READING LANDSCAPES
— CHINESE SPATIAL REPRESENTATION AND IDEOLOGY

by

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ABSTRACT

It is the objective of this paper to propose a link between the importance and pervasiveness
of Confucius and Taoist thoughts in shaping Chinese attitudes towards landscape, and by
extension, the surrounding natural world.

Landscape is understandably an important aspect of any society’s cultural
geochemistry especially for the agrarian and closed economy of ancient China, for man’s
constant negotiation and struggles with land forces are factors that hold immediate interest
to pedestrian life. On the other hand, Confucian values and norms that gave form to the
fabric of Chinese society were communicated by way of an astonishing array of agents to
construct, and is in turn influenced by, a particular attitude towards nature.
Whether by design or default, the incipient ideas of Tao and humanistic moral vision of the Confucian gentry elite, broadly defined, appeared to have functioned as a powerful and dominant system of ideas that has left a profound imprint on Chinese landscape across the span of more than ten centuries. A study of spatial patterning in the context of landscape thus turn out, on the basis of our investigation, to be a study of the Taoist–Confucian ordering of space.

The main body of this paper will thus deal with the question of landscape representation, opening with an examination of Man’s physical relationship to land, and concluding by identifying the core values of Taoist-Confucian thought that left the most profound influence on spatial conception — a nature-centric and bi-polar outlook of the world. Through our discourse, we shall also touch upon the major fields of Chinese thought from geomancy (man’s reading of land) to architecture (man building on land) and finally landscape paintings (man’s expression of land); to discover overlapping areas that tell us how Taoist-Confucian thought reflects a given reality and conditions a way of seeing and acting in the world.