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Beyond Ontological Captivity: Critiquing Colonial Gaze via Chinese Anti-Ontological Visual Thinking

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Abstract

This article argues that the problem of the colonial gaze lies not only in the entanglement of vision with power, but in the ontological distribution that continues to organize modern visuality around a subject confronting an object. Major accounts of the gaze, especially in Sartre, Lacan, Fanon, and Bryson, have shown that seeing is never neutral perception, but a structured mode of visuality bound up with lack, objectification, and domination. Yet such critiques often remain within the same subject-object grammar they seek to unsettle, exposing the violence of the gaze without fully loosening its underlying conditions of possibility. Drawing on François Jullien's notion of external deconstruction, this article approaches Chinese anti-ontological thought not as a civilizational alternative to Western theory, but as a methodological resource for displacing the conceptual primacy of the subject-object divide. Through Daoist notions of receptivity and wandering contemplation, together with the visual logic of Chinese landscape painting, it proposes a non-dominating mode of seeing grounded in relation, transformation, and co-presence rather than fixation and appropriation.

Introduction

For a long time, 'the gaze' has ceased to be understood as a neutral act of visual perception, and has instead come to be recognized as a mechanism of looking that is pre-structured within historical, discursive and cultural formations. Within visual culture studies and postcolonial theory, scholarship ranging from Sartre and Lacan to Fanon and Bryson has amply demonstrated that seeing is never a transparent apprehension of the world by a subject, but is always shaped by the symbolic order, social power and cultural coding. It follows that the gaze is never simply 'seeing'; rather, it is a mechanism that distributes positions, meanings and visibility between subject and object.

This point is of particular significance for understanding colonial visuality. The colonial gaze is not merely a misperception of the other, nor simply the projection of individual prejudice. It is, more fundamentally, a mode of looking that produces difference through framing, naming, fixing and hierarchization. The colonized did not exist a priori as 'objects'; rather, they were transformed into recognizable, governable and appropriable objects within a specific visual apparatus. The colonial gaze, therefore, is not an incidental violence superimposed upon vision, but a regime of domination that emerges at the intersection of visuality and structures of power.

Yet while existing critiques of the gaze have exposed the violence of representation, the instability of the subject and the power relations between the viewer and the other, they remain to a large extent trapped within the same ontological grammar of subject-object dualism. In other words, these critiques are adept at demonstrating that the subject is not autonomous and how objects are constructed, but they rarely press further to ask: why does modern vision repeatedly organise itself into a mechanism that is centred on the subject and that confirms itself through the object? So long as seeing remains predicated on the fundamental premise that 'the subject confronts the object, defines it and derives certainty from it', even

the most incisive critiques, while they may reveal the paradoxes of domination, will struggle to genuinely loosen the structural conditions that make domination possible.

Against this backdrop, this article argues that the enduring efficacy of the colonial gaze stems not merely from the instrumentalization of vision by ideology or power, but more profoundly from the fact that modern visuality itself is founded upon an ontological distribution: the subject is tacitly positioned as the center of meaning and cognition, while the world is presented as an object waiting to be grasped, interpreted and appropriated. Under this premise, seeing readily degenerates into a compensatory operation, whereby the subject temporarily stabilizes itself by fixing the object. The problem of the colonial gaze, then, is not merely one of visual ethics, nor simply one of political representation; it cuts deeper, touching upon a visual ontology that separates the subject from the world.

In addressing this question, this article does not seek to construct a cultural opposition between 'East and West', nor does it romanticize Chinese thought as an inherently power-free alternative. Instead, drawing on what Jullien terms the path of 'external deconstruction', it approaches Chinese anti-ontological thought as a methodological resource. Its significance lies not in offering another philosophy of the subject, but in opening up a relational language that transcends subject-object opposition—a language in which looking no longer proceeds from an isolated subject, no longer confirms itself through the appropriation of the object, but turns instead towards relation, becoming, resonance and co-presence.

Bryson's engagement with Nishitani's thought of 'emptiness' provides a crucial clue for breaking with traditional theories of the gaze, for it reminds us that if seeing remains confined within the subject-object framework, the gaze cannot truly escape its logic of domination even when the subject is decentered. This cross-cultural turn, however, has remained largely confined to metaphysical reorientation. This article goes further to argue that Chinese thought, and its visual practice in landscape painting, offers a more systematic articulation of a non-ontological mode of seeing. In particular, the Daoist concepts of '*xu wei yi dai*' (emptiness as receptivity) and '*you guan*' (wandering contemplation) do not merely offer an alternative aesthetic sensibility; they structurally undermine the logics of subject-centeredness, object-fixity and monocular perspective upon which the colonial gaze rests.

The article proceeds in four parts. The first analyses how the gaze functions as a dominant visual mechanism through framing, fixing and objectification. The second argues that while existing critiques of the gaze are profoundly illuminating, they have not yet fully escaped the ontological premise of subject-object dualism. The third draws on Jullien and related discussions of Chinese anti-ontology to propose a framework of seeing grounded in relation, life and becoming, rather than 'being' and 'representation'. The fourth, combining Daoist notions of 'emptiness as receptivity' and 'wandering viewing' with the visual logic of Chinese landscape painting, demonstrates how a non-dominating mode of seeing might be possible.

Colonial Gaze and Its Violence

The visual concept of the gaze embodies specific cultural metaphors for images, denoting that artists inscribe cultural, social, and historical significations onto objects. Painting, as visual art, has perpetually been situated by this hierarchical way of seeing within the 'strain or anxiety in the transactions between self and the world' (Bryson, 1983:93). This is because during the gaze, the subject attempts to extract, in an extremely ephemeral manner, a representation "serving" its own ends from the enduring form of object; in a sense, this very act inherently carries a violent character, which is 'penetrating, piercing and fixing' (Bryson, 1983:93). Lacan similarly insists that vision is never simply a matter of the eye, 'the painter knows this very well- his morality, his search, his quest, his practice is that he should sustain and vary the selection of a certain kind of gaze' (Lacan, 1998: 101). Specifically, what underpins the gaze is the symbolic order of language, social norms, and the pre-existing structural power that shapes the subject's scopic capacity. This means the way in which artists observe, fix and record the world is never the product of unfettered individual will, but rather is structured by the cultural, racial and political hierarchies of the society in which they are embedded. In the colonial context, the gaze evolves into a hierarchical visual project that frames the colonized world, its peoples and its landscapes as passive, malleable objects ripe for domination, extraction and conquest. Put bluntly, this mode of seeing forecloses the very possibility of neutral visual representation from its inception; it instead configures the world as a space of domination, discipline, and conquest. In this sense, the gaze is inextricably bound up with the violent logics of colonialism from the very outset (Mirzoeff, 2015: 13).

This mode of seeing, bordering on 'monopoly' (Jullien, 2020:120), has come to be taken as a given by the artist's engagement with the object: they selectively affix the so-called label of beauty to it, and even proclaim this very act to constitute a legitimate form of artistic expression. Lacan claims, '[…] for that eye is only the metaphor of something that I would prefer to call the seer's "shoot" (pousse) —something prior to his eye' (Lacan, 1998:72). In other words, the object is not perceived as an autonomous entity with its own intrinsic meaning but is forcibly subsumed into the subject's conceptual frameworks and cognitive reflexes. In turn, the subject circumscribes the object through its own aesthetic criteria and cognitive systems, reducing it to the subject's 'stereotypes' (Catelli, 2024:123) rather than the object in its own right, which, in colonial discourse, functions as a 'major discursive strategy' (Bhabha: 1994:91) of fixing and managing alterity. By imposing their will onto the object through the gaze, artists demarcate and frame it to construct a "reality" aligned with their own cognition, thereby reinforcing the illusion of the artist's self-evident authority. The object in painting is more like a colonized part that is 'a subject who is eminently said, labelled and interpellated' (Daniele and Martina, 2018; Macherey, 2014). Specifically, the layered brushstrokes and pigment allow the subject to fabricate a supposed "integrity" of object, and to compensate for the "trauma" of the object's fragmentation.

What's more, Lacan leveled a foundational critique of the scopic regime, 'What is at issue in geometric perspective is simply the mapping of space, not sight' (Lacan, 1998:86). Taking Avenue at Middelharnis (1689) as example, Hobbema establishes the central tree-lined avenue as a vertical axis, crafting a highly ordered linear perspective composition with a definitive vanishing point that generates a sense of spatial order and deep recession. The landscape has not escaped the symbolic cropping as if the landscape is stifled before it can fully unfold in its lived totality. Within the confined pictorial space defined by the

physical frame, vertical and horizontal lines sharply carve out regular geometric forms, imposing a rationalized order onto the unruly natural world. Such ‘implicit choices’ (Jullien, 2018: 7) lend apparent perceptual authenticity to the visible world, and this sense of certainty and stability transports both artists and their landscape paintings into “safe zones” where the object is reduced to a mere ‘disposition of things’ (Foucault, 2007: 99). This sense of order betokens a form of privilege exercised by the subject’s gaze, exposing this seemingly legitimate spatial composition to the colonial violence exerted by the gaze. Painting, here, is more like ‘an ethical/political practice’ (Manghani,2015:56), the subject categorizes landscape within the framework. Meanwhile, by demarcating boundaries and fabricating a spatial order, it enacts ‘a part of the land’ (Jullien, 2018: 18).

More profoundly, the gaze is no longer a mere visual act or an autonomous art practice but is a form of that ‘belonged to the protocols of the court’ (Bryson, 1983:93) or even ‘invisible coloniality’ (Mignolo, 2020:205). Behind it lies the invocation of the subject’s discourse and the exercise of power, which internalizes visual violence as the aesthetic criterion by which the objective world is judged. In other words, while painting is universally acknowledged as the concretization of visual experience, its images are in truth subjected to the implicit regulation of the power inherent in the gaze. By doing so, the subject is transformed into a form of power, reducing the object to something that can be ‘fixed and attached’ (Lorenzini and Tazzioli, 2018:77). It essentializes and fixates the object’s identity, achieving power in ‘discipline’ (Foucault, 1977: 23). This disregard for the object’s own integrity reduces it from an autonomous entity to something disciplined and formatted by the subject’s visual order that ‘always within a strictly heteronormative matrix’ (Catelli, 2024: 129). It follows that the gaze is similar to a form of ‘mis-interpellation’ (Hage, 2010). The artist can select and exercise agency over what to see, to emphasize, to depict and to obscure through gaze, which is like ‘the colonized subject is “fixed” and “attached” to a certain image of himself or herself by the language and the gaze of the colonizer’ (Lorenzini and Tazzioli, 2018:34). They fixate ‘the Other’ into a predetermined identity, erase the object’s inherent complexity as a self-sufficient being, and subjugate it to their cognitive and aesthetic frameworks, which is already embedded covert ethical biases, power hierarchies and political positionalities.

Foucault (2014) poses the critical question: ‘What is the relationship between the fact of being subject in a relation of power and a subject through which, for which, and regarding which the truth is manifested?’ The gaze, in this sense, seems to alter and produce the Other into an object that conforms to the viewing subject’s framework of knowledge and power. The truth of such an object is no longer defined by its own autonomy, but by the concealed power embedded within the very act of looking. As claimed by Fanon, ‘I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the “idea” that others have of me but of my own appearance. [...] And already I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes.’ (Fanon, 1967: 87) Within the field of visual representation, the painter, as the bearer of subjective power, becomes the sole arbiter of the ‘truth’ of the depicted other. Rather than reflecting reality, the canvas constructs a version of truth aligned with the painter’s cognition and ideology, silencing the other and reducing them to reified signs.

As the term, ‘cultural gaze’ (Frank,2015:19) describes a historically situated, ideologically structured way of seeing that naturalizes colonial hierarchies, racialized distinctions, and unequal power as if they were self-evident aspects of visual reality. When artists inherently rely on the gaze as their medium of sight, they unconsciously indulge in the “culture” sovereignty they have constructed, thereby subjecting the object to constant scrutiny and surveillance. Subsequently, through means such as ‘distortion and exaggeration’ (Bryson,1983:111), they reduce the object to a so-called purely representational structure, which is then embedded into the image, all while claiming “the polysemy” as a “unique” reflection of the painter’s understanding of the “world”. In addition, viewers are invited to adopt the painter’s perspective, seeing the other through their eyes, and thereby internalizing the hierarchies and prejudices produced by this gaze, which actually ‘instils a constant sense of surveillance and self-discipline, serving as a metaphor for the pervasive nature of power’ (Flores et al., 2025: 132). It demonstrates two aspects under the gaze:

On the one hand, this self-deceptive practice of painter deceives or conceals the truth: while they believe they are in control of sight, they overlook the fact that the gaze beyond their frame has long diminished their own creations to mere “objects” of critical judgment. This self-deceptive trap of the gaze is particularly prominent in a colonial context, where colonizers often confine themselves within their own ‘epistemic thresholds’ (Parikka, 2012: 33), blinding them to the limitations of their own gaze, just as artists are oblivious to the gaze that objectifies their creations. The dominant epistemic subject ‘can suppress, distort or exclude other groups’ ways of knowing and doing. Erasure can happen passively (by omission) or actively (by intentional suppression)’ (Cristina Pereira, 2025:1718).

On the other hand, viewers have been positioned within a colonial relation that confirms painters’ places in the structure of seeing, whether as part of the dominant group that gazes, or the marginalized group that is gazed upon. In Bal’s statement, ‘these seemingly superfluous details are what allow an initial “passive gaze” to convert into the dynamic “activity of the viewer” […]’ (Bal, 1991:4). Rather than operating as a unidirectional exercise of power from subject to object, the painting transforms viewers into active participants in the colonial project, drawing them into a silent and invisible structure of power and colonial relationality. In short, the gaze is engaged with a hidden power and colonial method which the passive viewing encouraged by visual art is transformed into active complicity—one that produces, fixes, and sustains the ‘truth’ of the other as defined by the dominant subject.

Granted, the gaze, which should have served as a bridge between the subject and the world, becomes a tool of self-destruction. By imposing their will on the object and denying its otherness, the subject erodes the very foundation of genuine visual perception, for the gaze is no longer a means of understanding the world but a self-imposed trap. In fact, the illusory sovereignty of the gaze, whether wielded by artists or colonizers, is inherently fragile: it relies on the deliberate exclusion of external perspectives and the denial of the object’s autonomy, ultimately leading the subject into a cycle of self-objectification. As Cabral writes (1988), ‘Man, who causes the destruction of the soil, destroys himself.’ Although this statement is rooted in the critique of colonial exploitation of nature, it can be engaged with the realm of visuality: when the subject (artist or colonizer) undermines the object’s inherent autonomy through

gazing, and then reduces it to a distorted representation that serves their own ideological and cognitive needs, they simultaneously undermine the authenticity of their own visual practice, forming a certain of the closure on subjectivity. It is precisely this act of gazing that plunges the subject into their own cycle of objectification, thereby threatening the real vision.

Therefore, the gaze is not a neutral, innocent act of seeing, but is always shaped by pre-existing cultural discourses and cognitive frameworks that are themselves products of power relations, including those of colonialism and artistic authority. As pointed by Bryson, 'between the subject and the world is inserted the entire sum of discourses which make up visuality, that cultural construct, [...] when I see, what I see is formed by paths or networks laid down in advance of my seeing' (Bryson, 1988: 91–92). Apparently, artists who indulge in the illusory sovereignty of the gaze, as well as colonizers confined within their epistemic thresholds, are both governed by these pre-established visual discourses: they believe they are actively gazing upon and defining the world, but in reality, they are passively shaped by the discourses they unconsciously reproduce. Sartre writes, 'If there is an Other, whatever or whoever he may be, whatever may be his relations with me, and without his acting upon me in any way except by the pure upsurge of his being […] My original fall is the existence of the Other' (Sartre, 2011:236). Here, the observer materialized by the gaze of the Other just as the Other equally materialized by the gaze of the observer, a reciprocal relationality in which 'the sovereignty of the gaze is reversed in the primacy of being gazed upon' (Mezzadra, 2013: 190). In this way, the gaze not only objectifies the other but also objectifies the gazing subject themselves, as their visual practice is reduced to a mere manifestation of power structures.

Emptiness and the Critique of Colonial Gaze

A closer interrogation of the specificities of the gaze reveals that, while it appears to originate in the sovereign intentionality of consciousness, it in fact veils both the ineradicable ontological aporia of binary opposition and the existential lack constitutive of the subject itself. It is this foundational lack that renders the subject incapable of grasping the in-itself essence of the object, condemning it instead to remain enclosed within the self-referential closure of its own horizon. Drawing on Sigmund Freud's concept of the 'nucleus', Lacan argues (1978), the subject's resistance emerges from a primordial discursive resistance generated in the process whereby discourse condenses around this unconscious nucleus. As Bryson (1988) critically demonstrates, speech is invariably governed by a linguistic network that pre-exists the subject: the speaking subject can neither create nor control these pre-given pathways; by the same logic, vision is equally shaped by the pre-given web of social signifiers. The subject labors under the misapprehension that it is the sovereign center of vision, when in fact it has always already been decentered by the sedimented structures of culture and power.

Yet far from engaging in critical reflection on this foundational limit, the subject instead refashions it into a legitimized regime of visual colonialism: through the act of seeing, the subject effects the delimitation, reification and appropriation of the object, in a bid to suture its own constitutive lack. This renders vision thoroughly alienated, reducing it to an instrument for the exercise and operation of power, and in effect

confining it to the self-constructed carceral structure of the gaze. As Lee Ufan critically observes, 'Such self-intoxication severs all connection with the outside, plunging the subject into an endless sea of solipsism, and in turn extinguishes the very desire for seeing' (Ufan, 2000: 101, my translation). Indeed, when the visual field is entirely reduced to the solipsistic desire of the subject, seeing is first and foremost inextricably bound by the 'interpretive communities' (Price, 2013: 92) forged through the subject's cognitive frameworks. It thereby ceases to be an authentic encounter between the subject and the world (the object) and is stripped of its inherent authenticity in the process. Put differently, the gaze anchors vision to the intentional acts of consciousness. Even as it decenters the sovereign status of the subject, it remains trapped within the binary framework of mind-matter or mind-body, insofar as it conceives of vision as the projection of the subject's consciousness onto external objects through the body's sensory organs.

This is why the psychoanalytic decentering of the subject, while indispensable, remains incomplete. Sartre and Lacan both demonstrate that the subject is never fully sovereign in vision: it is exposed to alterity, split by lack, and unsettled by the gaze of the Other. But such insights do not yet displace the basic field in which subject and object confront one another as opposed terms. They reveal the crisis of the subject within that field; they do not yet undo the field itself. Bryson's turn to Nishitani becomes significant precisely here. It marks an attempt to move beyond the oscillation between domination and alienation by asking whether vision might be rethought outside the substantial opposition between a seeing self and a seen world.

To transcend the ontological aporia of the gaze, Bryson turns to the concept of *śūnyatā* (alternatively rendered as emptiness or void), developed by Nishitani Keiji, a philosopher of the Japanese Kyoto School, to mount a critique of the residual subjectivity persisting within the viewfinder model of vision formulated by Sartre and Lacan. For Sartre, when the 'I' as the gazing subject fixes its gaze on the Other, it abstracts the Other from their concrete existential context, reducing them to an object for the 'I', a *being-for-me* that exists solely for the self. Conversely, when the 'I' becomes the object of the Other's gaze, it is plunged into an existential crisis of objectification. Yet this struggle for visual power played out between subject and object is, in its essence, still confined within the ontological binary framework of subject and object. Even when Lacan anchors the gaze in the subject's constitutive existential lack and the dialectic of the Other's desire, he is unable to transcend the subject/Other binary structure. While both thinkers grasp the lack at the heart of subjectivity that the gaze lays bare, they regrettably frame this lack as an inescapable destiny of the subject: the subject is either alienated in the gaze of the Other, or engages in the appropriation and domination of the object in a futile attempt to suture this lack, leaving it perpetually mired in the oscillation between self and Other, 'forming and deforming, appearing and disappearing, as bodies enter into relations with one another' (Hye Yun Kang, 2026; Ben, 2006).

Bryson draws on Nishitani's concept of *śūnyatā* to enable this constitutive lack of subjectivity to open onto the 'field of emptiness'. He argues that the field of consciousness is in essence a 'relational field of beings', within which the nothingness at the very root of beings is thoroughly occluded. The reason the subject is driven to cling to the appropriation of the object through the gaze is precisely that it cannot

bear to confront the nothingness at its own foundational root. Instead, it forges a rigid, substantial shell for the ego through objectifying cognition and power-laden domination, in a bid to evade the groundlessness of its existence. Emptiness calls upon the subject to abide within this groundlessness, and to cease framing nothingness as the negation of being, but rather to apprehend it as the very field within which being can come to presence – its originary source.

Put differently, when the subject ceases its attempts to suture its constitutive lack through visual appropriation, and instead lets this lack stand fully open, the objectifying function of consciousness quietly unravels. Furthermore, emptiness strips away the substantiality of both subject and object, enabling both to 'return' to a pre-subjective, pre-objective non-dual state, and enacts a commitment to the formation of a non-substantial, non-centered, interdependent relational totality. Within this totality, subject and object are no longer opposed substantial entities, but interdependent, perpetually becoming relational beings situated within the whole. Crucially, seeing at this juncture is no longer a cognitive act whereby the subject grasps the in-itself essence of the object. Instead, it lets the thing return to 'its own home-ground' (Stambaugh, 1999: 107), allowing it to come to full presence in its own suchness. As Nishitani writes (1982), 'The pine tree bids us learn from the pine tree; the bamboo bids us learn from the bamboo.' This enjoins to cease defining the pine and bamboo through our own cognitive frameworks, to cease reducing them to mere landscape, flora, or signifiers, and instead to let the pine tree be the pine tree, and the bamboo be the bamboo – to let them exist and come to presence in their own terms, within the field of emptiness.

Within the horizon of emptiness, the subject, in releasing itself from its egocentric fixation, escapes alongside the world the fate of reification engendered by the coloniality of the gaze. In this pure, non-centered seeing, there is no 'viewing subject' and 'viewed object', no intentional framing of vision, nor even the opposition between seeing and not-seeing. It operates instead like the spontaneous act of breathing, which never requires the deliberate thought 'I am breathing'. It is the same for pure seeing: it is not 'implicit choices' (Jullien, 2018:1), but the spontaneous manifestation of the formless self. Put differently, when *wu-hsin* (no-mind) becomes the foundational ground of seeing, the object ceases to be a fixed image captured by the subject. It opens onto all directions within the field of emptiness, much like the ink traces in the splashed ink works of Sesshū: it manifests in the form of the present moment yet is never bound by any fixed form. Nor does the subject remain the center of vision; instead, it stands alongside the object as interdependently originating manifestations within the field of emptiness. As Bryson writes (1988), 'What the image needs to include is the fact of the object's remainder, the other views which pass out from the object to all those uncountable places where the viewer is not'. The contingency and aleatory quality of splashed-ink Zen painting radically lets the object open onto a broader cosmic field. The rapid gesture of ink-splashing is completed before the subject's consciousness can formulate a response; this unconsciousness and unplanned spontaneity compels the subject to relinquish the purported sovereignty of vision without its awareness. In sum, this visual practice refuses to posit the subject as the centre of the cosmos, nor does it endorse the constitution of the object as an alternative locus of visuality. It undoes the binary framework of subject-object opposition from its foundation. Nishitani (1982) offers a more originary philosophical elaboration of this,

The true mode of being of a thing as it is in itself, its selfness for itself, cannot, however, be a self-identity in the sense of such a substance. Indeed, this true mode must include a complete negation of such self-identity, and with it a conversion of the standpoint of reason and all logical thinking.

Here, this 'negation of self-identity' constitutes an ontological critique of the substantial ego: the fixed, self-sufficient, isolated entity that stands in absolute opposition to the object and persists in eternal self-identity. Crucially, this is not a one-sided deconstruction of the subject. In negating the substantial ego, it simultaneously collapses the substantial object that is constituted in opposition to that ego.

It follows from this that the gaze of emptiness is not 'non-seeing' but *seeing without abiding* – no clinging to any phenomenal form, no reification of any fixed essence, no appropriation of any object, but merely letting the world come to presence as it is, in each and every present moment. In the painted works of Sesshū, the substantial boundaries between subject and object begin to dissolve within the field of emptiness. The subject is no longer a detached observer standing outside the frame, governing the act of seeing; nor is the object a passive entity to be surveyed and defined by the subject. Strikingly, this ontological turn towards the absolute nothingness of the 'I' quietly uncovers the fundamental crux of the coloniality of the gazing subject: namely, the 'I' (the subject) itself, posited as a self-sufficient substance occupying the center of vision. This negation of substantial self-identity amounts in part to a relinquishing of the subject's residual fixation on an 'essentializing identity' (Kapoor, 2024: 5). In concrete terms, for the colonizer operating from the premise of a self-sufficient substantial self, the coloniality of vision is consummated the moment the gaze anchors the colonized to an ossified, reified definition of essence.

By contrast, when the subject fully abandons this fixation on substantial self-identity, both subject and object can jointly open up a fluid space of dual dispersal, such that vision is no longer a unidirectional act of domination, but rather a set of fluid, co-constitutive events and situations. This authentic manifestation of the 'formless self' is at once the true nature of the perceiving subject and the authentic reality of the perceived, brought to full presence through the concrete, determinate form of the aesthetic object. The contemplative act of 'discerning the formless within the formed' further penetrates the superficial fetters of phenomenal appearance, enabling access to the *śūnyatā* and boundless reality that grants determinate form its ontological ground. This means that when the horizon of emptiness strips away the ontological 'nucleus' that, for Lacan, underpins the subject, the gaze ceases to be either a power-laden domination of the object by the subject, or an existential threat of the subject's entrapment within the web of social signifiers. Instead, it opens onto an all-encompassing, embodied experience situated within the holistic field of the cosmos.

Yet Bryson's cross-cultural opening, crucial as it is, remains limited in two respects. First, it remains largely articulated at the level of metaphysical reorientation: it shows why the substantial ego must be loosened, but says less about how a different configuration of self, world, and perception can be systematically conceptualized. Second, because emptiness enters the argument primarily as a corrective to residual subjectivity, the broader non-ontological conditions of vision remain

underdeveloped. What is still needed is not simply a more radical negation of the subject, but an alternative conceptual grammar in which vision does not begin from the separation between subject and object in the first place. It is here that Chinese anti-ontological thought becomes methodologically decisive. The point is not that Chinese thought offers a cultural antidote to Western theory, nor that it names an uncontaminated outside. Rather, it makes visible a different starting point for thinking relation, world, and perception—one in which life, transformation, and co-emergence take precedence over substantial being and oppositional structure. In this sense, Chinese thought does not merely supplement the critique of the gaze; it helps relocate that critique onto a different conceptual ground.

Chinese Anti-Ontology: External Deconstruction

The preceding discussion has shown that the gaze operates not as neutral perception but as a structure of fixation, ordering, and domination. Yet to describe these violent effects is not yet to explain why they recur so persistently, even within critical theories that seek to dismantle them. The deeper difficulty is that many influential critiques of the gaze, despite exposing the instability of the viewing subject, continue to work within the same ontological grammar that opposes a subject of vision to an object of sight. It is at this point that the problem of the gaze must be reformulated. The issue is not only that the subject exercises violence through vision, but that vision itself is organized around a divided structure in which the subject confronts the world as something to be grasped, interpreted, and stabilized. Even when the sovereign subject is decentered, the framework often remains intact: the subject may be fractured, displaced, or exposed to the Other, yet it still stands within a field structured by the opposition between self and world, consciousness and object, viewer and viewed. The critique of domination thus risks remaining immanent to the very distribution it contests.

Bryson's inquiry into the gaze goes beyond critical dialogue and contestation with established paradigms of vision at the level of visual form. It aims to open up a mode of cognition decoupled from subject-centrism, offering critical cross-cultural insights for reconfiguring the foundational relationship between human beings and the world. This critical orientation strikes at the very ontological foundation that the dominant discourse of the gaze has failed to transcend, which in turn compels us to return to the debates around ontology itself.

As the bedrock of Western philosophy, ontology is structured around the interrogation of *ontos* (being), encapsulated in its foundational question: *qu'est-ce que c'est?* (what is this?). This means that ontology abstracts things, substances, and even events from their context, their background conditions, and the totality within which they are situated – a move that generates the constitutive dualism between thing and context, part and whole. In so doing, ontology a priori establishes two asymmetrical dimensions of being (as exemplified by the coloniality of the gaze, which a priori posits the subject's dominant position over the object): on the one hand, the active 'subject' that poses the question, seeks out essence, and produces meaning; on the other, the passive 'object' that is interrogated, defined, dissected, and ascribed with meaning. Within this hierarchical order, the subject occupies the active, central position, while the object is consigned to the passive, marginal status of that which is always already determined.

It must be stressed that ontology is not in itself the constitutive lack of subjectivity; rather, it is the ontological root through which this lack is generated, sedimented, and perpetually reproduced. This root lies in a groundlessness immanent to the ontological system itself: it springs from the traditional binary opposition between noumenon and phenomenon at the heart of the ontological tradition, which effects an originary severance of the substantial subject from the totality of being, and thus renders the subject incapable of securing ontological validation through its own resources. The a priori positing of the isolated substantial subject within ontology severs the originary bond between the subject and the totality of being from its very inception, constituting the subject as a closed 'ego' set in opposition to the world.

This in turn condemns the subject to an inability to secure the self-validation of its existential meaning through its own resources, leaving it with no recourse but to fill its ontological void through the essentializing apprehension, appropriation and domination of the object. It is precisely here that the colonial violence of the gaze operates as the visual modality through which the subject seeks to suture this purported lack: through the act of seeing, the subject effects the reification, objectification and othering of the object, enacts domination over the world through a unidirectional ascription of meaning, and in so doing accomplishes a spurious form of self-validation. Conversely, this cyclical dynamic of 'lack, attempted suture, and intensified lack' perpetually reinforces the ontological subject-object binary framework, plunging the subject ever deeper into the circularity and phantasmatic illusion of domination and alienation. This in turn renders it incapable of undoing the logic of the colonial gaze from its very foundation.

Confronted with the internal aporia of ontology, Jullien opens up an *écart* — a critical interval — between ontology and non-ontology. In his view, Chinese thought is neither the antithetical Other of Western philosophy nor a supplementary corrective to its theoretical limitations; it operates instead as an external perspective that stands entirely outside the ontological frame (Li & Lash, 2023). What enables Chinese thought to serve as a force of external deconstruction against the stranglehold of ontology is that, at its most originary level, it has forged a non-ontological system centered on relationality and dynamic transformation. This defining feature undermines at the ontological root the generative conditions of the constitutive lack of subjectivity within the ontological paradigm, and provides the fundamental intellectual underpinning for the systematic evasion of the coloniality of the gaze.

First, within the Chinese intellectual horizon, 'the minimal unit of thought is not the individual subject as such, but duality' (Lash, 2023). The interplay of *yin* and *yang* offers a paradigmatic instance: the pair admits no absolute center, nor any fixed relation of dominance and subordination; each term comes into being only through a dynamic movement of mutual dependence and reciprocal conversion. Once the starting-point of thought is no longer the isolated substantial subject, the originary split between subject and world dissolves, and the constitutive lack of subjectivity is correspondingly attenuated. The subject therefore has no need to fill its ontological void by imposing a dominating gaze upon the object.

Second, there is a categorical shift from ‘being’ to ‘life’ what Lash (2023) designates as Chinese vitalism. Within this framework, no single being can occupy an absolute vantage point from which to define or govern others. This undermines the legitimacy of the subject as the center of the world and removes the very ontological ground for the logic whereby the subject seeks to confirm itself through dominating the object.

Third, there is the non-oppositional, co-generative relationship between *wu* (non-being) and *you* (being). In Chinese thought, *wu* deprives all centering and essentializing fixations of their ontological basis. Since the ultimate source of meaning is the open, infinite field of non-being, the subject has no reason to cling to the essentialization, reification and appropriation of the object. The colonial gaze, whose operation relies precisely on fixation and appropriation, is thus stripped of its inner impetus.

This anti-ontological orientation opens up a distinctive possibility for *seeing*, characterized internally by non-domination and non-objectification. At the heart of this visual paradigm lies a responsiveness and attunement to the ceaseless transformations of things within a relational network. As is manifest in Chinese landscape painting, the egalitarian perspective of non-differentiation between self and things admits no central, all-controlling viewing subject. Instead, the viewer’s gaze meanders through mountains, rivers, dwellings, foliage and streams, encountering the world in the intervals and interstices between phenomena. Here, time and space figure as events that capture the interconnections between things; seeing itself becomes a vital process in which human beings unfold alongside all beings amid the constant flux of the world.

At the same time, the co-generative relationship between *wu* (non-being) and *you* (being) further illuminates this mode of viewing things. *Wu* does not negate *you*; rather, as the originary dimension of the *Dao*, it undermines the very basis for all centering and essentialization, thereby opening up a space of meaning free from hierarchy and opposition. Within this space, seeing ceases to be an act of subject-centered domination over the object, and becomes instead an originary encounter between human beings and the world, enabled by the openness of *wu*.

Within the horizon of Chinese vitalism, moreover, this amounts to far more than a non-dominating, non-objectifying visual paradigm: it effects a fundamental categorical shift from *être* (being) to *vivre* (living or life) (Jullien, 2023). The world is not an inert collection of material stuff awaiting signification by the subject, but a vital unity animated by *qi* (pneumatic energy) and imbued with *yi* (dispositional intentionality). Even landscape is not an external object set apart for the subject’s gaze; it possesses its own intentionality and relationality, continuously generating meaning through the resonant interplay of all things (Lash, 2023, p. 54). For instance, when viewers engage with landscape works by Guo Xi and Dong Yuan, what they experience is a dissolution of the bounded substantial subject. The subject no longer stands in opposition to nature, but participates in the vital circulation of heaven and earth through a non-sensible *intellectual intuition*. This is precisely the concrete visual instantiation of the Chinese ideal of *tian ren he yi* (the unity of heaven and human) in perceptual experience (Hui, 2023: 138).

Within this conceptual framework, the relation between subject and world is no longer structured by the power dynamic of domination and subordination but gives way to a vital relation of coexistence and resonance. The subject's existential meaning is no longer secured by defining or mastering the world to affirm its own subjectivity, but by nurturing the vitality of all beings and yielding to the flux of the *Dao*, thereby achieving mutual fulfilment with the world. In this way, the constitutive lack of subjectivity embedded in the ontological paradigm is further dissolved. The subject no longer needs to fill its ontological deficit through external domination and appropriation, for it already participates immanently in the infinite plenitude of life as a totality.

Once vision is no longer anchored in the substantial subject's need to stabilize itself through the object, the question of seeing changes fundamentally. What comes into view is no longer a world awaiting conceptual capture, but a field of relation in which self and world emerge together through movement, resonance, and transformation. At this point, anti-ontology cannot remain a purely abstract philosophical claim. It must also be shown how such a displacement of subject-object logic becomes perceptible in concrete visual forms and practices. This is why Daoist receptivity and the visual logic of Chinese landscape painting matter here: they do not merely illustrate anti-ontology after the fact, but enact a mode of seeing in which fixation gives way to openness, mastery to attunement, and visual control to co-presence.

Receptivity and Peripatetic Seeing

If Chinese anti-ontology displaces the conceptual primacy of the subject-object divide, the next question is how such a displacement becomes operative in modes of seeing. The significance of Daoist receptivity lies precisely here. It does not propose a new sovereign standpoint from which the world may be more properly viewed; rather, it suspends the very impulse to found vision on mastery, projection, and appropriation. Receptivity names a disciplined withdrawal from the compulsion to define and possess, and thus opens a visual field in which the world may appear without first being subordinated to the subject's need for confirmation. The return of human beings to nature advocated within Chinese Daoist thought articulates an existential stance of *receptivity* – holding open an empty space to encounter the world in its suchness. This stance calls upon the subject to actively renounce the obsessive fixations and willful contrivance of calculated human action, to set aside its presuppositions, projections and coercive domination over the world, to retreat from the central locus of the sovereignty of vision into the receptive empty position and to open itself fully to the cosmos and the myriad things of nature. This enacts a mode of 'co-becoming' (Bawaka Country et al., 2013, 2016) rooted in the symbiotic coexistence of human beings and the myriad things of the cosmos, a mode fundamentally grounded in the collaboration between subjects and objects, rather than enacted through the imposition of human agency "upon" the world.

Daoism holds that nature is its inherent nature and even regards *receptivity* as the foundation and condition for the formation of Chinese thought: 'it is a non-principle "principle", because to erect *receptivity* as a principle would be to contradict it for the same reason that receptivity is a disposition

without a definite disposition' (Jullien, 2020:15). *Receptivity* opens up unbounded existential possibilities through an unforced openness unbound to predetermined ends. It allows the subject to dissolve the artificially imposed boundary between subject and object, letting the natural order of heaven and earth awaken the innate spontaneity within the human being, so that inner authenticity and the outer *dao* of nature enter into a resonant, mutually enfolding dynamic. In this way, 'Chinese thought unfolds in a manner that effectively defies ontologization and predomination' (Yu, 2015: 10). Rooted in a cosmic vitalism that rejects the fixity of subject–object and center–periphery, it situates humans, objects, and nature within a holistic relationality, thereby sidestepping the colonial violence engendered by the gaze.

As Zhuangzi states *in The World of Men*, 'The Way gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind' (Waston, 2013:48). This enjoins the subject to uphold a principle of humility and yielding, which constitutes the originary core of *receptivity* in Chinese thought. It demands that the painter take 'emptiness' as their fundamental cultivation, and 'use an attuned heart-mind (*xin lin* □□) and not eyes of arrogance or extravagance (*jiaoshe zhi mu* □□□□)' (Chai, 2021: 293). The painter no longer treats the object as a passive entity to be gazed upon, imitated or represented; instead, they yield to and allow the object to come to presence spontaneously and unbidden. Put differently, what 'the fasting of the mind' entails are that when genuine seeing occurs, the substantial 'self' that seeks to appropriate the object and reify the world simply cannot take hold. Here, seeing itself becomes the authentic affirmation of the self. Crucially, this 'I' is no longer the initiator and governor of seeing, but the very field within which the world comes to presence. The eye is no longer an instrument for the subject to apprehend external things, but one dimension of the opening of the empty field – much like the walking of mountains and the flowing of waters, it is a natural moment of the interdependent origination of the cosmic totality.

Furthermore, Zhuangzi, in keeping with a human-nature conviviality, a harmony in difference (Li and Lash, 2023: 12), proclaims, 'Heaven and earth were born at the same time I was, and the ten thousand things are one with me' (Watson, 2013:37) This dismantles the subject-object binary framework upon which the gaze is founded, at the level of the subject itself. It follows that Zhuangzi never clings to the substantial questions of 'what is the subject?' or 'what is the object?'. Instead, he situates the subject *within* the totality of heaven, earth and the myriad things, advocating a relational totality of equality and unity. This 'oneness' points to a mode of relational existence that is 'a fusion of self and other' (Yu, 2015: 18), encompassing human and thing, self and other, subject and object. In other words, no one possesses the absolute power to define or gaze upon the other, and no one is destined to become the reified, objectified other that is defined and gazed upon. This negates, at its very root, the essentialized identities upon which colonial gaze is predicated. In short, when the subject retreats into the "quiet or empty position", it is no longer confined to or dependent upon its own substantiality, and a far broader horizon of existence opens up before it.

In contrast to the decentering of the subject achieved through the aleatory contingency of splashed-ink Zen painting by Sesshū, Chinese landscape painting transforms these existential principles of 'emptiness' and 'yielding' into a systematized visual paradigm. It enables the subject, in the very act of withdrawal, to suspend its dominating agency and turn towards the latent possibilities inherent in the

world and the other. This presupposed stance of empty receptivity constitutes the fundamental precondition for safeguarding the openness of the field of being. Within Chinese landscape painting, this commitment to inner emptiness and yielding generates a cumulative potentiality of the empty position, facilitating the transformation from ‘empty’ to ‘fixity’(Jullien, 2018:34–35): In the very act of yielding, the subject suspends its dominating agency and turns towards the latent possibilities inherent in the world and the other. This unpresupposed stance of empty receptivity constitutes the fundamental precondition for safeguarding the openness of the field of being. It dissolves the fixity of seeing from the side of the subject, allowing it to enter into the situation of the object through peripatetic movement and achieve an immersive, embodied experience of perception and contemplation. In this way, it effectively avoids the violent fragmentation of landscape by the gaze and enables a holistic apprehension of the totality of landscape, which ‘is to correspond to an epistemology of pattern recognition, not fixed objectivity’ (Feuchtwang, 2023: 122–123).

For Chinese landscape painting, ‘it eludes the monopoly of sight, even of a panorama, and is promoted as a place in which to live’ (Jullien, 2020: 120). This is because painters, from the very outset, abandon the obsessive capture of superficial appearances and instead devote themselves to constructing a vital field within which the viewer can enter and dwell. In seeking an open, coexistent relationship between human beings and the world, it also points to a fundamental withdrawal of the viewing subject. In Huang Gongwang’s *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* (Fig. 1), an ink handscroll, the viewer is required to wander slowly through the landscape with a mobile gaze, thereby entering the field of communion with the mountains and waters through an unconditioned, decentered vision. In this sustained wandering contemplation, the boundaries between subject and object dissolve completely in the flow of life. As Jullien notes, ‘Chinese scholars consistently tell us that we must go back to the dissolution-disidentification of the subject, resorbing the gaze, the necessary condition for painting’ (Jullien, 2009: 173). It follows that Chinese landscape painting elegantly sidesteps the antagonistic gaze between subject and object, and instead becomes a holistic exploration of life and the cosmos, which ‘follows a dialectical pattern that begins within nature itself. For nature, as for humanity, survival depends on constant transformation’ (Silva and Vieira, 2025: 21).

It is precisely this fusion of idea and life that allows these natural elements to retain their distinct existential intentionality, and thereby thoroughly dissolves the *substantiality* privileged by Western visual orders. Here, the blank paper is the originary field that gestates all possibilities, bearing infinite potentiality and ensuring that phenomenal forms always retain the capacity to transcend subjective disciplining. This means that it entails ‘distancing this “middle” from the middle as it has been conceived on the field of reason’ (Stambaugh, 1999: 119). The subject is drawn into the position of the *in-between*, and even the *beyond*, and relinquishes all claims to subjective centrality. As Jullien emphasizes:

[…] letting go of its initiative as a ‘subject’ - one which from the outset presumes and projects, chooses, decides, places a focus on ends and gives itself means […] If the subject lets go of its own prerogatives, distrusts its ownership and 'privacy', it is because it senses that the privilege it confers on itself, which it attaches to itself, encloses it within limits it can't even suspect.

Admittedly, genuine vitality or authenticity never resides in isolated, fixed extremes, but in the fluid, unprescribable passage between poles; Authentic experience is thus rooted in the concrete interaction between human beings, mountains and waters, and nature itself, as well as in deep reflection on the meaning of being. In plain terms, when the subject abandons the pretense of 'rational cognition' or 'objective representation' of the object, dissolves the power and substantiality inherent in the visual order through active withdrawal, embraces the diversity and spontaneity of the object in a stance of *receptivity*, and breaks free from its own self-enclosure, the coloniality and violence of the gaze lose their very ontological foundation. Seeing at this juncture is no longer an act of appropriation and domination, but an authentic encounter between human beings and being. The world is no longer a fragmented collection of objects waiting to be captured by the gaze, but a creative, organic totality within which human beings and all things coexist and co- become.

Declarations

Data Availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this research as no data were generated or analysed.

Ethical Approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed Consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

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Figures



Figure 1

Huang Gongwang, *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* (detail), 33.64 × 721.46 cm, 1350, ink on paper, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Image source: China National Treasure Museum