived and the world as "the ultimate reality" fuse under the agency of *shanshui* and become the same world. Meanwhile, Liu's experience brings out a significant function of inner alchemical *shanshui* paintings: they could potentially have the same function as a typical Daoist bodily graph, and work as a record of knowledge, a mode of transmission, a mnemonic device, a visual translation of a text, and even a teaching aid. As inner alchemical transformation is a long and challenging process, and there can be dangerous illusions and delusions, these inner alchemical *shanshui* paintings are extremely valuable for confused practitioners. The translucence this genre of painting brings dissolves the border between the body and *shanshui*. This is especially true considering these paintings are often dedicated to a certain Daoist.

Inner alchemical *shanshui* paintings show us a vision that transcends the actualities of everyday life. It is not an image depicting the pure joy and magnificence of paradise—the realm *out* of this world. It is a picture *in* this world. The Daoist painters see the *shanshui*, the human body, and the cosmos essentially as one. The transcendence and even sacredness of inner alchemical *shanshui* paintings come from the unity of humanity and nature. The cosmic body and the human body fuse under the single agency of the *shanshui*, creating a unified image of the macrocosms and microcosmos. In these paintings, we can see how the flow of energy (*qi*) is activated through the momentum of force (*shi* 勢) of *shanshui* and how the *yin* and *yang* energy is constantly in flux through the coalescence of the amorphous *qi*. Inner alchemical *shanshui* paintings break down the constant confrontation and opposition between the "I" and the cosmos and reactivate one's primordial dependency on nature. The "outer" and "inner" realms hence become inseparable. What seems more significant than identifying the inner alchemical connotation of a *shanshui* painting is recognizing that it is a unified image of the macrocosms and microcosmos. This realm is ontologically united and is essentially one and the same. In this vein, inner alchemical *shanshui* painting is essentially a manifestation of the truth of Dao.

4. Concluding Remarks

For the Daoists, the body is a paradoxical complex. *Shanshui*, as something unspoiled and uncarved, is the manifestation of the Dao, the effective and redemptive mediation that connects the human body to the Dao. *Shanshui* is not the “other” but the manifestation of the absolute, which encompasses human beings and nature. *Shanshui* paintings, in this vein, provide access to the truth and reality of Dao as a proper vehicle. It is an organic whole that one could immerse oneself in, an aggregation of the interactive animation of the components of the world. As François Jullien eloquently puts it, *shanshui* paintings thrust our being back to its legitimate inductions, reestablish its primordial connections, and replenish vitality by immersing our being in these countless and constantly renewed circuits of energy (Jullien and Todd 2009, p. 143).

The underlying notion of human existence in harmony with nature is at the core of *shanshui* paintings. Nevertheless, human figures are usually quite small in *shanshui* paintings, and the human body is often “invisible”. It seems that the all-powerful forces of nature manifested by the grandeur of the monumental mountains do nothing but humble the existence of human beings. But in the eyes of the Daoists, the body is not invisible in *shanshui* paintings—it is ever-present through the agency of the *shanshui*. This is especially true in terms of inner alchemical *shanshui* paintings, in which human existence is immense. His head is the towering peak, his saliva the splashing stream, and his spine the dragon-like ridge. Heaven and earth are within reach. When the boundary between body and cosmos is dissolved, humans are no longer limited by their physicality. Human beings are not humbled or intimidated by the monumental mountains, and *shanshui* is no longer irrelevant to human presence. The human body is the mountain, and the mountain is the human body. The constant confrontation and opposition between the “I” and the cosmos have been demolished, and we see a realm of unity (between humanity and nature), translucence, and freedom.

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Notes

¹ 蓋身即山川而取之，則山水之意度見矣。(Guo 2010, p. 35).

² In this paper, I will use the transliterated term *shanshui* paintings to refer to this genre of painting. Although “landscape painting” might seem more straightforward, the phrase is only derivatively what *shanshui* paintings mean. The meaning, connotation, and history of these two terms are significantly different. To assume *shanshui* paintings equal to the genre of landscape art runs the risk of overlooking its indigenous intellectual history and cultural roots. The transliterated term *shanshui* will also help to preserve the dynamic interaction between *shan* 山 (mountain) and *shui* 水 (water).

³ The role of *shanshui* paintings in Chinese art has been compared many times with that of the nude in the West. William Watson believed that they both are a theme “unvarying in itself but made the vehicle of infinite nuances of vision and feeling.” See Watson (1974, p. 83).

⁴ 夫聖人以神法道，而賢者通；山水以形媚道，而仁者樂 (Zong and Wei 2016, p. 5).

⁵ 仙，遷也，遷入山也 (Liu n.d.).

⁶ 唯當澄懷觀道，臥以遊之 (Shen 1974, p. 2279). For an extensive discussion on Zong Bing, see Bush and Murck (1983, pp. 132–64). Lim Chyehong also provides a complete translation of *Hua shanshui xu* in her dissertation. See Lim (2011).

⁷ 山以水為血脈，以草木為毛髮，以煙雲為神彩，故山得水而活，得草木而華，得煙雲秀媚。水以山為面，以亭樹/樹為眉目，以漁釣為精神。(Guo 2010, p. 35).

⁸ 山有高有下。高者血脈在下，其肩股開張，其腳狀厚，巒岫岡勢陪擁相勾連。映帶不絕，此高山也。故知如是高山謂之不孤，謂知不仆。下者血脈在上，其巔定半落，項領相攀，根基龐大，堆阜臃腫，直不深插，可測其淺深，此淺山也... 此山水之體裁也。(Guo 2010, p. 37).

- ⁹ *Yunji qiqian* is an anthology of the *Dasong tiangong baozang* 大宋天宮寶藏 (*The Precious Canon of Heavenly Palace of the Great Song*). It was compiled by Daoist Zhang Junfang 張君房 in 1019, dedicated to Emperor Zhenzong of the Northern Song 宋真宗 (r. 997–1022). It is later included in the *Zhengtong Daozang* 正統道藏 (hereby referred to as *DZ*). The *Zhengtong Daozang* was printed under the Zhengtong (1436–1449) reign in 1445. This paper uses the *Daozang* text published by the three publishing houses (*sanjiaben* 三家本), see *Daozang* (1988). It is one of the most authoritative collections of Daoist texts, graphs, charts, maps, talismans, and so on. This paper benefits greatly from Schipper (2005). The work number follows the title concordance of Schipper and Chen (1996).
- ¹⁰ 泊乎元氣蒙鴻，萌芽茲始，遂分天地，肇立乾坤，啟陰感陽，分布元氣，乃孕中和，是為人矣。首生盤古，垂死化身，氣成風雲，聲為雷霆，左眼為日，右眼為月，四肢五體為四極五嶽，血液為江河，筋脈為地裡，肌肉為田土，發髭為星辰，皮毛為草木，齒骨為金石，精髓為珠玉，汗流為雨澤。身之諸蟲，因風所感，化為黎。(Yunji qiqian, DZ 1032. 56).
- ¹¹ Birth and death date unknown.
- ¹² 天人一氣本來同，為有形骸礙不通。煉到形神冥合處，方知色相即真空。(Yin Zhenren 2012, p. 215).
- ¹³ 夫道生於無，潛眾靈而莫測。神凝於虛，妙萬變而無方。杳冥有精，而泰定發光。太玄無際，而致虛守靜。是之謂大洞者歟。(DZ 6).
- ¹⁴ 信安郡石室山，晉時王質伐木，至見童子數人，棋而歌，質因聽之。童子以一物與質，如棗核，質含之不覺饑。俄頃，童子謂曰：何不去？質起，視斧柯爛盡，既歸，無復時人。(Ren 2019, p. 53).
- ¹⁵ The game of Go is no ordinary game for the Daoists. *Xijing zaji* 西京雜記 (*Miscellaneous Records of the Western Capital*), attributed by Liu Xin 劉歆 (c.53 BCE–23) and collected by the famous Daoist Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343), denotes that “those who are good at the principle [of Go], are good enough to aid the teaching of the saints” 精其理者，足以大裨聖教 (Liu 2012, p. 20). The strategy of Go sometimes is compared to the art of administering a country.
- ¹⁶ 玉泉者，令人延年除百病。(DZ 838).
- ¹⁷ The three cinnabar fields within the human body. The three Prime Lords function as intermediaries, enabling the adept to ascend to heaven.
- ¹⁸ 天無謂之空。山無謂之洞。人無謂之房也。山腹中空虛是謂洞庭。人頭中空虛是謂洞房。是以真人處天，處山，處人。入無間以黍米容蓬萊山，包括六合，天地不能載焉。唯精思存真，守三宮，朝一神，勤若念之，必見無英，白元，黃老在洞房焉。雲車羽蓋既來，便成真人。(DZ 303).
- ¹⁹ 洞者通也，上通於天，下通於地，中有神仙，幽相往來。天下十大洞、三十六小洞，居乎太虛磅礴之中，莫不洞洞相通，惟仙聖聚則成形，散則為氣，自然往來虛通，而無窒礙。是以聖人遠取諸物，近取諸身。則人一身之中，亦有洞者。頭有九宮，上有寥天，共為十大洞天；柱骨二十四節，共十二重樓，共三十六洞。上通泥丸之九天，下徹尾閭之九地，中有真炁幽相往來。是以聖人於虛極靜篤之中，斡轉璇璣，神通炁洞，上與天通，所謂三宮昇降，上下往來，無窮者也。(DZ 399).
- ²⁰ On one hand, the practice of inner alchemy belongs to the general tradition of Daoist meditation and inner cultivation. It is the ripe fruit of this constantly evolving tradition. On the other hand, differentiated from the primitive inner cultivation practice of early Daoism, inner alchemy stands out for its distinct characteristics and fully developed cosmological system. From the Tang and Song dynasty onward, inner alchemy replaces the pantheon of inner bodily gods with the impersonal principles which regulate the functioning of the cosmos and the human being.
- ²¹ Upper burner is a concept in traditional Chinese medicine. It is the upper part of the so-called *sanjiao* 三焦 (triple burner), one of the six *fu* 腑 (bowel) organs within the human body. It is essential to the free movement of the *qi*. The upper burner relates to organs the thorax and the breathing function. The middle burner relates to the organs above the stomach and digestion. The lower burner relates to the organs lower down in the abdomen and the urogenital or gynecological function. According to *Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經 (*Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*), the upper burner acts like a mist; the middle like foam; and the lower like a swamp. See *Huangdi neijing* (2009, p. 315).
- ²² 吾於是宜知夫內境真象焉。內境者何也？身之境也。真象者，吾身之爐，其中有天地、日月、星辰、風雲、河漢、山嶽、江河、草木焉。天者，乾也，金也，華蓋也，處於萬象之上，是為內境之肺者也。星辰日月之輪者，是為內境之上焦，榮衛流行之度者也。太虛玄界之上清氣凝集焉，玄界之下濁氣聚散焉，上下清濁之分是為內境之中焦，羅隔者也。羅隔之上，清爭之域也；羅隔之下，穢濁之境也。五嶽群山者，首也；澗谷者，口也、鼻也；泉源者，津液也，飲食也；江河奔大海者，飲食聚於水穀之府也；雲雨生山川者，毛髮也。(DZ 1017).
- ²³ Although the general over-arching structure of inner alchemy moved on from the pantheon of inner gods, it still borrows terms from earlier meditative practice. For example, *jing* (essence) is also called “White-haired old man” 白頭老子 and *shen* (spirit) “Woman in Green Attire” 青衣女子.
- ²⁴ There are three inner alchemy treatises in the Daoist Canon associated with him: *Secret Instructions on Holding the One and Encasing the Three* 抱一守三訣 (DZ 576); *Straightforward Directions on Quanzhen by Sir Paper Boat* 紙舟先生全真直指 (DZ 242) and *Alchemical Instructions of the Old Man Three Peaks, the Master Holding the One* 抱一子三峰老人丹訣 (DZ 281).

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