

Mountain Waters

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Abstract

From London, our studio is now in Chongqing in South West China where we are working on many scales, types of projects and workshops in China at times of rapid change. Environmental, socio-economic and spatial problems persist; the phenomenon of the burgeoning dominant human habitat of the city is also faced with rapid change from new technologies and forms of occupation.

In his essay *Living off Landscape*, the French writer on aesthetics Francois Jullien discusses the limitations of European landscape thought and the potency of different Chinese ideas as a critique and spur to new relations with our environment.

What are the contemporary ideas of landscape in Europe and China and how would they cooperate with ancient and still underlying ideas? The broader idea of a landscape of the city is useful as we try to humanise, optimise and culturalise our increasingly plural urban world and search for equitable coherence.

Reviewing ideas of the environment, the media of photography and important spatial cultures in China the paper considers the street itself. As a manifestation of cohesion, this shared domain could inter-weave the diverse needs and characters of the city. The building itself - as an heroic object or as a merged urban component - may also welcome in that exterior field of interactions, and from wherein resonant interiority could conjoin into a fertile field.

Promoting positive visions of the otherwise wicked and unruly city is a pressing need: How can the architect's role be extended to make sense of the solid and liquid material there?

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Keywords

Idea of Landscape, Environmentalism, Photography, Architecture, Urbanism, practice in Modern China

Please Note

This paper can be read with the separate Appendix of Visual References.

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1.0 Introduction

Writing from the viewpoint of an architect from London now practising from his busy architecture, urbanism and landscape studio in the raucous expanding city of Chongqing (South West China), this paper reflects on the relations between ideas of landscape and urban phenomena in China and refers to our projects being worked on concurrently.

In my practice of architecture, domestic building projects extended in time through larger sizes, into urban realms, to large projects in problematic regions (Saudi, Egypt, Russia, China) and then to questions about the city itself. Making improvements in that now dominant human habitat would need engagement with our natural contexts, but also with the unruly forces of policy making, blunt economics and evolving human behaviours. It would mean working at the scalar and behavioural extremes of architectural practice whilst still arguing professional ethics and working with still-carried aesthetic pre-dispositions somehow applied within the limitations of the construction methods of the day.

I am also a PhD candidate at the University of Westminster, London and participating in the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology Practice Research program¹. This paper will play a part in ongoing studies.

The tissue of relations that politically, physically and emotionally entangle the forces at work on the Chinese city is for me necessarily seen through foreign eyes: I can but use as reference my experiences of the European cities of

¹ RMIT PhD by Practice program September 2017: "We seek out practitioners who have developed a body of work demonstrating mastery of their field, invite them to reflect on the nature of that mastery within a critical framework, to speculate through design on the nature of their future practice and demonstrate their findings publicly. We argue that architects and designers have a responsibility to the furtherance of their practice domain and that this examination of the nature of their mastery promotes and extends the fundamental knowledge base of their profession, and thus its ability to serve society."

my background and that are also beset by their different and particular histories. It is necessary to beware of the presumptions of an architect porting ideas from West to East, and it is necessary to bear in mind the relations between the local and the global.

In an age of expanding specialisations and partisan discussions on urbanisation, a frame of reference to guide us is needed I believe. Now, as well, cities face imminent change from disruptive technologies, demographic shifts and new modes of occupation arriving in the '4th Industrial Revolution'² of our 'Anthropocene Age'.³

Would it be possible then to chart some of the waypoints and continuities in this oceanic field, this *terra incognita* of the now irrevocable, problematic and wayward human habitat of the city?

These reflections begin from the observation that 'idea' as a value system is the precondition of policy and land policy making, which in turn substantively determines urban form and architecture itself. For instance 'Western-scape'⁴ myths of foreign 'superiority' in China spurred wholesale adoption of Western (USA) land use and infrastructure planning policy in modern urbanizing China. In Europe, anxious ideas of preservation and conservation have dominated city planning policy there. Mid 20thC images of the visibly vulnerable 'blue planet' from space coalesced new perceptions of earth, underpinned environmentalism, and profoundly affected land policy today in the West and now in China too. Ideas of our land and the anthropomorphic adaptations there are crucial to how practitioners in the urban field can operate.

Beginning with Francois Jullien's recent essay *Living off Landscape*⁵ that compares European Landscape thought with the radically different classical Chinese thought formulations of 'Shan Shui' (the two Chinese characters used for 'landscape' literally translated as 'Mountain(s) Water(s)'), that essay leaves fruitful questions at the end for the urbanist-architect:

What happened to the European idea of landscape, now with the renewed passions of loss and environmentalism in an era of pervasive media of photography and film in fluid ways of seeing?

What is happening in Chinese environmental thinking, as it shifts beyond its 'heavy modern'⁶ period into more restorative, humane and plural conceptions of the rural and the urban?

For the architect, what of the relations between building and environment in classical and modern thought, and are those deep cultural understandings relevant now?

Can the tantalizing seductions of the Chinese path-way in classical literature and painting that leads us through the lived-in formulation of Mountain Waters be useful in our thinking on modern Chinese urban form?

Architects work within complex and shifting political, social and economic processes. They try to mediate between larger geographic structures and the diverse human interactions within cities, often working on the borders between public and private domains. Yet architects are too often unable to address the larger questions about the future of the city, despite being so well placed.

How can overarching ideas be usefully taken into the day-to-day of actual practice? This paper refers my current projects in the fields of urban renewal, rural development and a public buildings, all of which have strong relations to land-nature and public domain. Through these examples I try to test the efficacy of the first sketch of a 'chart' overviewing cultural thinking that could be used in design thinking.

The main argument examines the core questions raised in Jullien's essay and the conclusion suggests paths for further research and explorations through design.

2.1 The European and Chinese idea of Landscape

In *Living off Landscape*, Francois Jullien, the French writer on philosophy and aesthetics, asserts that Europe – initially through renaissance painting and in the literature of romanticism - only recently became aware of landscape, whereas in China landscape had arisen over a thousand years earlier in ancient philosophy, literature and in the vast – still ongoing - project of landscape painting.

² Schwab, Klaus., *The Fourth Industrial Revolution* (2017)

³ The 'Anthropocene' geological age of human effect on the earth was first used in the 1960's but has not been formally adopted by science bodies.

⁴ Introduction by Zeng Han - *Chinescape: Contemporary Chinese Landscape Photography Exhibition*, Shenzhen & Guangzhou: Authentic Vision, Times Museum, 2010.

⁵ Jullien, Francois., *Living off Landscape, or the Un-thought of in Reason* (t.2018)

⁶ Referring to the heavy industry of the modern period in the 20thC in the West and post war period in China. Also the attendant social philosophy behind that period for example as expressed in Bauman, Zygmunt., *Liquid Modernity* (2000, 2012)

Examining Chinese landscape-thought, he articulates the potentiality that “..we might consider this thing called ‘landscape’ no longer as ‘part’ of the land that ‘nature’ presents to an ‘observer’, in the ordinary definition, but as a resource on which living (*vivre*) can indefinitely draw.”⁷

He addresses also the idea of the ‘intimate’ - the quiet that exists between two – which “..comes to be when the boundary is breached between an interiority and an outside.”⁸

His critique of European thought on landscape is that firstly it arose almost in passing – as the backdrop to events in the foreground, much as the film director scouts for a rural or urban setting, and that in painting it was developed as a primarily visual medium. The idea of Landscape in Europe, he argues, is constrained by three underlying precepts⁹: Firstly that is conceived as a selected part in relation to a whole (of land), secondly that there is a visual bias to it as something we view or look at. His third constraint is that it doesn’t escape from subject – object biases, where we the objective observer are separated from the landscape subject before us.

He next outlines the way language is used in China, through parataxis, conjoining different character-symbol-meanings. Hence the ‘word’ for landscape in Chinese is the combination of the two characters for ‘Mountain(s)’ and ‘Water(s)’. Here already is an entirely different scope for the idea of landscape and inhabitation of it, with the correspondence of the immovable forms of mountain with the fluid formlessness of water, vapour and cloud. He compares this thinking: “We (Europeans) were not expecting this other possibility of thought. In truth, we *had never even imagined it.*”¹⁰ and concludes “All landscape apprehended in this play of correlations is the entirety of the world in its vibrancy: not a world that beckons from Elsewhere but a world received in the to-and-fro of its respiration. This same tension of *living* is what Chinese painting captures in landscape.”¹¹

The notion of view point is avoided in Chinese landscape-thought. “Looking is not neutral, or unitarily abstract. Rather it modulates and distributes itself as we move between our various positions.”¹²

This stance is apparent in landscape paintings where “Permanence and variance are at the same time confronted and associated.”¹³.

Jullien argues that landscape as articulated in Chinese thought extends beyond the seeing and viewing - as a locus of exchange - where the polarisation for instance of near-far or of permanence-transience speaks of the correlation between physicality and interiority and between the *perceptual* and the *affectual*. These appreciations could free us, has says, and “We can now better appreciate the usefulness of the Chinese theoretical apparatus. By looking at everything in terms of correlation it breaches the wall behind which Europe’s psychological (insular) notion of the self-subject lies entrenched.”¹⁴

He focusses on the way that in Chinese thought Mountain-Waters entwines the realms of physicality, living and spirituality; “Thus landscape plunges us physically - or, better yet, phenomenally - “between Heaven and Earth”; it plunges us raw into the fundamental interaction that endlessly promotes existence and conveys us to a clearing-out and opening-up.”¹⁵

Jullien concludes his essay with a short design manifesto: “What matters is the advent of multiple polarities that set the world in tension and rescue it from impending uniformity, which will doom it to boredom by atony before relegating it to indifference.”¹⁶. He leaves us invigorated with his fresh insights but with many counterpoints and questions to follow.

2.1 Photography + Environmentalism

What happened to the idea of landscape in - as cultural Europe became in the 20thC - the ‘West’?

With loose strands in Jullien’s essay, the relevance of this question is underpinned by the still vast output and influence of the Western Art project and, that it in considering China as an architect from the West, I can but use my foreign eyes.

Looking back again at the works of Nicolas Poussin, famously known for his landscapes, we are also drawn into his intense internal-external compositions where human passions and the environment are entwined - for instance his Seven Sacraments¹⁷. As the popular writer Alain de Botton recently argues in ‘Art for Therapy’¹⁸, we may

⁷ Prologue, p.x - Jullien, Francois., *Living off Landscape, or the Un-thought of in Reason* (t.2018)

⁸ Prologue, p.xi - Jullien, Francois., *Living off Landscape, or the Un-thought of in Reason* (t.2018)

⁹ Chapter I, Expanse, View, Cutoff - Jullien, Francois., *Living off Landscape, or the Un-thought of in Reason* (t.2018)

¹⁰ P.17 Chapter II, “Mountain(s)-Water(s)” Jullien, Francois., *Living off Landscape, or the Un-thought of in Reason* (t.2018)

¹¹ P.26 Chapter II, “Mountain(s)-Water(s)” Jullien, Francois., *Living off Landscape, or the Un-thought of in Reason* (t.2018)

¹² P.35 Chapter III, From a Landscape to Living - Jullien, Francois., *Living off Landscape, or the Un-thought of in Reason* (t.2018)

¹³ P.15 Chapter I, Expanse, View, Cutoff - Jullien, Francois., *Living off Landscape, or the Un-thought of in Reason* (t.2018)

¹⁴ P.49 Chapter IV: When the Perceptual turns out to be Affectual - Jullien, Francois., *Living off Landscape, or the Un-thought of in Reason* (t.2018)

¹⁵ P.60 Chapter V: When ‘Spirit’ Emanates from the Physical - Jullien, Francois., *Living off Landscape, or the Un-thought of in Reason* (t.2018)

¹⁶ P.125 Epilogue - Jullien, Francois., *Living off Landscape, or the Un-thought of in Reason* (t.2018)

¹⁷ Poussin, Nicolas., (b. 1594) *The Seven Sacraments – the second series (1644 to 1648)* is currently on loan at the National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh

¹⁸ De Botton, Alain., *Art for Therapy* (2018)

correspond with works of art for powerful emotional reasons, that extends beyond works drily described as moments in a linear history of art. In Poussin's work the 'environment' is inhabited by us, and it emanates to us the assembled interplay of things.

Jullien observes that art in Europe declined to further develop ideas of landscape. Romanticism – perhaps most poignantly expressed in Caspar David Friedrich's *The Wanderer Above The Sea Of Fog*¹⁹, and resurrected perhaps also in Gormley's single cast iron figures²⁰ had reaffirmed the (tragic) isolation of the individual in the subject – object 'fold', or limitation, of Europe's landscape thought that Jullien describes. Impressionism focused on the phenomena of light²¹, of seeing itself and haecceity – a profound legacy evolving still today in our era of 'hyperreality'²² – but detaching from land and environment as the frame. Juan Miro is passionate about what he see-feels: "It is the land, the land. It is stronger than I. The fantastic mountains have a very important role in my life, and so does the sky. [...] It is the clash between these forms within my soul, rather than the vision itself. In Mont-roig it is the force that nurtures me, the force."²³ Though his principal works are visibly abstracted away from any imagery of Mont Roig. 20thC conceptual art has generally shown little interest in the specific subject of landscape.

Of the many exceptions, the most significant for the urbanist is perhaps *Land Art* that has articulated both environmental concerns and re-framed an idea of nature as sublime and separate from us. Richard Long, initially using the walk-poem as his medium, then photographs slight re-arrangements of found material in wilderness sites²⁴. These evoke relations of the man-made to our natural context, as well as extending the scope of the art gallery – our revered locus of contemplation – outwards and beyond to the edges of the earth. Later many of his works bring back the found 'wild' material into the gallery²⁵. The American artist James Turrell, creates rooms with apertures where to focus us on the profound haecceity of light and astronomical phenomena above us.²⁶ His extraordinary and prolific Roden Crater project is still unfinished and kept secret.

The new medium of photography, on the other hand, has profoundly extended the scope of landscape vision making, partly through its ability to document the 'realities' of places and actions on land, partly because it has been able to overcome aesthetic prejudices towards what terrain is photographed, and significantly because it has become such a pervasive and exponentially expanding medium. In his introductory article 'Landscape and Photography' Volker Demuth writes "Within the photographically democratised image creation, with the snapping of pictures by all and sundry, reality becomes a global montage. The image pools in digital networks and clouds are growing immeasurably. In a quasi-mythical act, they are forming a second act of Creation, and earth-building cosmogenetic dimension of time and space. Reality is proportionally reversed: reality is created out of images taken rather than reality being presented in the images."²⁷ To use the example of the field architecture, I have no need to imagine how the building I occupy appears – I am more preoccupied with who is with me and what I see outside. The building for the non-occupant 'is' primarily as represented through the medium of photography. As Demuth says – being a 'reality' created out of the image, and through which we (architects) converse with.

Landscape and Land was photography's project from its very beginning: The earliest surviving photograph of a real-world scene is Niépce's *View from the Window at Le Gras* (1826 or 1827)²⁸. Perhaps photography's capability to represent 'reality' and thereby occupy the field of landscape was the reason that painting moved away. However since then, photography has been included as – by way of reconciliation - a strand of fine art itself. The 2017 retrospective of British painter David Hockney included his videos of English rural scenes that he had also 'painted' on ipads.²⁹, exhibited firmly for the wider public at London's National Gallery.

But it is the breadth of photography that has so comprehensively expanded the idea of landscape as well.

As Demuth says: "One thing is certain: within the topography of language, landscape earned an elevated rank long ago, located somewhere between terrain, preserve, area, territory, region and other semantic assessments of space. *Somewhere* - because the borders of landscape, just as with their names, are more like liminal spaces than clear delineation. This is where we immediately encounter some of the most exciting aspects of landscape; its permeability, its openness, which is inviting us to both physical transitions and symbolic transit. Landscapes grant us space. They become stages of spatialisation or more precisely: the location of a life....Landscape is, strictly speaking, a visual and a storytelling space. Texts and images overlap and interweave in landscape....Landscape forms a dense space of experiences, reflecting the immediate individual history as well as collective history."³⁰

¹⁹ Friedrich, Caspar David., (b. 1774) *The Wanderer Above The Sea Of Fog* (1818)

²⁰ Sir Antony Mark David Gormley (b. 1950), British sculptor, for example: *Another Place* (1997) 100 cast iron figures on Crosby Beach, near Liverpool, UK

²¹ For example in the work of: William Turner (b. 1775), Claude Monet (b. 1840), Pierre Bonnard (b. 1867)

²² Hyperreality is the inability of consciousness to distinguish reality from a simulation of reality, especially in technologically advanced societies. First expressed by French sociologist Jean Baudrillard (b. 1929) in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981)

²³ Juan Miro, Gallery caption at Fundacion Miro, Barcelona.

²⁴ Long, Richard., (b. 1945) *A Walk in the Himalaya* (1982)

²⁵ Long, Richard., (b. 1945) *Waterfall Line*, *Tate Modern* (2000)

²⁶ Turrell, James., (b. 1943) *Roden Crater* (purchased 1971, ongoing)

²⁷ P.15 Munich Stadtmuseum., *Land_scope, Photographic works from Roni Horn to Thomas Ruff in the DZ Bank Art Collection*. (2018)

²⁸ The oldest surviving photographic image: Joseph Nicéphore Niépce's *View from the Window at Le Gras* (1826 or 1827)

²⁹ *Woldgate Woods*, Nine digital videos synchronised and presented on nine 55-inch NEC screens to comprise a single work, November 2010. Displayed at the National Gallery, London (2017)

³⁰ P.9 Munich Stadtmuseum., *Land_scope, Photographic works from Roni Horn to Thomas Ruff in the DZ Bank Art Collection*. (2018)

Photography has ranged over picturesque location, sublime natural beauty, military battlefields, agriculture, cities and the (aerial) documentation of geography and space itself. Bernd and Hilla Becher had photographed post-industrial structures, eg. water towers, since the 1950's spurring numerous photographic studies of abandoned interventions and 'production landscapes'. The influential New Topographics photographic exhibition of 1975³¹ had as Ulrich Kohlmann and Christina Leber say "...reveiled landscape as a venue for economic interests and alienation from nature."³² Photographer Fay Godwin articulates deep archaeologies in the (English) landscape in her powerful account *Land*³³. From 2001 film director Wim Wenders works on his *Pictures from the Surface of the Earth* depict resonant deep historical sites such Bethlehem and Ayres Rock.³⁴ More recently – photographer Nadav Kander – traces the path of the 6,380km Yangtse River and documents – beautifully and humanely – the gigantic infrastructural changes ongoing in (my studio's city) of Chongqing³⁵

The prolific large scale photographer Andreas Gursky, who was a student of Bernd and Hilla Becher, has added powerful imagery of the urban landscape and the patterns of human behavior in cities. His photographs of stock exchanges, airport halls, supermarket shelves and the serried ranks of tower blocks or container ports challenge our aesthetic prejudices and invite us to contemplate the patterns of the contemporary. Flatness and repetition can also become engaging, resonant propositions.

But it was perhaps the near universally reproduced photographic images of earth from space from the 1960's onwards that have so significantly shifted collective ideas of where we live. The 'blue planet' is re-formulated as tremulous, vulnerable and alone – imagery that would powerfully support through visual means otherwise abstract scientific reports of destructions through pollution, climate change and the misuse of land. Underpinned by these visualisations, Environmentalism would extend into all aspects – now in China too – of land policy and global economic policy making. Architects too have responded to this new aesthetically supported perception of our habitat in diverse ways.

In his introductory article for the *Chinescape* photography exhibition of 2010 (in Shenzhen and Guangzhou) Gu Zheng says "Landscape photography in post-industrial society has gone way beyond the simple representation of beauty, but has elevated to the level of rethinking the destiny of the human race."³⁶ In his essay Jullien does not elaborate on Environmentalism as a total, holistic perception that is inextricably linked to ideas of landscape, yet it now dominates our thinking.

As we anticipate human development in the '4th Industrial Revolution' in the 'Anthropocene Age', photography has also explored landscape through digital techniques. Though radically different, this is also part of photography's heritage of selection, composition and manipulation of image-making techniques. The British photographer Dan Holdsworth painstakingly creates large scaled digital mappings of familiar terrain – for instance the Grand Canyon, the site for earlier photographers such as Ansel Adams of 'sublime' nature – to reimagine topography and a new aesthetic environment. In his photo essay on Holdsworth's work, critic Myles Little says "the exaltation of discovery can still exist because the man-made and the sublime are not mutually exclusive."³⁷

Through landscape, environmentalism and the irreversible digital other-worlds impinging on our 'reality', as we participate in a (Demuth's) second act of Creation, we can inhabit a new *terra* practice.

2.3 Modern China

In the baggage claim hall of Kunming Airport a new 150m long landscape frieze depicts aspects of the mountains, rivers, lakes, ancient towns, modern cities and the people of the immense and diverse Yunnan Province in the far South West of China. The formula of the ancient landscape painting, the focus of Jullien's essay, is still alive and being re-interpreted time and time again. Numerous artists - and photographers - pursue the essence of classical Daoist thought, as an apparently boundless resource through new presentations in their work.

Again working at large scale – her *The Shape of the Wind: in Fuchun Mountains* is a 2.65 x 160 metres long scroll - the artist (and previously a bio-medical engineer) BingYi Huang works in Chinese ink (Shui Mo), video and live performance. She explains "In my case it's not about reinterpreting Chinese traditional ink painting. If you are truly 'Shan Shui' (ie. connected to the Chinese idea of landscape) you don't need to think about it. If you are the being, you don't need to think about the being. You just are."³⁸ Her recent work *Journey to the Center of the Earth* was a painting hanging the full 150 metre depth of a mine shaft in Essen, Germany, a work developed through extensive research in weather, geology, geography, history and sociology.

³¹ New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape", (1975) Rochester, NY, USA

³² P. 5 Introduction: Munich Stadtmuseum., *Land_scope, Photographic works from Roni Horn to Thomas Ruff in the DZ Bank Art Collection.* (2018)

³³ Godwin, Fay., *Land* (1985), Heinemann.

³⁴ Wenders, Wim., *Pictures from the Surface of the Earth*, touring exhibition: various galleries in Europe, Australia and China (2001-04)

³⁵ For instance: *The Long River, Chongqing VI* (2010) by Kander, Nadav (Israeli & South African photographer and director, b. 1961)

³⁶ Introduction by Zeng Han: *Chinescape: Contemporary Chinese Landscape Photography Exhibition, Shenzhen & Guangzhou: Authentic Vision, Times Museum, 2010.*

³⁷ Little, Myles., *The Digital Sublime: Dan Holdsworth's Virtual Landscapes*, Time Magazine, 2013

³⁸ BingYi Huang (b. 1975, Beijing) <<https://theculturetrip.com/asia/china/articles/between-heaven-and-earth-bingyi-s-meditative-ink-paintings/>>

The artist Zheng Chongbin, now resident in California, links traditional ink drawing with western abstraction. “Central to Zheng’s art is the notion of the world as always in flux, consisting of flows of matter and energy that repeatedly cohered and dissipated. Inherent in pre-modern Chinese and especially Daoist thought, this worldview enables contemporary inquiries into complex systems like climate and social behaviour, artificial intelligence, and quantum physics. Through the interactions of ink, acrylic, water, and paper, Zheng’s paintings generate and record the processes that underlie the emergence of order (including organic life and human consciousness) and its inevitable dissipation.”³⁹

A third artist – among so many to refer to – pursues Mountain Waters differently. Yang Yongliang⁴⁰ was trained in traditional ink, though now works in digital photomontage media. Large images are composed as classical landscape paintings but made from thousands of fragments of modern Chinese cities; tower blocks, factories power masts, construction cranes and motorways. Is this dystopian view a criticism of how far modern China has left behind the harmonies promised in classical art and literature? Is it cynical or humorous? His complex work is widely known, frequently referred to and regularly exhibited in China as well as the West.

Certainly in contemporary Chinese photography, artists have stepped outside the picturesque and sentimental, inspired by western photographic explorations, to document the gargantuan appropriations, disruptions and collisions of the fast growth urban project in China.

For the exhibition of contemporary Chinese landscape photography *Chinescape*, the catalogue essay by Yang Changjiang *Holy Landscape* asserts that “The aesthetics of the ancient Chinese are consisted of a strong sense of universe, time and space as well as personal emotions..” however that now “China has come to her most affluent and vulgar era..” Rapid development in China he says “..can be regarded as an unprecedented wonder.. what contemporary photography should work on is not aesthetics, but an exploration of another form of sociology and philosophy.”

In the introduction critic Zeng Han writes; “Over a hundred years ago, photography was brought to China shortly after its invention along with missionaries and opium. At that time those novel and exotic images in the photographs were called ‘Western-scape’. For more than a hundred years, the Chinese have long regarded the ‘Western-scape’ as a dreamlike goal and ideal, continuously shaping China into a real ‘imaginary foreign country’.” and that now “Chinese photographers re-examine their increasingly distorted homeland with mixed and complex feelings of love and hate.”

The disconnection between Yang Changjiang’s ancient aesthetics and ‘vulgar’ era is pronounced. At a recent seminar in Chongqing that I chaired with a high ranking government planning officer, a member of the public stands up to ask directly “why does our city look like Dubai?”.

In practice as an architect in the 21stC, working on the ground as ideas and policies shift there is still yet a sense of that idealization of the West and about making imported environments – though more critically now; Our client the Mayor of Mengzi, Yunnan makes his first visit to Europe during our village regeneration project there, and returns saying he didn’t like it and thought it backward.

So when a foreigner is commissioned to make a building, to what extent is this on the merits of their work or because of their perceived identity? If more because of the latter, to what extent are they then free to design whatever they wish? How would that contribute to the reconciliation of ancient cultures and vulgar appropriations of the land?

The rapid growth of urban China is a well told story⁴¹, though less emphasis is placed on remarkable poverty alleviation programs⁴² in rural areas, where some 600 million people still live. Having been very concerned about excessive population growth and introducing the One-child policy in 1979, increased longevity (through better diet and healthcare) and reducing proportion of working age people portends the opposite demographic. Officially reported, China “will have the biggest aging-society problem of any country in the world”⁴³. Industry continues to shift away from heavy manufacturing, consumer and service economies are encouraged, innovation and new technologies are forcefully promoted. This background creates new directives and new experiments, not least in the environmental and urban realms.

After such rapid migration to urban areas, the bonds with the rural are more immediate and potent than in the West, which began the – much slower – processes of de-populating rural areas some 200 years earlier. With policies of encouraging spare time – for consumers to spend disposable income in – the outflows into the countryside, with better air and fresher food, with leisurely and active pursuits, to visit and stay in scenic, cultural or just quiet locations in the vast opening country (of 1/20th the population density of the UK.) is an established substantial socio-economic trend. Our practice has worked on numerous rural tourism projects, from small ‘Mingsu’ - bed-and-breakfast lodges – to hotels, visitor centres, historic village regeneration projects and new built development as well. This growing

³⁹ Zheng Chongbin (b. 1961, Shanghai) <<https://www.inkstudio.com.cn/artists/55-zheng-chongbin/overview/>>

⁴⁰ Yang Yongliang (b.1980, Shanghai) <http://www.chinaphotoeducation.com/Carol_China/Yang_Yongliang.html>

⁴¹ For instance, Chen, Yuanzhi & Hudson, Alan & He, Lisheng., *Chinese Urban Transformation: A Tale of Six Cities* (2018)

⁴² The World Bank estimates that 500 million Chinese have been lifted out of extreme poverty since 1981.

⁴³ China Daily 5th December 2011 <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/bizchina/2011-12/05/content_14212002.htm>

trend is culturally underpinned – the particular relations of people to the land and landscape in China are profound in Chinese ways, and as discussed earlier the heritage of ideas of nature is extensive and alive. Different cultures have different mental maps of their terrain – one aspect of the Chinese ‘map’ is culinary; people often locate places within a picture of what is grown, reared or cooked there. If the divide between the French living to eat and the English eating to live, China is firmly on the former side.

(As an indicator of openness however, the spicy cuisine famous in Sichuan - Chongqing municipality was part of the province until 1998 - is characterized by the chili. Welcomed as a useful foreign import (unlike some foreign inventions rejected later by the Dowager Empress in the Qing Dynasty), Portuguese missionaries introduced the South American plant in the 17th Century.)

Rural tourism has also proved economically useful in the shift to home grown economies and a key part of poverty alleviation. “With some 2.1 billion trips made to the countryside last year (2016), the rapidly growing sector created jobs for 6.72 million rural people..”⁴⁴ states the official China Daily; rural tourism is centrally supported and is the topic of numerous ongoing studies.⁴⁵

Investment by government in environmental remediation is rising. As yet brittle and difficult to mediate with as a designer, environmental control and protections play an increasingly dominant constraint to local physical development. Protected forest and agricultural land, the presumption against green field development, interest in regeneration and repurposing buildings, and ‘culturalising’ urban – and rural – environments all form part of the ‘new urbanism’ of Chinese environmental and urban policy. Mitigating and optimizing agendas encourage changes to the functions and characteristics of spaces, streets and buildings. More consultation is also coming through with the development of community scaled units of government agency, where local issues can be aired and considered⁴⁶. Partnerships between government and private interests are also being experimented with – with some urgency given the current decline of local government funding. Improvement of the public realm – parks, squares and local public buildings – has a higher emphasis in China than in the West, though too often resorting to unimaginative formulae. The industry of growing and transporting trees and other plants, of digging up and moving heavy sculptural rocks are well developed and prolific.

2.4 Pavillions, Walls and Courtyards

As discussed, the Chinese Landscape painting balances and beguiles us in a matrix of the solid forms of topography, the specificity for instance of trees and flowers and the formlessness of changing cloud, vapours and water. We are drawn into fluid realities of ‘thisness’ with winding paths and lonely pavilions placed delicately before nature.

Jullien describes the idyll of the pavillion, quoting from poems how the pavillion is entwined with the changing seasons, looking out onto and welcoming in nature where we can enjoy timeless conversations with friends and wandering scholars, with their path-link to the wider world clearly apparent. This articulates a primal attitude in architecture, with the modest building that barely separates inside from outside. This is a lineage still worked on today, where we expensively use glass to enlarge further our view and increase our comfort. Formal gardens – such as the so often quoted Garden of the Humble Administrator in Suzhou, compress the components of the pavillion, pathway (sometimes covered, sometimes a winding bridge), symbolic rocks and manicured trees into a 3-dimensional incarnation of the landscape painting, where again “Permanence and variance are at the same time confronted and associated.” This production has been so affective to have become one of China’s major cultural exports, spurring not least the landscape architect Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown and those he inspired to form ‘natural’ idealisations of the English Garden from the 18th Century. The pavillion-building – for instance the Rotunda at Stowe Garden (1730-38) – is a carefully placed landmark and aspect of an entire landscaped composition.

If the Suzhou garden is a step on from the classical landscape painting, how would we go further towards ideas of urbanity? The Chinese garden project distends for our leisure a set of changing spatial experiences – however this would not be feasible without the pauses and detours created by walls.

The phenomena of stepping through thresholds to postponed vistas, extends our experiences not limits it. Carefully formed and framed openings suggest the apertures of sight itself.

With that practical invention defining and ensuring privacies, the Chinese wall is specially developed in its architectures and social subdivisions, and is extensively iterated as characterful sculptures in themselves – curved ‘dragon’ walls for instance.

Though the Chinese garden makes intimate spaces, there is usually little room for courtyards.

Beyond the compressed Chinese garden, the courtyards of temples, palaces, private dwellings and farms are an universal building typology which, when interlinked, form complex spatial relations of continuity and separation. At its extreme is the remarkable plan of Beijing with the imperial complex of the Forbidden Palace (accessed from

⁴⁴ China Daily, 11th April 2017 http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2017-04/11/content_28880107.htm and for example <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11629-013-2501-3>

⁴⁵ For example: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11629-013-2501-3>

⁴⁶ Chapter 6, Chen, Yuanzhi & Hudson, Alan & He, Lisheng., *Chinese Urban Transformation: A Tale of Six Cities* (2018)

Tiananmen Square) of courtyards and walls exactly at the centre of the city. Surrounding Hutongs and other courtyards supported the services needed to sustain and administer the court and empire. Beyond concentric rectilinear grids extend outwards, now with a succession of peripheral motorways.

(Another model of urbanity – the secluded village in the fable of Peach Blossom Spring by Tao Yuanming written 421 CE – speaks of harmony with nature and the happy interaction of old and young. It remains a powerful and recurrent myth of an elusive utopia.)

The models of the pavilion for the contemplation of nature and life and of the authoritarian imperial plan dominated until the 20thC. It is often observed that China's architecture-urbanism leapt from millenia of traditional building to global modernism with little in between. The difference with the ever-evolving European model of the city (and architecture) is very marked. The ancient Greek 'democratic' model of assembling together the temple, agora and pnyx, the medieval European city jostling with churches, universities, exchanges, guild halls and merchant houses and the plural, historically enriched western cities of today result from very different processes of thought and society.

In China now, as fast development slows and with environmental and heritage protections insisted on, how will urbanity develop? Whilst China economically 'catches up' - it had 80% of world GDP in the Song Dynasty 960-1279 AD⁴⁷ and is not short on determination, hard work and intellect – it still leans to the import of ideas whilst it foments independent contemporary identities.

Reflecting these wider junctures, Chinese architects, artists and photographers – exemplified above - are emboldened by reflection on their deep cultures and experiment within societal needs and patterns of behaviour, whilst also importing – often far too quickly – ideas from abroad. As Portuguese architect Eduardo Souta de Moura says: "Architecture is all about copying. We copy the things that we see. But when this copying process happens consciously it is a disaster. It should be subconscious, almost unintentional."⁴⁸ This is not always appreciated in China and we try to restrain our too speedy studio team. Architecture is a cultural pursuit - we must work with shared languages, syntax and vocabulary in re-formulating and refreshing deeper knowledges.

The deeper knowledges in China are both apparent and yet disrupted by jarring imports – not so much *Collage City*⁴⁹ as 'Collision City'. We see part of our approach trying to help a renewal of cultures and assimilate the contemporary with oncoming changes without imitation or sentimentality. We find that is the relations with nature, land and fluid social phenomena – the core purpose of architecture and urbanity - that can explain the connection between very different projects.

2.5 Nature-Relational Architectures

Tracing then Souta de Moura's 'unconscious' in our own work, there are many threads and lineages that are widely shared by others in architecture and relevant to China now, as it resets the uses of its land and architectural-urban strategies.

The Pavillion

Mentioned above, this primal attitude is revisited time and time again – from the frontality of the Greek temple to Johnson House's glassy transparency. We are completing a small MingSu (lodge) above Chongqing where windows formally frame the view of trees and distant hills. Here we can sit poised at the potent threshold between the comfort of 'home' and the innocence of nature. Here, the classic Daoist question can be asked; 'Am I in Nature or is Nature in me?'

Now, in China, there has been rising interest in modern Japanese culture and architecture – in many ways Japan distilled Chinese ancient culture in its island isolation, and so indicates possible directions for modern Chinese cultural development. For the European, now the Chinese, that resonant minimalism had evolved also through for instance Donald Judd's sculptures⁵⁰, Land Art or the Japanese photographer and architect Hiroshi Sugimoto's Seascapes⁵¹.

Accommodations

Alvar Aalto grew up in the forests of Finland at a time of the county's renewed identity and nationalism. His work developed deliberate relations with the natural contexts of his sites through both assimilative massing of building components and the literal use natural form and motifs. The softness of his interiors and materiality belies the robust shaping of program. Profoundly influential on so many architects, his modernity promises new accommodations with the shared domains without. Using a courtyard and atrium plan, we are working on a public hospital outside Chongqing that in a direct way tries to engage with the wooded embankment of a small river next to the site, new gardens, roof terraces and planted in-patient ward balconies, that draws on not only the culture –

⁴⁷ See: <<http://www.chinawhisper.com/chinas-historical-gdp-share-in-the-world/>>

⁴⁸ Pritzker prize winning architect Eduardo Souta de Moura quoted in interview, Arch Daily (2nd Feb 2019)

⁴⁹ Referring to Colin Rowe's book *Collage City* title: Rowe, Colin., *Collage City* (1978) with Fred Koetter

⁵⁰ Judd, Donald., (b. 1928) considered leading exponent of 'minimalism'. Eg. a series of sculptures *Stacks* (from 1965)

⁵¹ Sugimoto, Hiroshi., Japanese photographer and architect (b.1948)

architectural memes - of relations with nature but also the proven benefit of adjacency to green space for good health, and the ancient holistic ideas in Chinese medicine still practiced in hospitals today.

Allusional

Before we try to make our buildings *look* like nature or landscape – we can imply, symbolize or represent through form and materiality. Our project for an Arts Centre above a lake in beautiful mountain scenery – a rural tourism project in Sichuan – is a floating pyramidal form alluding to the terrain of the site. It suggests a large boulder that may have long ago been part of the 5250m high holy mountain above. Its entrance carves down between tilted gardens that visibly tether the ‘boulder’ to its ground. Fixed lights and lighting beneath the gauze of its exterior finish suggest a lantern – a potent cultural object. The combination of allusions is intended to enrich the implications of a sculptural intervention. The project tries to engage with the land directly whilst in an abstract way remaining man-made.

Another project within the same area – a visitor centre and main tourist gate – more literally announces the mountain, forest and pastoral scenic features of the area and is shaped like a child’s drawing of a hill and has clusters of columns made from the trunks of trees nearby.

Greened

Environmental threat, climate change, finite resource depletion, water and air pollution are the crises of today, systematically communicated through imagery. Architects were able to move beyond the merely stylistic confrontations fought between for example classicists, modernists and post modernists and instead focus on the new imperatives of building ‘sustainably’, and framed their thinking with another form of re-accommodation with the wider natural world. The functional requirements of sustainable construction were to create new aesthetics. Intended energy conservation in buildings has been successful – mainly through tighter regulations, efficient equipment such as LED lighting, and better building management – but have made the building more complex, costly and esoteric in the ‘developed’ world, where carbon footprints steadily increase through travel and consumption. Meanwhile the still impoverished ‘bottom billion’⁵² needs basic power and lighting that will massively increase global energy demand indefinitely. (That is not an argument for complacency however)

as Landscape

Perhaps best consummated in Foreign Office Architect’s Yokohama Cruise Terminal (from 1995), Snohetta Architect’s Oslo Opera House (2008), Amanda Levete’s MAAT Lisbon (2016) or so much of Zaha Hadid’s work, the narrative of building as landscape has been a powerful and ongoing inspiration for architects. Innumerable walkable roofs have appeared in images and in reality too. On our part, a first prize winning planning and architecture scheme for the Orestad extension of Denmark was ‘grown’ around formed hillocks using the spoil from the construction of the Oresund bridge. In Nizhny Novgorod, our winning scheme for the Sochi Olympics ski jump training, sports and retail complex (2009) embeds itself, its bulk disguised by fluid roof forms merging with the natural topography of the banks of the River Volga.

The idea that the building could in some way engage with ‘nature’ by looking like a landscape is odd. A building is not geography or organic. The anecdote of a famous architect presenting her / his airport designed with the flow of flight in mind is salient: the client’s surly response was that they asked for a design for a port building on the ground, not a plane afloat.

Digital Nature

In the architect’s fascination with digital form making there has been a further elaboration of the building as ‘nature’. Since the early (disturbing) scale-less propositions of fractal geometry – and imagery from Science Fiction – digital design-making has also promised the interface with computer-based fabrication. Algorithmic code is written by the author who hopes to rely on the specially adapted software for the design task, though the code itself must be adjusted later to suit the desired output. In geometry, the quest for the seamless and continuous curve is one strand of this prodigious project, and has created remarkable representations of a new artificial nature.

Beyond organic form are the conceptions of buildings growing. Bio-morphic architecture imagines buildings and whole cities part man-fabricated, part biologically cultured as hybrids organisms. Inspiring this architecture, technological futurism portends hybrids between humans and computers in the new domain of ‘Cyberia’ that we are told is upon us in the Anthropocene.

Here, the architect has numerous starting points – and combinations between them – to investigate and experiment with in landscape relations and numerous ways of re-accommodating with our environments. The architect is invited – not least in our experience in China now – to consider not only the interior, building-as-component or ‘master’ plan assemblage, but the urban district and the city scales too. If we are to agree with Jullien’s assertion that ideas of landscape are appropriate also for other terrains such as cities or for the expanding subjects of contemporary photography, then the field of enquiry is now more potent. Jullien also warns against ‘atony’ and flatness. In McFarlane’s *Landmarks*⁵³ which records lost words in the landscapes that we are retreating from, the

⁵² Oxford University Economist: Collier, Paul., *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done About It* (2007)

⁵³ McFarlane, Robert., *Landmarks* (2015)

writer talks about impending 'blandscape' - the indifference to the distinction between things - and the need for 're-wonderment'. If then an ideal city is a plural, diverse phenomena, and the site of many different people interacting, then many architectures – such as those above - would cohabit there.

2.4 Continuities and Interactions

The pathway in classical Chinese painting, literature and mythology has had high importance. As we have seen, the visual device of the path wanders us through the landscape to help us imagine our physical-spiritual journey of changing phenomena and emotion. It leads us through and behind and on to the lonely pavilion, where we can imagine shelter and comforts amongst and at peace with nature. Here we travel alone or with friends, here we meet farmers, fishermen, monks, musicians, scholars - the world of our human relations is included as part of our realities. This idea of a path – sometimes a prescribed route - is similarly prominent, and practically speaking useful, in the classical Chinese garden, and also important in modern design. Many of our projects are met with puzzlement when the 'loop' which the user or visitor would follow is not clearly shown on our plans.

Was this path also so important an idea given the much longer distances travelled in such an extensive nation? Unlike the Cathedrals within the European city, major temples in China tend to be remote - often on mountainous sites. Pilgrimage and travel involving lengthy sacrifice then would have been a crucially different perception of territory. Many events and encounters in myths and literature take place on the way – such as Journey to the West⁵⁴ Today people are very willing to make long journeys for their modern pilgrimages for study, work or pleasure – the famous migrations at Chinese New Year for instance – and along the way rest, refreshment and stimulation is needed.

China's consolidation as the immense 'Middle Kingdom' with increasing command, communication and trade would have been dependent on good road networks. Now, modern China has placed high emphasis on investment in new infrastructure, with extensive motorway and high-speed rail systems. One of its most tangible foreign policies is the Belt and Road initiative⁵⁵, involving new rail and road connections to South East Asia, Pakistan, Iran, the Middle East and Europe as a new 'Silk Road'. (Comparatively, Mediterranean and European civilisations place greater emphasis on maritime communication)

Classical Chinese art does not depict the street – the urban pathway - so extensively as it does landscapes, but when it does these are busy places of interaction, with shops, inns, shrines, gated courtyards and gardens. Chinese film frequently uses the street as the setting for historical drama using the interplay between public space, shared space and private rooms that is the subtle pattern of assembled streets and courtyards. Urban tourist attractions such as preserved historic shopping streets, or pedestrianized quarters in China, are popular and economically successful. Those patterns however have been largely absent in the late 20thC city formula, partly through the arrival of the zoning of gated communities – large blocks of land for a limited range of housing types which are separated from roads by security fencing or walls.

If the physical and social material of the pathway connection is elevated both as a cultural space and as imperial efficacy, and where the pluralities of architecture co-exist too – could this be useful in our thinking on future Chinese urban form?

Certainly in the West, the humanization of the city through investment in the public domain, re-thinking the road and pedestrian friendly urban design has been tangibly beneficial. Zaha Hadid Architects – perhaps unexpectedly for the work they are usual known for – have presented 'Walkable London: Upgrading the urban prosperity engine' at London's New London Architecture centre.⁵⁶ In the high streets of Europe, the shop – always taken as more cultural than a merely commercial unit of space – is being transformed with the advent of internet based purchasing and different modes of work and interaction. There the booming café has expanded into a multi-functional space for solitary and group activities for a wide range of people.

In China tea houses and casual restaurants are also re-configuring and multiplying for more diverse modes of behaviour as a symptom of new home-grown economies. Accessed by a dramatic copper clad escalator enclosure, the basement FanGuo bookshop below the new TaiKoo Li shopping quarter in Chengdu extends to some 10,000sqm and has cafes, art and craft stalls, clothing, technology, reading areas and book sales. Hybrid commercial, social and cultural functions are emerging, perhaps just as Japan experienced in its flowering of new products in the 1980's and 1990's. The trend in China is encouraged and financially supported by central and local government.

Our Mad.Lab ('Mapping and Design Laboratory') program with the University of New South Wales Art and Design School, University of Sydney Architecture School and the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute Landscape School has run four multi-disciplinary and cross-cultural student workshops focussing on the busy Guan Yin Xiao area of

⁵⁴ Journey to the West is one of the 4 classic Chinese novels, attributed to Wu Cheng'en (c. 16th Century, undated)

⁵⁵ For instance: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/documents/Understanding%20China's%20Belt%20and%20Road%20Initiative_WEB_1.pdf>

⁵⁶ See: <<https://www.newlondonarchitecture.org/whats-on/events/2018/january-2018/walkable-london-zaha-hadid-architects>>

Chongqing. The program encourages mapping, interactive experiment and design interventions in the rapidly changing streets and public spaces of the area. We ask; "How does it smell and taste, what music does it play, what poetry does it recite, what is Chongqing-ness?" Our design briefs invite the interweaving of urban, building and product scales of thinking. We suppose that there will be oncoming changes in the function of the city - not least in Chongqing - due to demographic change (longevity + low birth rates) more free time and new economies resulting from arriving technologies and the 'uberisation' of the city. We focus on happenstance interactions on the street and imagine the city as a primeval soup where play, interaction and cultivation may evolve new ideas, activities and economies. The city is imagined as more loamy & creative and so to move on from dystopic visions of the city of exploitation, precarity and anonymity. Perhaps the city could again be seen as an Agora-like environment of exchange and address and so could be nurtured towards a more fertile ground for the unexpected circumstances of origination.

3.0 Conclusion

This paper is motivated by the formless practice of architecture, especially in China, as the demands of the day-to-day and the diversity of design briefs constantly redirect us. At the same time the city is both expanding and changing with oncoming modes of occupation, and where the hardware of buildings and the flows of human interaction are unbalanced.

Early maps use initial information to form a set of assumptions, building its shape around features and waymarks. As more information is collected, the map adjusts and evolves into a more accurate chart for navigation. If this conceptual chart is a tool of orientation, what is the purpose of the journey? Are we on a mission or a tour?

Starting from Francois Jullien's philosophical essay *Living off Landscape*, we have looked at the ideas of landscape that underpin our attitudes and aspirations for our finite physical and cultural contexts. That essay illustrates limitations to European landscape thought but leaves unanswered the questions of how the modern world has continued. Photographic media, especially in the West, has certainly added and extended out thinking on land and, by considering the method and tactics of looking and seeing, also developed new scopes in the field and new aesthetics. Photography has underpinned overarching concerns about the vulnerability of an isolated and probably unique planet, and become a primary medium through which environmentalism has been communicated and embedded.

Much of this world-wide thinking has been shared with the modern Middle Kingdom, which remains open to assimilating ideas – now more critically - from beyond. In China, problematic disconnections persist between the enduring cultural ideas of landscape as an ideal and explanation of fluid reality, the 'heavy modern' post-war project of formulaic industrialization and urbanization and rising ideas of enrichment and optimization in the new urbanism.

In this short paper on so broad a subject there are necessarily large omissions, by-passes and long jumps too. Written from the point of view of a practicing architect, the argument has only mentioned in passing the fields of national, regional and district planning, and then only briefly touched on some of the ways that buildings may respond and engage with a new landscape of natural-social phenomena.

In the vast, relatively intact, 5,000 year old region of China the path and road are viewed as pronounced cultural, practical and administrative emphases. By extension, but not yet developed in practice, the street seems to offer many possibilities as the place for all-ages, new behaviours and interaction, and potentially adaptable in three dimensions.

Here too, in 'Cyberia', a place of probable less work through automation and / or different work-life patterns with unimagined new industries, the street needs to flex and adapt more fluidly, include, and nourish us with more soulful participation.

As so many artists and architects continue to work on in China – now more independently of earlier formula - there are so many more investigations to make through writing, illustrating and thinking through drawing and practice. Before the Long March that in many ways still symbolises China's recent leap back from its troubled 19th Century, Chairman Mao said: "The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

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