FORMULATING CHINESE SPACE
The logic of three-dimensional spatial perception in Chinese space

By

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ABSTRACT
Space exists in the human mind through the process of optical reception, thus enabling vision of
the world around us. However, the attempt to represent and express visual images of the
surrounding space is a constant universal challenge constrained by the conventions of analogy.
Throughout history, the challenge is to seek resemblance, striving towards achieving closer and
closer approximations of a perfect realistic representation. Through the western eyes, the
mathematical construction of lines or "perspective" is developed to express and visualise the
world in three-dimension. However, in the eyes of the traditional Chinese landscape artists, the
world is experienced in a somewhat "warped" spatial perspective. Monumental landscapes of
mountain ranges and rivers are expressed comfortably within the restricted canvas frame, a
display of harmonious balance and dignity. The phenomena of perspective applied intuitively by
the Chinese present an alternative yet effective expression of images. Does this seemingly
"warped" sense of perspective belie a set of principles that could even more effectively represent
the world we see?

A formal stylistic inquiry is inadequate in the investigation of spatial representation in Chinese
paintings. It must be studied as a holistic coherent system encompassing philosophical or even
psychological concepts, with references to spatial qualities such as "heaving or thrusting masses",
"heavy and massive volumes", "the lightness and transparencies of spaces", "mysterious and
enigmatic views". Chinese paintings have to be analysed, as an end product to be evaluated by
the viewer and also more importantly, as a process or production, to be expressed by the artist.
We can then postulate how three-dimensional space is represented and perceived in Chinese
paintings and ultimately, attempts to construct the formula behind this unique spatial system.

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