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Tracing the Past, Drawing the Present

Sixue Yang
sixue.y@wustl.edu

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Tracing the Past, Drawing the Present

by
Sixue Yang

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Thesis Advisor
Meghan Kirkwood

Primary Advisors
Richard Krueger
Jamie Adams
Cheryl Wassenaar

Graduate Committee
Buzz Spector
Denise Ward-Brown

Table of Contents

| | |
|--------------------|----|
| Abstract..... | 3 |
| Introduction..... | 4 |
| Chapter One..... | 7 |
| Chapter Two..... | 15 |
| Chapter Three..... | 22 |
| Conclusion..... | 28 |
| Notes..... | 29 |
| Figures..... | 31 |
| Bibliography..... | 53 |

Abstract

The group of work *Rising Water, Floating Islands* is inspired by traditional Chinese scroll landscape paintings. Such landscape paintings combine meticulous technique, compositional complexity, and tension between representation and abstraction to reveal an alternative universe that awaits discovery amid our mundane existence. In “Rising Water, Floating Islands,” I explore the political and social ramifications of the ongoing cultural conflict between traditional and emergent contemporary values. By using traditional Chinese elements and techniques in my painting, I give the audience the opportunity to remain a part of our rapidly growing world while contemplating the implications of our present digital condition through traditional aesthetic forms. I value the power of traditional Chinese aesthetics to reveal philosophical dispositions, and I incorporate this perspective through the mark-making system that I created, which emphasizes aesthetic attributes and emotional assimilation with the painting as an alternative way of being in the world.

Introduction

The group of work “Rising Water, Floating Islands” (fig. 1) is more than twenty-four feet in length, and is inspired by traditional Chinese scroll-based landscape painting, or literati painting. The scrolls hang on the wall, their layers of ink creating gray and black tone patterns that recall islands floating in the air. The white void areas morph into shapes suggestive of clouds, watercourses, and mists. When viewed closely, the observer sees that the mist over the mountains is composed of numerous tiny squares. These abstract geometric forms contrast with the organic forms of traditionally rendered rocks and trees. Only the meticulously depicted boats around the river hint at the existence of human beings in nature. The meticulous brushstrokes on small details allow the painting to shift from a grand landscape perspective on mountains and ravines to a microcosmic space in each leaf and flower.

These landscape paintings combine meticulous technique, compositional complexity, and tension between representation and abstraction. They present a world that defies any logical reading of mass or space. There is no single vanishing point or mathematical perspective. Instead, the paintings are built of black ink and white surfaces — light and dark, yin and yang, mass and void — all of which have been reduced to traces. Together, landscape works reveal an alternative universe that awaits discovery amid our mundane existence. Here, time and space seem to disappear. All beings and non-beings are hidden in them, completely self-contained; human passions do not matter. However, the painting also features a chaotic current under its veil of serene blandness. The work not only points to the essential abstraction of literati painting but also implies the fundamental uncertainty and ambiguity of life during troubled times when the environment in which humans live is chaotic and upended.

Since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, China has gone through dynamic transformations in response to industrialization and the growth of digital technologies. In my lifetime, I have seen thousands of acres of farmlands converted into urban developments. The lake I used to play around in my childhood has disappeared; people filled the water with concrete. New

buildings seem to grow as rapidly as grass after spring rain. The green mountain I used to see every morning has disappeared. Instead, the view now shows numerous factories hiding amid the dusty air. Wuhan, the city I used to live in, with all its lakes, hills, flowers, and trees, is now suffocated by construction and media infrastructure. Suddenly, the way people view and experience nature has been changed by the development of urban views and digital media.

Yet China's history proves that the country has been in a constant state of flux, both politically and culturally, in the past five thousand years. For China, one might say that change is, truly, the only constant. While many people feel that change automatically constitutes progress, I am uncertain, and feel unsatisfied with the lack of recognition and appreciation that Chinese people have for their environment and traditional art. I believe that the aesthetics and philosophies behind traditional painting are still worth contemplation and that “traditional” art is still relevant and should be ongoing. Inspired by the tendency among contemporary artists in China to fuse contemporary visual tropes with rediscovered local cultures and aesthetics, I decided to make paintings in the traditional Chinese manner with ink and brush on absorbent paper. By using this traditional art form, I can best represent the controversial changes to our environment.

I have an unshakeable faith in the power of this art form. Traditional Chinese landscape art has always been used as a powerful medium to deliver messages and emotions throughout history. However, it is impossible to appreciate the “new” Chinese ink art I want to make without knowing anything about “old” Chinese landscape art. Most scholars and writers are inclined to adopt the vocabulary and theoretical framework of Western art and fit the artworks into a grand narrative of international modern and contemporary art. But traditional Chinese art has a thousand years of its own theory and concepts that distinguish it from western art theory. Over the centuries, the sophisticated formal language of Chinese painting has evolved independently of artistic movements occurring in the rest of the world.

Therefore, in the thesis I will explore the history and methods of traditional landscape art in China and illustrate how my own works responds to the present time. The first chapter explains how

landscape artists use different content and brushstrokes to express the social and political influences of their time. The resilience of landscape art shows that tradition is still alive and can be used to talk about our current culture and environment.

In Chapter Two, I will analyze Chinese philosophical ideas and aesthetic concepts as fundamental principles for viewers to interpret painting. Chinese landscape painting cannot be discussed thoroughly without referring to China's native artistic traditions of calligraphy and painting in general. The power of traditional landscape painting takes its roots from Chinese aesthetics and philosophy. Along with its traditional materials and techniques, landscape painting is influenced by a deep-seated Taoist philosophy, which seeks balance between human and nature. The viewer has to recognize the basic concept of the Tao in the work for it to have meaning and endurance.

These philosophical ideas and aesthetic concepts are also the mental guidelines of my studio practice. The entire body of my work searches for communion with the long lineage of traditional Chinese landscape art. Being a landscape artist, I use a specific mark-making system to reveal a profound sense of the human relationship with nature. In my work, I have made a conscious choice about how to see the landscape and what to experience. Therefore, in Chapter Three, I intend to explain the process of making the paintings and how I brought all these concepts to light.

In this thesis, I aim to explore the political and social ramifications of the present conflict between traditional values and the emerging cultural values. By using traditional elements in my painting, I allow people in a rapidly growing world to contemplate the implications of our present digital condition through traditional Chinese aesthetic forms. I value the power of traditional Chinese aesthetics and their connection to philosophical discussions through the mark-making system I created, which reveals the aesthetic attributes and emotional assimilation of the painting as a way of being in the world.

Chapter One

Tradition is not dead, or merely “historical.” It is still alive, developing, transforming, and absorbing new energies from generation to generation, and it can be applied to the present.

Landscape painting is the essence of traditional painting in China. It is rich in connotations of Chinese culture, incorporating social and political phenomena. It is never merely a simulation of nature, but rather sublimates the human senses of natural features like mountains and rivers into a political and philosophical conception. Resilience and adaptability are unlimited in this art form. Chinese landscape painting combines emotions and imagination with the power to reflect contemporary society. It can express a painter’s statement and perspective, which gives it rich intellectual content and influential power. It can lead us to a plane of cultural and spiritual transcendence, which is part of why it has become an important, expressive, powerful mode of communication.

It is important to understand that historically, Chinese landscape paintings have always had a relationship to social and political contexts. However, the content of Chinese landscape painting has varied between different time periods and political eras. In this chapter, I want to present how artists use traditional landscape painting to talk about their present time in history, in order to explain that the traditional landscape form is still useful and adaptable to talk about the current era. Chinese landscape painting is a powerful expression of the social and political context of a given period. Chinese landscape painters from various time periods constantly changed the content of their works to express their opinions about political and environmental changes. I chose to use traditional Chinese landscape as a powerful and everlasting art form to convey my feelings and understanding of current social, cultural, and environmental dilemmas.

During the Tang and the Song Dynasties, China experienced great advances in philosophy, science, technology, ideology, and industry, as well as strong economic development. Traditional landscape paintings during the Song Dynasty revealed peace, prosperity, life, and a well-organized government. The Song Dynasty is considered the most harmonious period for culture and politics in

ancient China. Rice cultivation developed and stabilized, allowing the population to double in size. Cultural and social life was vibrant. Literati constantly gathered for tea parties to view and discuss art and literature and pursue a higher aesthetic power. Artists during this period used the endless mountains and rivers in landscape art to praise the greatness of the Song Dynasty. Therefore, the Northern Song period (907–1127) is known as the “Great age of Chinese landscape.”ⁱ Chen Yinke (1890 – 1969), considered one of the most original and creative historians and orientalist in 20th century China, wrote, "Chinese landscape painting in the Song Dynasty reached an aesthetic peak".ⁱⁱ Artists in the North preferred to use strong black outlines and sharp brushstrokes to depict mountains and rocks. In the South, artists preferred to paint soft rolling lines of mountains and rivers in a peaceful atmosphere. These two significant schools built the foundation of classical styles of traditional landscape painting in Chinese history.

Artists and scholars often made landscape paintings to praise or criticize the emperor's political achievements. Artists put their devotion and reverence for the nation into their landscape scroll paintings. They depicted mountains, rivers, stones, and trees in such an elegant form to glorify the tranquilization and prosperity of life. In ancient China, artists were usually high officials or scholars who were part of the bureaucracy and whose official positions often had nothing to do with art. Sometimes, their technique was overpraised because of the importance of their official titles. On the other hand, their social status gave the landscape painting its political power in Imperial China. Landscape painting was regarded as the highest form of Chinese painting, and generally still is.

Guo Xi (1000–1090) was the preeminent scholar and landscape master during the eleventh century who used landscape art to reflect on the thriving government and peaceful society. His painting *Early Spring* (fig. 2) is considered one of the great masterpieces of the Northern Song landscape painting. It is a monumental art piece that used landscape as a poetic political metaphor. Under the vague atmosphere, rocks and mountains are suggested by meticulous outlines. The

towering mountains behind clouds represent the Emperor Shenzong (1048 – 1085) and the power of his government. The flourishing plants are growing in the spring rain.

Even though Chinese landscape art fell into a slump during the Yuan Dynasty (1279 - 1368), artists never stopped using landscape painting to convey their inner heart and political opinions. Under Mongol domination, Chinese scholars retreated from the government and focused on their private cultural gatherings. Landscape artists switched from realistic depictions of actual space to imaginary, reclusive worlds. The rivers and mountains in the painting became representative of physical place and the desire for freedom. Artists decided to use landscape as a metaphor to secretly convey their resentment of the government. Ni Zan (1301–1374) was a Chinese painter during the late Yuan period. His work *Rongxi Studio* (fig. 3) emphasizes the desire for peaceful exclusion. The brushstrokes and ink wash are bland. The simple scene depicted a land of idyllic beauty. Without any suggestion of human presence, the painting actually invites the viewer to explore rocks and trees. During the uncertain time of Mongol domination, Ni Zan uses concise brushstroke to express personal emotions and his desire for nature.

The Ming dynasty (1368 - 1644) brought landscape painting back as an official art form and enhanced its political power. When native Chinese restored their autonomy, court landscape artists revived the Song Dynasty art as orthodoxy. Their style combined Song's aesthetic and Yuan's expressive ideas. Wen Zhengming (1470–1559) was a master of exemplified Ming literati ideals. His work focused on promoting political goals and self-cultivation. His work *Huxi Thatched Cottage* (fig. 4) depicts the scenery of literati daily life in nature. The empty space sets off a feeling of tranquility. Wen Zhengming was skilled in using fine brushstrokes with green and blue pigments to create gradations of light and dark tones that harmoniously exist in one space. Even though the colors are bright and bold, he still controls the scene under a refreshing and elegant atmosphere. The fine features and subject matter reflect the spirit of the Chinese literature. The style and aesthetic of the Ming Dynasty continued until the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644 - 1912). The Ming and Qing

Dynasties' traditional landscape paintings indicate that the society attached importance to the cultivation of literature, poetry, and painting.

Though the dynasties never stopped changing over the past five thousand years, the mountains and rivers remained the same, quietly staying there for artists to find inspiration and express feelings. Even now, I can still find the same mountains that an artist depicted in a painting or that a literati wrote about in a poem in ancient times. In 2018, when I traveled and saw these mountains and rivers in person (fig. 5), I suddenly understood the consciousness of reverence for nature. As I climbed narrow stairs with views too hazy to see the full road, I felt as if I stood on a stairway to heaven. I stood on a cliff to see the sun emerge from the endless clouds, and I heard birds singing heavenly in the open sky of a summit. My views extended to uncharted land on the mountain, where I could only see the billows and fog. The clouds, bright or dim, hovered over the rocks, only visible for a short time. Only the lush greenery and trees around reminded me of the real world that I was standing on.

I realized why there are thousands of poems and paintings that choose mountains and rivers as everlasting subject matter. The land is powerful enough to contain all emotions. I want to remind my generation, who usually live in cities and hardly see natural landscapes, of the beauty of mountains and rivers. Therefore, I studied artists from ancient times, seeing how they used brushstrokes to depict trees and rocks, and used ink to present breathtaking nature. Observing the work from a further distance, audiences see the way a mountain touches the sky and clouds turn to rain and rise into a smoky haze. But by walking close enough, the viewer can find meticulous depictions of flowers and trees (fig. 6). The mountains and rivers are still full of vitality and the traditional landscape painting is still alive.

Although the landscape remains the same, the way people view it has dramatically changed in contemporary times. Using only ancient brushstroke techniques to depict the same view is not the most ideal way to keep traditional landscape paintings relevant. Artists have always been using the landscape art form to discuss their present time by adjusting the content and their representations of

it. I also want to involve specific characteristics of the contemporary landscape as seen by my generation into the painting. Many contemporary Chinese landscape artists influenced me and inspired me to include new materials, techniques, subject matter, and cultures into landscape painting.

The vitality and resilience of landscape art depends on the artist's determination, adaptability to cultural changes, and creativity in exploring different content. Despite the ravaging of traditional cultures during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), traditional Chinese landscape art survived and found a way to balance the ancient art form with new communist ideals. Zhan Jianjun was a famous revolutionary realist painter, well-known for "The Five Warriors of Langya Mountains" in the 1960s. He presented a painting of the Great Wall entitled *Look Back* (fig. 7) in 1980, which could be considered a formalist adaptation of realism and tradition. Zhan's work was not entirely founded on visual beauty, nor political messages; he used the landscape of the Great Wall as a subjective spiritual symbol, while at the same time creating it using Western materials such as oil paint and canvas. He also utilized expressive methods, such as broad brushstrokes and intense colors, to create a nearly abstract landscape structure, which visually represented the confusion of collisions between political messages and traditional landscape aesthetics, and the tension between Eastern and Western culture. The use of landscape forms connects his work to the traditional landscape ink painting in Song Dynasty, while the extensive expression of emotion in his work can be traced back to the Ming Dynasty's classic landscape paintings.

In the 1980s, traditional Chinese art expanded to include a unique national connection to global culture. To reflect the new era's nationalism, Chinese art-making emphasized national characteristics and histories. Economic development became the most essential indicator of modernization and the barycenter of all sorts of work in the country. In addition to the growing economy level, China's integration with the outside world, which was seen as open and affluent, was also considered an important part of the new era's promise of a highly modernized future. Furthermore, with the Socialist revolutionary cause cast into the past in the official narrative,

Chinese people needed to look for new ways to connect with the rest of the world. Thus, traditional landscape painting became a symbol of national pride and unity. During this process, the 1980s brought forth efforts to rediscover “traditions” from the whole of Chinese histories and cultures. A series of traditional artworks demonstrate this paradoxical gesture of looking ahead to a modernized future and simultaneously moving towards tradition. "Tradition" as a reborn art element became part of a new ideology that fueled the Chinese with the urgent need to reflect on their socialist, revolutionary history and its relationship with the future of China. The mutually beneficial relationship between individuals and the nationalist project of modernization has been greatly emphasized in recent traditional cultural products. Many artworks highlight an individual’s responsibility for achieving personal happiness through hard work, thereby contributing to the nation.

Wu Guanzhong (1919 - 2010) came to represent the shift toward aesthetic formalism in traditional landscape paintings in the 1980s. In contrast to Socialist Realism, modernist art that incorporated traditional elements was first favored by Wu Guanzhong's landscape oil paintings (fig. 8), which combined the poetry of Eastern painting with the materials of Western painting, presenting a moving formal beauty. After the Cultural Revolution, the overall tendency in the art world was the elimination and criticism of anything related to the Cultural Revolution, but very few people realized the significance of formal beauty and the value of tradition. Wu strengthened the formal elements of his subject matter by developing a set of suitable techniques. His landscape paintings challenged the rules of traditional painting through the expressiveness of form, opening a new visual realm in China. He successfully transformed traditional paintings into modern ink paintings, establishing a solid foundation of traditional Chinese culture, in the development Chinese modern art.

The new political ideology offered the opportunity for “traditions” to be integrated into a modernized life while contributing to China’s connection with the outside world. Traditional aesthetics were presented as part of the life of the ancestors of modern Chinese people, who could

connect with the past through such intimate memories. Moreover, this traditional Chinese culture was not considered a barrier to China's integration into the modernized world; it was considered a marker of the uniqueness of Chinese culture. They were juxtaposed with European art historical examples, appearing as unfamiliar and curious to modern Chinese audiences. Traditional art in Chinese history was presented as an "intimate spectacle" in which the audience had historical, cultural, and even personal connections with the traditional landscape painting. In the present, traditional Chinese landscape art is a powerful tool to offer a starting point from which an equal dialogue with the outside world can be initiated.

In addition to the political and cultural changes in China, ongoing dramatic environmental changes following industrialization and digitalization in the 1980s also become more obvious in Chinese art. Yang Yonglian (born 1980), a traditional Chinese landscape artist engaged in contemporary art, uses multimedia, virtual reality, and video art to give a new life of landscape painting. His photography piece *View of Tide* (2008) (fig. 9) turns the traditional landscape view to a powerful view of rapid urbanization in China. Even though the landscape was "painted" with photography, the composition and aesthetics still retain as parts of the traditional method. At first glance, it is a traditional handscroll depicting mountains and rivers surrounded by clouds and mist. But the details reveal the succession of buildings and power-line towers. These modern constructions reflect the environmental changes in the new China.

Nowadays, not only the construction industry and urbanization, but also the development of digital technologies, have changed our view of landscape. Our contemporary era of electronic media movement is characterized by mediascapes and multiple media infrastructures, including the internet, mobile telephones, cables, broadcasting and signal traffic, all of which shape the way we see the environment. Our current lifestyle would not exist without such media constructions. In my work (fig. 10), I hid tiny squares under mountain and cloud shapes to reveal the transition of nature to a manmade virtual environment. These repetitive square elements accumulate and form a new

layer of the landscape. This new way of viewing the landscape also suggests to the viewer the ramifications of these overwhelming changes in our natural environment.

Landscape painting is not an old art form abandoned in ancient times. It has always played a powerful and critical role in politics and cultures, and its relevance is ongoing. It is an emotional, social, and political conduit that also contains classical aesthetics and forms. It has been pursued and admired, destroyed, reconstructed, and risen again, but the power of the art form, based on its connection with society and its ability to reflect the features of the nation, never disappears. I don't want to see the environment transformed into a soulless state that is littered with concrete, so I use the depth and inclusiveness of traditional Chinese landscape art to express my appreciation of nature and my skepticism toward the reality I perceive.

Chapter Two

China has been blessed with one of the longest painting traditions in the world. Beginning with the decorative patterns on Neolithic Chinese pottery, the 3,000-year tradition aspired to create true representations of nature using the simplest of materials: brush, ink, and silk or paper. Across thousands of years, the traditional landscape art had seen major shifts and developments as political and economic views shift. But to see landscape painting as only symbolic of politics would be too superficial. The power of traditional landscape painting is rooted in aesthetics and philosophy. Having a basic understanding of these aesthetic and philosophical principles helps the viewer realize the meaning of landscape painting. For many traditional landscape painters, especially in Song Dynasty (960 - 1279) and Ming Dynasty (1368 - 1644), a true representation of nature is not simply a matter of copying nature, but capturing its essence and expression as interpreted intellectually by the artist. In this chapter, I will discuss the methods for reading a traditional landscape painting. In doing so, I will show how and why this genre has remained influential for over two thousand years. I will focus on analyzing Taoist philosophical ideas about nature and balance, and their impact on landscape painting. I will also explain the fundamental aesthetic principles and concepts in landscape painting.

To understand the meaning of landscape painting, the viewer must understand the philosophy of landscape in ancient China. Shanshui (literally, mountain and river), was used in ancient times as the name of nature and represents the fundamental character of all things in the heavens and the earth. As a practice, Shanshui emphasizes living in harmony between heaven and earth as the primary philosophical idea of Taoism. Landscape painting always seeks the most poetic expression of the Tao. The space created in mountains and rivers in the landscape painting refers to the balance and Dao (the way) of nature.

Taoism means following the Dao concept: seeking the meaning of life and the spirit of the universe through the natural landscape, by reflecting the philosophical spirit of mountains and rivers. In a broader sense, landscapes, which incorporate the yin and yang of heaven and earth, are

an important symbol of Taoist philosophy. The expression of the landscape is sentimental in a painting. The theme of life naturally integrates into mountains and rivers, into the emptiness and nameless form. The understanding of the world is always full of the poetry of life and freedom, which endowed the landscape painting with eternal vitality and value.

Chinese artists have always used mountains and rivers as subject matter throughout their scrolls, which weave in four narrative scenes in nature. According to artist Wu Changshuo (1844 – 1927), the major theme of Chinese landscape painting is “painting as calligraphy as poetry; the brush-marks reveal feelings; the subject matter reveals character, and naturalness reveals the ideal of reclusion.”ⁱⁱⁱ The landscape’s depiction of spatial transformation invokes the balance of heaven and ground in Taoism. An individual artist’s subjective imagination of the space created in the painting challenges the harmonious horizontal perspective, but extends the space to an infinite view, transforming the environment from merely physical to spiritual.

In Juran’s painting *Asking the Way in Autumn Mountains* (fig. 11), for example, the major objects are the tree and the misty river. The composition of the tree and surrounding water harmoniously enhance each other's charm, as if intimately engaged in a balanced conversation. The choices made in the composition and the vigorous drawing show the subjectivity in the artist’s view and experience of nature. The artist intentionally renders the space in a graceful manner, where clouds, rivers, trees, mountains, and pavilions construct a simple, pristine scene. The artist’s conception is full of Taoist philosophy; there are no grand mountains nor splendid landscapes, but rather a peaceful, individual experience of nature, livelihood, and life. The human is part of nature and seeks a balanced existence between heaven and ground. Guo Xi thus reveals the serene inner heart that comes from observing the peaceful natural world.

In traditional landscape painting methods, an interpretive, philosophical vision that presents the idea of Dao in nature is valued over realistic depictions. Su Shi (1037 – 24), a Chinese calligrapher, painter, and poet of the Song dynasty, wrote: "The concept is before the brush, and where the painting ends the conception is still present...there is feeling in the landscape, and there

is a landscape in the feeling."^{iv} The “feeling of the landscape” refers to the pure strong bond between humans and the natural environment. The bond created in the painting extends this idea of harmony. Conversely, landscape paintings do not feature realistic drawings, because they are supposed to represent the landscape in people's hearts. This suggests a fundamental philosophical question about human existence in the world. This question has given landscape painting a long-lasting power to abstract and summarize social and political ideology in a visual form.

The most significant aesthetic concept in traditional Chinese landscape that is distinguished from Western art is the translation of space. Paintings often feature a mist creeping over the mountain and river that casts a veil over everything. To leave some space voided is a special aesthetic technique reflective of a philosophical perspective of the world in Chinese art. In the Tao Te Ching, Laozi mentions, "Great music has the faintest notes, the great form is without shape."^v Tao, in this case, refers to a state of supreme material and spiritual existence, a representation of the fundamental theory that all things in the world are usually hidden and nameless. The intangible law inside reflects the infinite space of imagination. Based on this idea, traditional Chinese art follows the fundamental aesthetic concepts of Tao, to be natural and implicative, to extend the spirit to endless space.

A great example of a traditional landscape painter who used the scroll's form and perspective to create an infinite imaginary space, Wang Ximeng (1096–1119) was one of the most renowned court painters of the Northern Song period. *A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains* (fig. 12) is a 39-foot scroll that is also one of the largest and greatest landscape paintings of Chinese art. In Wang's painting, he used bright blues and greens on a dark ochre background, a style typical of Green and Blue Landscape painting tradition. As a scrolling painting, stretching nearly twelve meters in length, Wang's masterpiece is impossible to take in all at once. Standing too far away, one loses its fine details; getting too close, though, one misses its grandeur. Instead, viewers are rewarded for careful observation at multiple points and distances. The transformation of distance and space gives the painting a mysterious veil that attracts the audience to exist within and without

the inner world of mountains and rivers. The landscape is never directly exposed in the painting; rather, a mist, cloud, and stream are always around the features. The contrast between the meticulous depiction of the ground and the hazy sky emphasizes the charm of its obscure beauty. Such vagueness is the most thrilling quality of a landscape painting.

Ancient Chinese artists refer to implied beauty, but the idea is also proposed by many Western philosophers. Theodor W. Adorno argues that “art is magic delivered from the lie of being truth.”^{vi} To further illustrate this idea, we can look closely at the powerful example of the mountain and river to explore the idea of gesture between truth and fantasy that creates the atmosphere of ambiguity.

The beauty that is implied to exist behind the obscure veil is more attractive than directly exposing the scene. The “veil” in landscape paintings not only functions as an atmospheric perspective in the space, but also manifests as an aesthetic of hiding beauty under a diaphanous surface.^{vii} The diaphany of a landscape is a precondition of beauty in the artwork. As Walter Benjamin writes in his early essay on Goethe’s “Elective Affinities”, “The beautiful is neither the veil [Hu’lle] nor the veiled object but rather the object in its veil.”^{viii} In other words, the veil defines both the condition of beauty and its essential unavailability, symbolic integrity predicated on “a distance, however close the thing that calls it forth.”^{ix} When beauty reveals itself, it becomes vulgar and easily loses its attractiveness. On the other hand, a veil is a condition of beauty that requires an incomplete view, an emptiness, and distance. The vagueness and distance allow space to be imagined, and only imagination owns the power and space to go beyond the truth that glorifies the beauty infinitely. Therefore, a “veil” is a fundamental gesture of art. It allows the audience to only see partly through and partly not, creating the space of imagination between open and closed, clear and vague.

Diaphaneity is a fundamental quality of illusion, and art is all about illusion. This technique is not unique to painting, but has a counterpart in Chinese literature too. Traditional painting involves essentially the same techniques as calligraphy and is done with the same brush dipped in

black ink. This is the reason why many well-known paintings were done by a scholar or poet, and why landscape painting is also called literati painting. One of the major painting themes, as stated above, is “painting as calligraphy as poetry.” Many poems in China also demonstrate the concept of diaphaneity and implicit beauty.

Scholars often emphasize the important relationship between Chinese landscape art and literature. The fundamental theme for both is using either language or brushstrokes to depict emotions toward natural beauty and harmony. Wang Guowei (1877 - 1927), a well-known Chinese poet, wrote in *Jen-chien Tz'u-Hua - A Study in Chinese Literary Criticism*, “一切景语皆情语”^x (“When the ancient discussed poetry, they made a distinction between scenic description and expression of emotions. What they did not realize was that all scenic description involves expression of emotions.”) The connection between Chinese classical poetry and painting in terms of aesthetic characteristics causes the two forms of art to appear together commonly. Behind the euphemistic and implicit conceptions, the core of both is to express the sentimental understanding of nature.

In the long tradition of Chinese classical poetry, poets gradually formed the pursuit of aesthetic inclination in the artistic philosophy. The euphemistic pursuit in a landscape painting is in harmony with the aesthetic characteristics of Chinese classical poetry.

Literature and painting have been inseparable from the project of endless meaning. The implicit mood in a poem is never expressed directly, but is shown without revealing the mood tangibly. "Without a word" is an approach that emphasizes conveyance without relying on endless words. In painting, the artist selectively leaves some space blank; the poet does the same. When the greatest poet Bai Juyi depicted beauty in the Tang dynasty, he wrote:

千呼万唤始出来，犹抱琵琶半遮面”^{xi}

(“Only after many pleas did she come out of her place,
Still holding the pipa that shadowed half of her face.”)

Li Bai, a romantic poet in the flourishing Tang Dynasty who took traditional poetic forms to new heights, also wrote,

“卷帷望月空长叹, 美人如花隔云端”^{xii}

"(I lift the shade and, with many a sigh,

gaze upon the moon,

single as a flower centered behind the clouds.”)

In Guo Xi’s landscape painting *Old Trees, Level Distance* (fig. 13), he never shows the entire view of the mountains; rather, part of it always hides behind clouds and mist. The implicit beauty is viewing flowers emerging from under the fog and seeing the moon hiding behind the cloud. The philosophy in traditional Chinese aesthetics is veiled and implicit. Neither poem nor painting carries out any physical or psychological descriptions. Instead, they are presented in a lyrical style that leaves an infinite imaginative space and convey a deep artistic concept of void and implication. The beauty of the veil reduces the straightforward representation and raises a question about the differences and similarity of aestheticism. The function of the empty space and vagueness in landscape painting not only suggests the theory of “beauty in the veil” by creating distance and imagination, but also represents the interplay between real and unreal, macro and micro, of an infinite world.

Traditional Chinese landscape painting had been evolving for more than a thousand years by the twentieth century and had maintained its vitality through ink wash and a flowing ink line that embodied movement and growth. Influenced by classical poetry and culture, landscape painting continues to pursue the euphemism of beauty by creating empty space for the viewer to experience subtle expressions under the misty world. Space, above all, is the unifying element in traditional Chinese landscape painting, and it is a key element that contemporary artists can adopt to achieve the deeply spacious quality of landscape forms in various mediums.

The harmonious union with nature, and the sense of form and inner vision, are the most powerful transformations of reality into art. This applies to both landscape art from ancient eras and present times, from the metaphysical to the political. The philosophical and aesthetic power of the art form is strong and abstract enough to embody the condition of humans living in nature. To view the harmony of nature and beauty of implication in Chinese landscape painting is to experience a peaceful and generous mentality; the trees, rocks, ink wash of mist, and relationship to poetry all contribute to the implicit mood and dialectical philosophical attitude. This is the reason why the landscape art form has been inherited and developed for over two thousand years of Chinese history.

Chapter Three

Having experienced social and environmental changes in China over the past twenty years, I feel doubtful and critical about our physical, cultural, and political living conditions. In my artworks, I aim to perceive and capture the relationship between traditional Chinese aesthetics and our present style of life. I believe that the tradition of ink landscape painting is profound enough to embody the power of life, not only in ancient China but also in the present. In this thesis, I connect the power and tradition of landscape painting in history and use the techniques, materials, and aesthetic concepts of this art form to create a group of work that reveals the contemporary human condition. In each piece, I highlight a different realm of Chinese painting, where the brush flows wherever the intention moves. I have experimented with rhythms in freely rendered landscapes and my understanding of forms and I have tried to impart a virtualized ambiance to the air and space. I wanted to have organic connections in all segments so that they could reflect the spiritual resonance and rhythm of people's lifestyles and views of the world. To do so, I entered a free creative realm, so that my feelings would show themselves naturally, endearing and vigorous, full of life's energy.

Today's digital environment includes not only real landscapes, but ones made virtual by data and messaging. If we imagine these constructions as the new mountains in our era, the data stream and signals become the mist and cloud. The development of technologies has changed our living environment and our way of viewing the landscape—it is still there, but people use a different technique to see and experience it. What if we used a traditional Chinese method to observe our landscape now? What can we see? How are we viewing it?

These questions led me to use traditional Chinese landscape art as a language to explore the imaginary environment that we are living in. The works present a completely different scheme for translating traditional philosophy both in terms of data network and representation. I want to take note of our immediate environment, to disprove beauty in the changing, everyday things. I intentionally render various subject matter and visual elements in a space based on a brush mark-

making system in order to create an opening of a conversation. I intend to ask the viewers: What space do we have here? Where we are?

The collection “Rising Water, Floating Islands” consists of four scroll paintings of traditional Chinese rice paper and ink and are defined by the arrangement of architecture, patterns, clouds, mountains, and waters in the works. The types of elements and brushstrokes that I chose to portray are critical to the meaning of the painting. An arrangement of pictorial elements and gestural brushstrokes in the scroll reveals an underlying theme of the environment and signifies a macro and micro space.

The first painting, *Rising Water, Floating Islands I* (fig. 14), relied heavily on traditional Chinese brush mark-making system and provides an introduction to traditional Chinese culture and ink landscape art form. The line-work of the painting is a fundamental element for understanding the relationship between shapes, brush, motion, and energy. Mi Fu, an ancient Chinese painter and calligrapher gave a poetic description of the dynamic qualities of brushwork: “...like a cloud formation stretching 300 miles, indistinct but not without form...like a big stone falling from a high peak, rebounding and crashing, about the shatter...a withered vine a thousand years old, ...the sinews and joints of a mighty blow.”^{xiii} The brushwork of lines create a dynamic strong enough to convey an intense scene with strong emotion. I tended to present simple, clearly outlined shapes against an unpainted background, concentrating on the primary subjects rather than creating a complete environment. I did not attempt to construct a continuous space that follows perspective principles on the surface. The spatial environment, rather than being fully described, was suggested through relationships between the selected rocks and plants. The first painting renders the internal conflict between the tradition and contemporary.

The second painting *Rising Water, Floating Islands II* (fig. 15) is intended to create a fusion between the traditional and contemporary as well as combine a natural view and with digital surroundings. To reconcile or confuse the space, I use a technique called layered ink wash, known as “broken-ink” (泼墨) as a foundation of the piece. This involved applying ink washes layer upon

layer, carefully controlled in placement and coordinated in tone, with darker layers usually applied upon lighter layers. This technique permitted the modeling of seemingly solid forms and the achievement of rich, naturalistic effects. Washes helped to consolidate some areas visually, contrasting them with neighboring areas, heightening the sense of naturalism, and contributing forcefully to the abstract design, which blurs the boundary between reality and imaginary space.

Bada Shanren (1626–1705), a Han Chinese painter of ink wash painting and a calligrapher, wrote, “If you have ink, you have all the five colors”.^{xiv} My work largely validates this assertion, especially evident in the second piece *Rising Water, Floating Islands II*. The eroded contour of the upper surface is defined by the addition of repeated layers of wet ink, applied with a twisting and curling motion of the brush, with darker lines indicating the upper ridges of the hills and paler tones spreading downward to round out the surface of the forms (fig. 16). The process of going over multiple times with wet ink was preferred for its organic, tonally irregular result, blurred and suggestive rather than distinctly linear. The mountain forms recall clouds because of their fully rounded, puffy quality, and seem more cloudlike than the primitive, hard-edged clouds of colored paintings.

An encounter between old and new elements occurs in the tiny square patterns surrounding the clouds and mist mountains (fig. 17). This pattern is almost invisible at a distance. By rendering this very traditional Chinese foggy form in a modern context, the little square pieces can be read as a data stream and associated with media infrastructure. Today, the main method to reproduce the world using a flat surface is coding. Using this pattern reflects the way people's lifestyles interact with digital material and are surrounded by virtual information.

The way we experience and observe landscape has changed from riding horses and driving cars to viewing information remotely on the internet. This painting puts the viewer in a reality where information and landscape connect differently. The layers and marks made by ink washes traverse two worlds, showing how we encounter and cross these spaces with different styles and technology. This piece emphasizes the integration of the traditional mark-making system and

contemporary content, thereby questioning the views that surround us: are they virtual information or a real natural environment?

The third painting *Rising Water, Floating Islands III* (fig. 18) presents a more obvious representation of information, languages, city constructions, and digital messages by shifting the natural landscape to an urban view that features endless construction and overwhelming information. Through the line, wash, and texture, the composition is built of individual motifs of varying shapes and sizes that are arranged into a confusing space. In the painting, rather than attempting to present only what can be seen from a fixed point of view — otherwise known as a single scene — I decided to introduce varying points of view to create a panoramic vision. In this work, I invite the viewer to move their head left and right, to peer down and crane up, get close and far away, to experience the artificial landscape as diverse and unlimited (fig. 19). The foreground is seen from above. The ground plane from which many of the trees rise has been foreshortened. The perspective twists the baseline so that we seem to view them from the side rather than from above. Conversely, the background water and distant shorelines are seen from above. These multiple viewpoints are a chaotic vision, which challenges the viewer to find peace in the landscape.

Similar to traditional modes of Chinese landscape painting, I edited and modified nature to express my feelings and intentions. In the opening section of the painting, we are abruptly introduced to a landscape that contains many signs of human habitation (fig. 20). A grove of tall trees standing on a foreground hill draws the viewer's eyes leftward to a small village and rocks. Upon closer observation, the blurring clouds are revealed to be composed of countless apartments and buildings. The natural grandeur is suddenly revealed to be an entirely manmade environment. The harmonious traditional landscape becomes a digital vision of urbanization. The mist and beauty of the void in the traditional landscape painting are now occupied with endless structures that can no longer support life. The painting suggests that both the natural environment and the traditional way in which nature was envisioned are in danger of being overwhelmed and trapped by a new megalopolis culture.

The last painting, *Rising Water, Floating Islands IV*, expresses the dynamicity of nature and traces of human thinking. I used finer lines to draw trees covered by white wires, and circles in a round space to refer to the spiral spiritual connection (fig. 21). The almost invisible circular ovals refer to biomorphism models—elements designed after naturally occurring patterns or shapes reminiscent of living organisms. By attempting to force naturally occurring shapes onto functional devices—the circle lines are neither perfect ovals nor geometric—the placid atmosphere in the painting represents how philosophy and style approach and evolve in a dynamic space.

To achieve a high visual contrast, the lines depicting rocks are relatively thick, and their width is virtually modulated through the full length of the stroke. The beginning and end of individual brushstrokes tend to be rounded rather than pointed. This is energy expressed and released intentionally. In contrast, on the other part of the painting, the brush moves carefully on trees and flowers (fig. 22), presenting an ecological condition in an imaginary space, one of dynamics and discipline in a steady calm environment. In Chinese aesthetics, such calmness is appreciated equally to dynamic action, and is regarded as a sign of strength rather than an indication of weakness. Rather than releasing energy, the work stores it up as potential, like the potential of a mighty bow whose subtle curve expresses tautness and the ability to spring instantly into motion. The variation of brushstrokes gives the landscape a tension, which indicates the intense and complicated environment under a peaceful surface.

In “Rising Water, Floating Islands”, I used the form and concepts of traditional landscape painting as a tool to discuss cultural and political consciousness. Observing our chaotic culture and environmental changes, it is hard to ignore the anxiety caused by history, economics, politics, and globalization between ancient and contemporary China. In order to address what has been valued and what has been lost in present-day society, I had to look into landscape painting's philosophy and visual conceptions. These four works reflect the distance and connections between traditional culture and our contemporary time. The particular images depicted within each genre, based on traditional Chinese painting elements, have a specific meaning and reflect particular motives,

concerns, and philosophy. In “Rising Water, Floating Islands,” I used the brush-making system to indicate the traditional landscape's aesthetic and philosophy, to further indicate my thoughts and concerns about the current living environment and our connection with nature. These concerns can be correlated with the accompanying visual images that contain the power of traditional landscape aesthetics. This group of work creates a space for viewers to contemplate our relationship and tension with nature in a daily life condition around industrial and digital technologies.

Conclusion

An important aspect of China's transformation in recent eras is the rapid growth of the city. At the same time, the city has become increasingly incoherent and incomprehensible. Its growth is visible from the forest of cranes and scaffolding, the soaring sound of bulldozers, and the dust and mud, all signifiers of never-ending destruction and construction. Old houses come down every day to make room for new buildings. The feelings of helplessness and frustration generated in this process can be expressed artistically. The implications and the notion of the modern and the postmodern must be understood in China's cultural tradition and political experience. Fortunately, in this ever-changing world, humanity and landscape remain unchanged. These are unending and eternal themes in world history. Taoist philosophy and landscape painting offer introspection during this period of transformation. I believe the significance and value of traditional Chinese art could bring classical philosophy back to the present time and could guide us to realize the importance of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

If used effectively, the concept of tradition could be continuously transmitted over time. Since the term "tradition" embraces the past and exists in the present, it also implies the future. Tradition emphasizes continuity, but it does not deny change. Traditional art is not stagnant—it is ongoing.

Traditional landscape painting still possesses the power to address contemporary social and environmental concerns. Zhang Zao, a literati painter in the 8th century, was quoted as saying "one should learn from nature and paint the image in one's mind."^{xv} Chinese painting relies on great skill in the use of lines to communicate emotion, passion, and thoughts. The expectation of evolutionary change is built into the Chinese painting tradition. It is this self-awareness and art-historical consciousness that keeps traditional ink painting as a continuously developing art form. The genre of landscape painting could help create a discussion of cultural consciousness and address what has been valued and what has been lost in the present.

This traditional approach has allowed me to restore the intellectual component of Chinese painting while creating works that are self-consciously trans-historical. I am allured by the power and aesthetic of contemporary art, and will continue to devise new strategies to absorb and transform these influences. I try to not only work in a traditional model but also develop a personal style. As a contemporary artist, I want to put my imprint upon such an ancient and venerable aesthetic heritage and reveal the attributes and emotional import of the painting as a way of being in the world.

Notes

ⁱ Jessica Rawson, *The British Museum Book of Chinese Art*. London: Published for the Trustees of the British Museum by British Museum Press, 1992.

ⁱⁱ Yinke Chen, *Chen Yinke Shixue Lunwen Xuanji*. Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1992.

ⁱⁱⁱ James C. Y. Watt, *Translation of Art: Essays on Chinese Painting and Poetry*. Place of publication not identified: Univ. Washington P., 1976.

^{iv} François Cheng, *Empty and Full: the Language of Chinese Painting*. Boston: Shambhala, 1994.

^v Lao zi and Chao-Hsiu Chen, *Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching*. Red Feather Mind, Body, Spirit, an imprint of Schiffer Publishing Ltd., 2018.

^{vi} Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia, Reflections from damaged life*. 1951.

^{vii} Pater, Walter. *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. 2006.

^{viii} Hansen, Miriam Bratu. *Benjamin's Aura*. 2008.

^{ix} Hansen, *Benjamin's Aura*.

^x Wang Guowei, *Jen-chien Tz'u-hua*. 1908-1909.

^{xi} Bai Juyi. "Ode to a Lady's Pipa Play with an Introduction". A.D.816.

^{xii} Li Bai "Endless Yearning". A.D.701 ~ 762.

^{xiii} James C. Y. Watt, *Translation of Art: Essays on Chinese Painting and Poetry*. Place of publication not identified: Univ. Washington P., 1976.

^{xiv} Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art: a History, 1970s-2000s*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2014.

^{xv} Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky, *Contemporary Chinese Art and the Literary Culture of China*. Bronx, NY: Lehman College Art Gallery, 1999.



Figures



Figure 1. Exhibition space of “Rising Water, Floating Islands”. Sixue Yang, Ink on Xuan paper, 2020

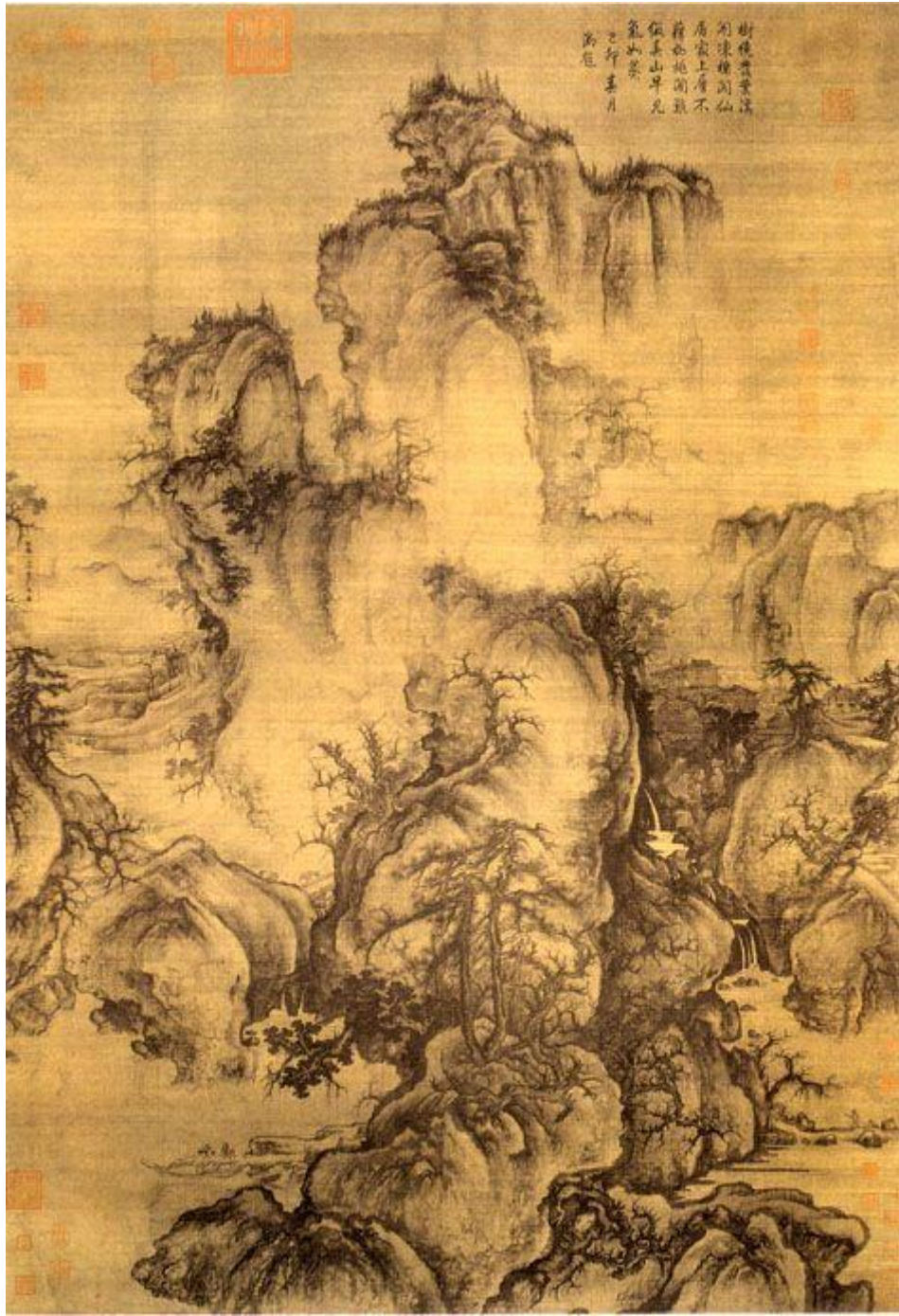


Figure 2. *Early Spring*. Guo Xi, Handscroll; ink on silk, 1072



Figure 3. *Studio (Rongxi)*. Ni Zan, Handscroll; ink on silk, 1372



Figure 4. *Thatched Cottage (Huxi)*. Wen Zhengming, Handscroll; ink on silk, Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)



Figure 5. *View of Hua Shan*. Sixue Yang, photography, 2018



Figure 6. A section of *Rising Water. Floating Islands II*, Sixue Yang, Ink on Xuan paper, 2020



Figure 7. *Look Back (Huiwang)*. Zhan Jianjun, oil on canvas, 1980



Figure 8. *Spring Snow (Chunxue)*. Wu Guanzhong, Color on card, 1982



Figure 9. A section of *View of Tide*. Yang Yongliang, Inkjet print, 2008

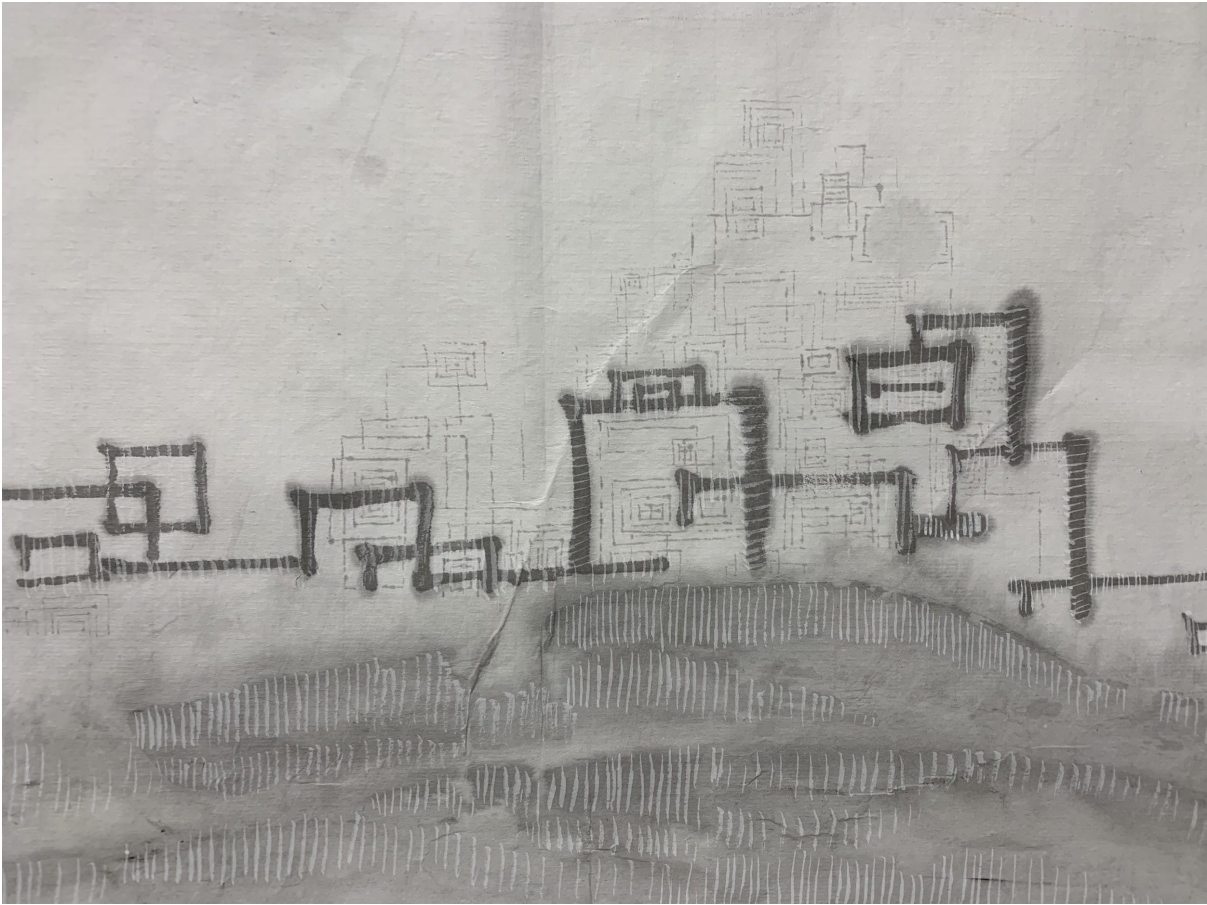


Figure 10. A section of *Rising Water, Floating Islands III*. Sixue Yang, Ink on Xuan paper, 2020

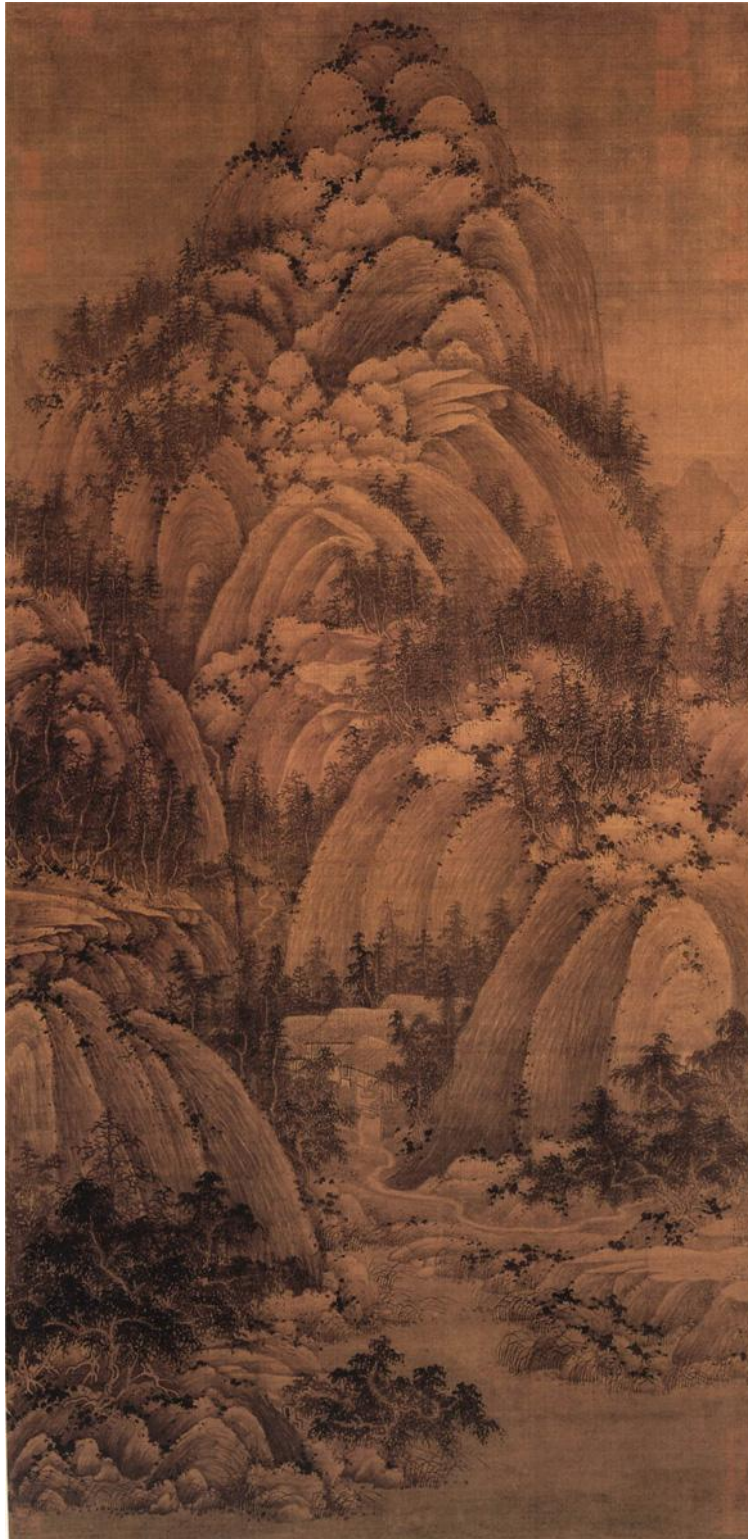


Figure 11. *Asking about the Way in Autumn Mountains*. Juran, Hanging scroll, ink on silk, Five Dynasties Period (907-960)



Figure 12. A section of *A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains*. Wang Ximeng, Color on silk, 1117

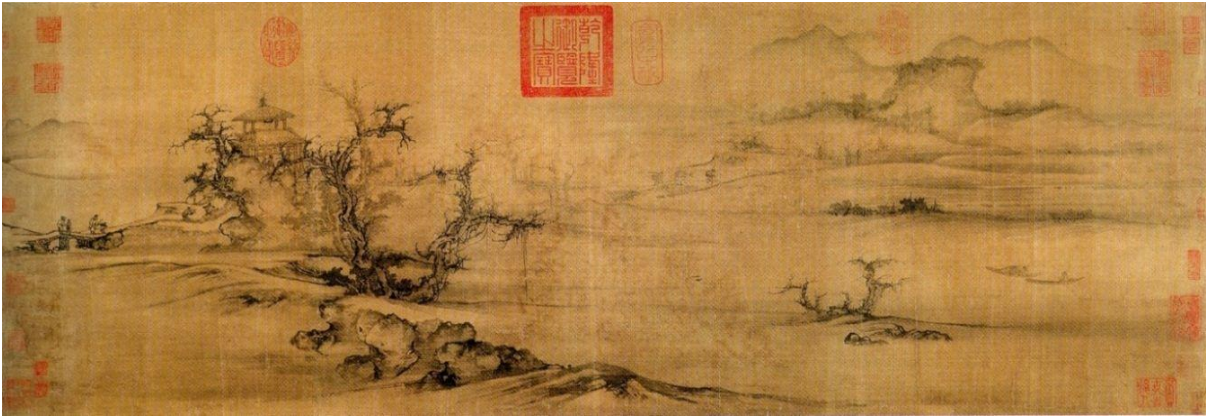


Figure 13. *Old Trees, Level Distance*. Guo Xi, Handscroll; ink and color on silk, 1080



Figure 14. *Rising Water, Floating Islands I.* Sixue Yang, Ink on Xuan paper, 2020

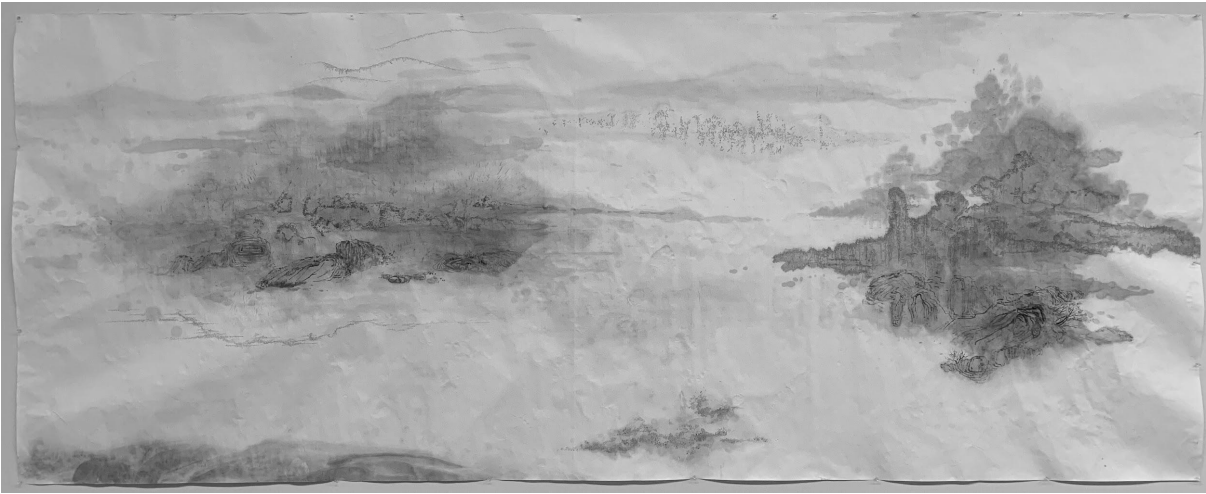


Figure 15. *Rising Water, Floating Islands II*. Sixue Yang, Ink on Xuan paper, 2020



Figure 16. A section of *Rising Water, Floating Islands II*. Sixue Yang, Ink on Xuan paper, 2020



Figure 17. A section of *Rising Water, Floating Islands II*. Sixue Yang, Ink on Xuan paper, 2020



Figure 18. A section of *Rising Water, Floating Islands III*. Sixue Yang, Ink on Xuan paper, 2020



Figure 19. A section of *Rising Water, Floating Islands III*. Sixue Yang, Ink on Xuan paper, 2020



Figure 20. A section of *Rising Water, Floating Islands III*. Sixue Yang, Ink on Xuan paper, 2020

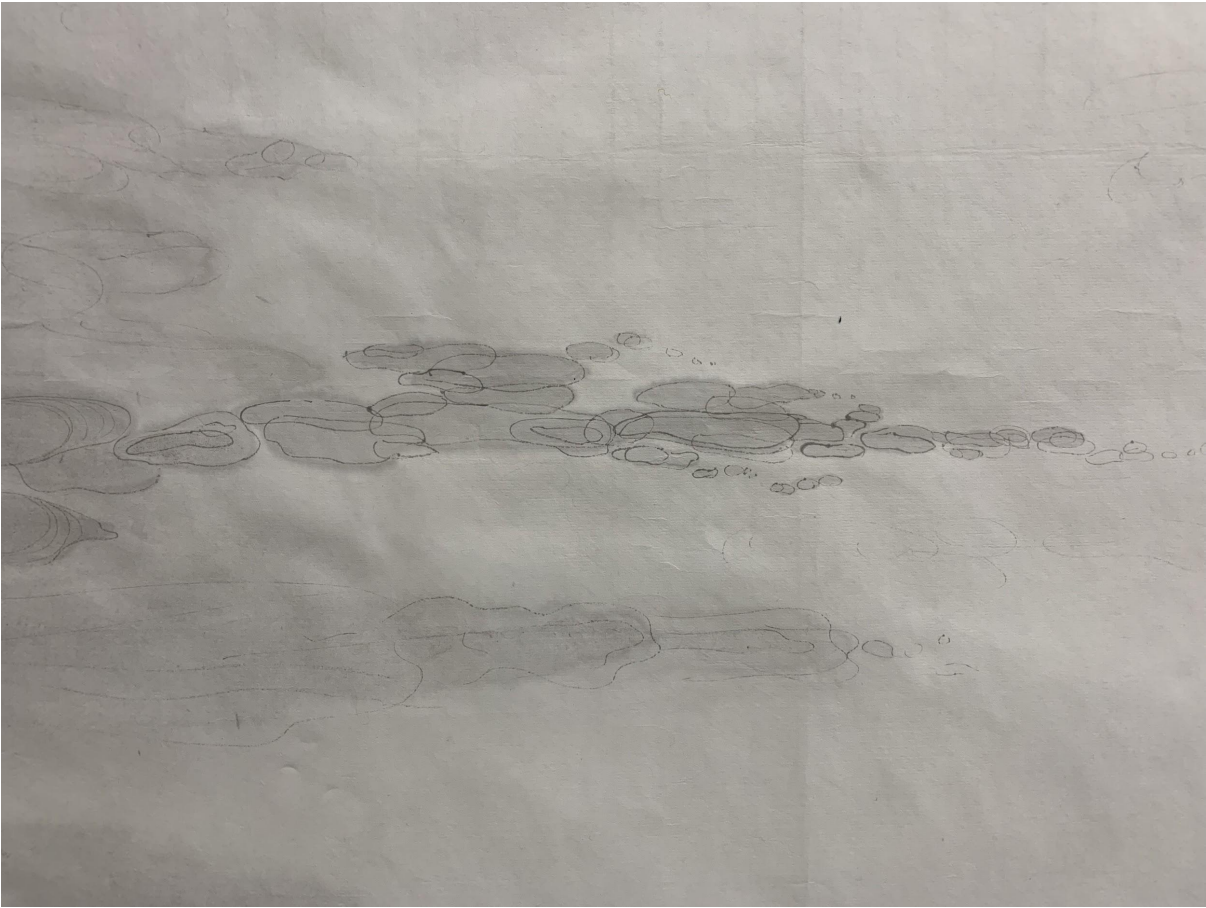


Figure 21. A section of *Rising Water, Floating Islands IV*. Sixue Yang, Ink on Xuan paper, 2020



Figure 22. A section of *Rising Water, Floating Islands IV*. Sixue Yang, Ink on Xuan paper, 2020

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