

An Analysis on Wen Boren's *Gazing into the Waterfall by the Autumnal Precipice*

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The painting *Gazing into the Waterfall by the Autumnal Precipice* was painted by Wen Boren 文伯仁 (1502-1575). The hanging scroll measures 342.7 x 97.6 cm (Fig.1) and is currently stored in Shanghai Museum. Painted in the middle to late Ming Dynasty, this is a literati painting that exemplifies Wen Boren's virtuosity and his influence from earlier painters. This essay will explore imageries presented in the painting and associations Wen Boren attempted to bring to his work.

This polychromatic hanging scroll opens with the lower mountain gorge where the moving water flows from the waterfall in the background. Two scholars with a servant in blue robe are seen looking up to the woodcutters who are resting in the mountain path, whose gazes are fixed on the waterfall in the depth of the mountains. Layers are created with the contrasting styles of brush work in the foreground and the background. Brush work in the foreground are lucid, they are mainly long hemp-fibre strokes¹ which creates the texture of the mountains. Wutong leaf dots² and confused dots³ are also used to depict tree leaves in the foreground. Wen Boren also combined a variety of colours to depict the autumnal scenery in painting the different appendages of the rich vegetation in the foreground as well. In the middle ground, a waterfall is situated and there is a clear difference in the way Wen painted the mountains than that in the foreground. The mountain was painted with more watery ink and less textures. This lack of detail is to create a visual discrepancy to bring out the layers of the painting. The layering effect is further enhanced by the simple ink washed misty mountain in the background in which Wen provided no detailed structure. On top of the mountain, is a simple inscription of the title and the artist of this hanging scroll.

¹ Molly Schadt, Richard Mellott, and So Kam Ng, *Brushstrokes Styles and Techniques of Chinese Painting*. (USA: Asian Art Museum - Chong Moon Lee Centre for Asian Art and Culture, 1995), 39.

² Ibid, 38.

³ Ibid, 38.

The painting *Gazing into the Waterfall by the Autumnal Precipice* dates to a time when the court was dominated by eunuchs and the people were under strict rule of the government. Wen Boren himself was born into a wealthy family of scholars and was the nephew of renowned painter and calligrapher Wen Zhengming 文徵明 (1470-1559).⁴ He was a student of his uncle and his works are stylistically and compositionally inspired by him and Wang Meng 王蒙 (1308-1385).⁵ Although Wen Boren originally received education to become a civil servant as his uncle had, he eventually gave up advancing in the civil examinations and chose to make a living by trading and selling his paintings.⁷ In most of Wen Boren's life, he was under the rule of Jiajing Emperor (1521-1567), also known as Zhu Houcong. The court was in a chaotic situation all throughout Jiajing Emperor's reign, and the literati also suffered a great deal from the emperors' mistrust to them, which drove many educated men away from the court.⁸ An example would be how the government forbid civil examination candidates from incorporating their own views in their answers, which could be a contributing factor to why Wen Boren withdrew from the civil examinations and turned to a life of seclusion instead.

In the inscription on the painting, Wen Boren identifies himself as the *wufeng shanren*, meaning the mountain man of the five peaks. The definition of a *shanren* in the Ming Dynasty was an educated individual who abandons the pathway to serve in the court,

⁴ "Fine Places Of Forests And Streams: Wen Boren And The Art Of Painting_Introduction" National Palace Museum (Taiwan) website, https://www.npm.gov.tw/exh99/wen_boren/en_01.html, accessed 10 December 2018.

⁵ Ibid, 10 December 2018.

⁶ Hong Kong Museum of Art, Provisional Urban Council Hong Kong, *Xubaizhai Gallery of Chinese Painting and Calligraphy* (Hong Kong: Shi zheng ju Xianggang yi shu guan, 1998), 2.

⁷ "Fine Places Of Forests And Streams: Wen Boren And The Art Of Painting_Introduction" National Palace Museum (Taiwan) website, https://www.npm.gov.tw/exh99/wen_boren/en_01.html, accessed 10 December 2018.

⁸ Richard M. Barnhart, James Cahill, Wu Hung, *Three Thousand Years Of Chinese Painting* (New York: Yale University Press, 1997), 198.

and lives a life trading poetry and paintings with wealthy patrons instead.⁹ These people took the name as a person of the mountain because of the mountain's association with reclusion and well-respected literati such as Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (365?-427).¹⁰ *Shanrens* were portrayed as pretentious and selfish individuals who chose the path of solitary enjoyment instead of serving the public as court officials.¹¹ Wen Boren addressed himself as a man of the mountains. Although he lived the traditional literati's ideal life, wandering in nature and away from the constraints of courtly responsibilities, he was still condemned by the public for being selfish. He was a solitary figure who excluded himself from social turmoil and was mildly ostracized by the common people who looked upon to the educated ones for a better life in times of strict oppression from the Ming court. Therefore, the terms used to describe Wen, '*shanren*', and the painting that documents a solitary journey of 'roaming' to the five peaks suggest a degree of rootlessness and marginality that Wen possesses.¹² Painting nature could therefore be an expression and reflection of Wen Boren's desire to be free from the public expectation that the educated should serve in the court and make commoners' lives better. Therefore, nature is not only a place for self-cultivation for Wen Boren, it is also a sanctuary for the condemned literatus.

There is no previous research or documentation that indicates the location of the Five Peaks. However, the inscription and the artist's travel history give us reason to believe that

⁹ Chen Tao 陳濤, "Shanren Xian Xiang yu Zhong Wan Ming Wenxue de Yulehua 山人現象與中晚明文學的娛樂化 (The Shanren Phenomenon and the Transformation of Middle to Late Ming Literature into Entertainment)" In *GuoXue* 國學 (*China Studies*) website, 2007, retrieved from <http://www.guoxue.com/?p=778> on 23 September 2019.

¹⁰ Shen Defu 沈德符 (1578-1642), *Wan li ye huo bian* 萬曆野獲編 (*Gains from the Wilderness in the Wan Li Years*) In *Zhongguo zhixue dianzhuang jihu* 中國哲學書電子化計畫 (*Chinese Philosophy Book Electronic Plan*), 2018, retrieved from <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=646812&reap=gb#山人> on 10 December 2018.

¹¹ Zhao Diefeng 赵轶峰, "Shanren yu wan Ming shehui 山人與晚明社會 (People of the Mountain and the Late Ming Society)," *Dong bei shi daxue bao* 東北師大學報 (*Northeast Normal University Press*) no.1 (2001): 8-16.

¹² Craig Clunas, *Empire of Great Brightness* (London: Reaktion Books Limited, 2007), 66.

the Five Peaks could refer to the cloistered area around *Wu Feng Shu Yuan* 五峰書院 (*College of the Five Peaks*). It is still impossible to ratify that the current architecture in the Five Peaks are ones depicted in the painting, but there are geological and stylistic similarities between the depicted architecture and the image (Fig.4). Construction of the College was completed in 1536, but its history dates back to the Southern Song Dynasty. During so, educator and philosopher Chen Liang 陳亮 (1143-1194) conducted his seminars in the *shou shan shi shi* 壽山石室 (*agalmatolite caves*), later joined by renowned philosopher Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200).¹³ In the Ming Dynasty, the area became a favored traveling location for the literati like Wen Boren himself.¹⁴ From the provenance of the College and Wen's nominal reference, it is justifiable that the landscape is a scene captured near the College. Wen's travel history shows him to be an ambitious traveler. Yet, personal references to the destination form an association with Wen's scholarly identity. In this case, the rationale for Wen's journey could mean more than leisure, it could have also been a search for peer understanding and an identity.

Wen Boren's inner pursuit of peace and reclusion through traveling in nature is very much reflected in the stylistic and compositional features of his painting that he proudly endorsed. Wen Boren studied works by great Yuan masters such as Wang Meng, Shen Zhou 沈周 (1427-1509), and his uncle. The artist expanded the intricate styles of these masters and incorporated individualistic features in his works. He made references to Wang Meng's notable calligraphic long hemp-fibre strokes when applying textures to the rocks and

¹³ "Wu Feng Shu Yuan 五峰書院 (College of the Five Peaks)" GuoXue.Wiki website, <https://wiki.hygx.org/index.php?title=五峰書院&variant=zh-tw>, accessed 30 August 2019.

¹⁴ Ibid, 30 August 2019.

mountains.¹⁵¹⁶ Yet, unlike Wang Meng's paintings (Fig.2) (Fig.3) that mostly impedes the viewer from penetrating into the depth of the painting, and possibly the world of the painter, Wen Boren has expanded the Yuan master's style and created layers and depths in his painting by allowing more space to roam within the ink and colours. Wen Boren imitated Wang Meng's meticulous brush strokes, the theme of seclusion in this painting is also predominant in Wang, Shen Zhou and his uncle's works. The artist's pursuit of seclusion is portrayed by the secluded huts and the gazes of the literati towards the woodcutters, and the woodcutters' towards the waterfall. Studying after Shen Zhou's student – Wen Zhengming, Wen Boren's illustration of the two literati could be a projection of himself with a literati companion, which is the Daoist manner of self-expression that Shen Zhou has always infused in his paintings.¹⁷ An example could be Shen Zhou's *Night Vigil* (Fig.5), in which he portrays himself meditating in a bucolic residence secluded from the city. Judging from the refined roof of the huts and the elegant well-cared bridge nearby, the scene in the painting could be a depiction of Wen Boren, a man born of a wealthy scholarly family, welcoming a literati friend into his dwellings within the mountains. This was a common activity among Ming literati that is prevalently represented in works of other Ming painters as well. An example is Shen Zhou's *Meeting an Old Friend in the Autumn Study* (Fig.6).¹⁸

The theme of seclusion is also evoked by the two gentlemen's gaze at the woodcutters. Their longing gaze suggests the literati's pursuit of a simple secluded life away from the corruption of the government. The theme of seclusion portrayed by woodcutter is prominent in Wang Meng's works from which Wen Boren studied. Wang Meng had

¹⁵ Hong Kong Museum of Art, Provisional Urban Council Hong Kong, *Xubaizhai Gallery of Chinese Painting and Calligraphy* (Hong Kong: Shi zheng ju Xianggang yi shu guan, 1998), 2.

¹⁶ Maxwell K. Hearn and Wen C. Fong, *Along The Riverbank Chinese Paintings from the C.C. Wang Family Collection* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999), 45-46.

¹⁷ R. Eno, *Traditions of Literati Painting*, Indiana University, 2008, 17, retrieved from <http://www.indiana.edu/~e232/17-Paint.pdf> on 10 December 2018.

¹⁸ Ibid, 16, 10 December 2019.

identified himself as the Mountain Woodcutter of the Yellow Crane Mountain, Huanghe shanqiao. The specification of the term “woodcutter” in his pseudonym is highly associated with his life in the Yellow Crane Mountains as a hermit after resigning from the court in view of its chaos and corruption.¹⁹ Hence, the woodcutters in the painting could also reflect Wen Boren's admiration of Wang Meng and his choice of lifestyle.

Xiao Dezao's 蕭德藻 (1127-1279) poem *Qiao fu* 樵夫 also depicts this ideal lifestyle by describing the trivial events of a day in a woodcutter's life. The poem reads,

A woodcutter gathers firewood at an ancient dock,
Another carefree day passes as he finishes his woodcutting work.
Then, he comes to sharpen his axe at the bottom of the gorge,
And prepares himself for tomorrow's work to support his family with his earnings.²⁰

From this Song Dynasty poem, the viewer of the painting may determine that Wen Boren was drawing an association with the woodcutter's life to his own yearning for the serenity in a hermit's life. The two gentlemen at the bottom of the painting may represent Wen Boren and a friend, who longed for tranquil in the carefree lives of hermits, portrayed by the woodcutters in this painting. The positioning of the two literati and the woodcutters in the painting is also important to note. Wen Boren deliberately placed the woodcutters at the upper part of the painting and the two literati at the lower part of the painting, allowing space for the literati's gaze to roam. It is also possible that Wen Boren implied that the benefits from the bucolic life of a woodcutter, is more significant and rewarding than that of the normal literati's life. This may explain the hierarchy in the painting.

¹⁹ Wang Qiaoling 王巧玲, “Lun Yuan dai zhuming daoshi huajia Wang Meng 論元代著名道士畫家王蒙 (Renowned Daoist Painter Wang Meng)”, *Hong Dao*, no.2 (2011): 29.

²⁰ Xiao Dezao 蕭德藻 (1127-1279), “*Qiao fu* 樵夫 (Woodcutter)” In Tang shi Song ci wang 唐詩宋詞網 (Poems and Songs from the Tang and Song Dynasties), 2017, retrieved from <http://tsse.timetw.com/50980.html> on 17 October 2018.

A reason for the enjoyment of nature that has drawn many literati away from the urban life, is its magnitude that allows self-cultivation and its comprehensive abundance. It is a space that allows the literati to meditate and be at peace. Shen Zhou wrote an inscription about the rewarding experience of meditating in the rural night alone in his painting *Night Vigil* (Fig.5), which shows the importance of nature to the literati at that time. In this painting by Wen Boren, the significance of nature as an abundant space for self-cultivation is reflected in the seasonal imagery of autumn and the symbolism of water. In Chinese culture, autumn is associated with the idea of abundance and family togetherness because of the lunar activity in the season. The moon is the fullest in mid-autumn, its symbolic shape is regarded by Chinese people to be representative of abundance and harmoniousness.²¹ Autumn's symbolic importance of representing abundance is also supported by the fact that most harvests are made in this season. A poem from Wei Yingwu's 韋應物 (737-792) that reads as follows discusses the season of autumn in Mount Langya.

I have been to the temple for a few times in the past,
And yet I have not fully immersed myself in the faintness of Langya.
The autumnal skies are high and far,
And the sceneries of mountains and streams are now clear.
I climbed the mountain and took a rest,
And at twilight watched the clouds beneath.
The dimming sky was vast and one could feel winter slowly arriving,
Then I heard a clangour of the night-bell and it lingered for a long while.
I adored the clear autumnal air of the night and I wanted to stay to enjoy the night,
Yet I, as the head of the prefecture had duties to fulfil.
And I know only a monk who lives within the mountains,
Could wander in the woods alone freely.²²

This poem, featuring Mount Langya, comments that the autumnal mountains could allow a person to see his surroundings clearly and also describes the beauty of this state where self-

²¹ "Backgrounder: Cultural Significance Of Mid-Autumn Festival" Xinhua English News website, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-09/22/c_137486340.htm, accessed 11 December 2018.

²² Wei Yingwu 韋應物 (737-792), "*Qiujing yi langya jing she* 秋景詣琅琊精舍 (Autumn Scenery)" In Tang shi Song ci wang 唐詩宋詞網 (Poems and Songs from the Tang and Song Dynasties), 2018, retrieved from <http://tssc.timetw.com/40403.html> on 17 October 2018.

cultivation is better achieved because the person has returned to nature. Therefore, Wen Boren could be drawing an association between the autumnal mountains and the self-fulfilment he acquired from nature in this season.

The pictorial representation of nature and traveling as an abundant space for self-cultivation could also be explained from the symbolic waterfall pouring from the depths of the mountain range. A visual-verbal association can be drawn between the waterfall and the word *you* 遊 or 游 (*to roam, to travel or to swim*). In a philosophical concept – *Wu Xing* 五行 (*Five Forces*), water is a mobile element and fertilizes the growth of wood.²³ An alternative of 遊 (*to travel and to roam*) – 游 (*to travel or to swim*), was often used in the past to represent the same semantic content. However, the composition of the word 游 is slightly different from 遊, the former has a water radical, suggesting a connection between the mobile nature of traveling and the fluidity of water. Therefore, the river and the waterflow in the painting evoke the ideas “to drift” and/or “to flow,” a state of tranquility in the mind that the Daoists believed to be beneficial for self-cultivation.²⁴ Moreover, a landscape painting that illustrates or records a traveling experience is also considered *wo you* 臥遊 (*recumbent traveling*).²⁵ As such, the artist engaged in a prestigious form of movement artistically and physically. What I wish to point out here, is the reassertion of traveling that the artist experienced and attempted to portray in the painting. Again, it is impossible to correctly understand the literatus’ connotation behind making this painting. Nonetheless, we could deduce that traveling, or painting the episode offered Wen Boren an alternative sanctuary away from the infernal capital.

²³ C.A.S. Williams. *Chinese Symbolism and Art Motifs* (China: Tuttle Publishing, 2006), 194.

²⁴ Craig Clunas, *Empire of Great Brightness* (London: Reaktion Books Limited, 2007), 63.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 61.

Traveling, wandering, or roaming *you shan wan shui* 遊山玩水 (*roaming in mountains and playing in the water*) offers an expanse to the Ming elite for self-discovery and self-cultivation. Despite Clunas' expatiation about traveling being a prestigious activity sought after by the scholarly elites, *you* 遊 was an ancient Daoist concept that had been reiterated throughout dynasties.²⁶ It was construed as a pathway to become truly free and one with nature. *Zhuangzhou Meng Die* 莊周夢蝶 (*Zhuangzhou Dreaming of a Butterfly*) is an early textual example embodying the idea of immersing oneself in a dream so as to "roam" and "drift" and hence become one with nature.²⁷ Below is my translated excerpt of the writing.

In the past, Zhuangzhou dreamt of himself becoming a butterfly, one that was so lively that it was almost mistaken to be real. The experience was so joyful and pleasing that Zhuangzhou almost forgot who he was. All of a sudden, he awoke from his dream and surprisingly realized that he himself was the man Zhuangzhou. Is it Zhuangzhou who dreamt of becoming a butterfly, or is it the butterfly who dreamt of becoming Zhuangzhou? There lie differences between Zhuangzhou and the butterfly, and this is the transformation and the unity of me and nature.²⁸

Lu Zhi 陸治 (1496-1576) painted this episode which depicts Zhuangzhou burying his face in his arms and drifting off to sleep to transcend mortal boundaries and experience nature as part of its existence (as a butterfly) (Fig.7). Daoist classic *Xiao Yao You* 逍遙遊 (*Happy and Boundless Excursion*) delineates the *dao* 道 (*way*) ideal of *wu wei* 無為 (*purposelessness of actions*), coincidentally echoing Wen's desire to wander in order to be free of presupposed

²⁶ Ibid, 60-61.

²⁷ Ibid, 63.

²⁸ Zhu Weijing, "Zhuang Zhou Meng Die 莊周夢蝶 (Zhuangzhou Dreaming of a Butterfly)," In *Hanyu Shijie* 漢語世界 *The World of Chinese*, 2013, retrieved from <https://www.theworldofchinese.com/about-us/> on 20 September 2019.

social expectations, and to rid of distress from disruptive thoughts. In other words, to *xiao yao you*.²⁹³⁰

The notion of liberation through traveling in this painting was reaffirmed by Tang politician and Confucian philosopher Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773-819) in his writing *Shi De Xi Shan Yan You Ji* 始得西山宴遊記 (*Traveling Record to the West Mountain*), first of the *Yongzhou Ba Youji* 永州八遊記 (*Eight Records of Excursions in Yongzhou*). Liu Zongyuan recorded his journey to Xishan after he was demoted from the court. During so, he reached an epiphany where he understood the innate unity of all beings in nature – himself and all forms of existence on earth. The translation of an excerpt is written as follows.

I felt as if my thoughts had come to a pause, all forms and shapes had vanished, and all beings became one. It was after this journey to the West Mountain that I realized I had just begun to experience traveling genuinely.³¹

As such, all throughout the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States periods, the Tang Dynasty, the Ming Dynasty and so on, traveling has been the intermediation between a person and freedom. It is an activity that provides an appropriate setting – nature, and, nurtures self-discovery. In the end, the traveller will be liberated from distress and all forms of mortal constraints. Little about the incentive of this work is known, but the pictorial and contextual similarities drawn between the aforementioned works ratify the claim that *you shan wan shui* is a journey of self-discovery. It is a cultivation process that eventually leads

²⁹ Wang Keping, *Chinese Culture of Intelligence* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2019), 88.

³⁰ Wang Guangqian 王先謙, *Zhuangzi Ji Jie* 莊子集解 (*An Explanation of Zhuangzi's Episodes*) (Beijing: Zhong Hua Shu Ju, 1987), 6-8.

³¹ Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773-819), “*Shi De Xi Shan Yan You Ji* 始得西山宴遊記 (*Traveling Record to the West Mountain*)” In *Hanyu Wang* 漢語網 (*Website for the Han Language*), 2019, retrieved from <http://www.chinesewords.org/poetry/72573-855.html> on 22 September 2019.

the person in motion to find peace with himself and nature. Henceforth, to become one with the world – to reach the ultimate goal of *tian ren he yi* 天人合一 (*man and sky united*).

Gazing into the Waterfall by the Autumnal Precipice is a painting that exemplifies Wen Boren's excellent mastery of technical skills that he acquired from studying works of his uncle and great masters. It is also a meticulously planned painting that eloquently depicts the artist's journey in the Five Peaks and a 'recumbent traveling' experience in completing the work. When we look closely at this painting, a part of the artist's identity is revealed. We see an educated elite who half-heartedly turned to the life of a mountain wanderer, and ultimately finding harmony with his past and future. As our gazes travel along scroll, we too embark on a journey of personal cultivation and discovery, and experiment the immense power of *wo you*.

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Fig.1. Wen Boren, *Gazing into the Waterfall by the Autumnal Precipice*, painting, ink on paper, hanging scroll (1368-1644). 342.7 x 97.6 cm. Shanghai CH, Shanghai Museum.

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Fig.2. Wang Meng, *The Simple Retreat*, painting, ink and colour on paper, hanging scroll (1370). 136.5 x 44.8 cm. New York (NY) US, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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Fig.3. Wang Meng, *Dwelling in the Qingbian Mountains*, painting, ink on paper, hanging scroll (1366). 140.6 x 42.2 cm. Shanghai CH, Shanghai Museum.



Fig.4. Wangan Langzi, *Wu Feng Shu Yuan*, kknews-Culture website, retrieved from <https://kknews.cc/culture/q6enmbg.html> on 21 September 2019.

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Fig.5 Shen Zhou, *Night Vigil*, painting, ink and colour on paper, hanging scroll (1492). 84.8 x 21.8 cm. Taipei TW, National Palace Museum.

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Fig.6. Shen Zhou, *Meeting an Old Friend in the Autumn Study*, painting, ink and colour on paper, hanging scroll (1484). 157.3 x 33.6 cm. Shanghai CH, Shanghai Museum.



Fig.7. Lu Zhi (1496-1576), *Zhuangzi Dreaming of a Butterfly*, ink on silk, album leaf from a set of ten, mid-16th century. 29.4 x 51.4 cm.

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