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From Water-element to Water-theme: A Study on the Creative Transformation in Chinese Landscape Painting

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Abstract

This paper breaks away from the traditional research paradigm of landscape-water integration and proposes the theoretical framework of an independent water-theme creative system. By constructing a dual-analysis framework centered on water-element and water-theme, this study systematically examines the historical reasons behind water-element's long-standing subordinate status in traditional landscape painting, revealing how hyper-stable structures constrain the development of water-theme. Based on an analysis of historical cases such as Ma Yuan's *Water Scene*, this study focuses on examining the diverse explorations of modern and contemporary artists in water-theme creations. It proposes an innovative development path of drawing inspiration from nature while integrating Eastern and Western perspectives, providing theoretical support and practical reference for the transformation of contemporary Chinese landscape painting.

Key Words

Water-theme, drawing inspiration from nature, super-stable structure, innovation, and ink painting language

Throughout the long history of Chinese landscape painting, the depiction of water has always been a subject worthy of in-depth exploration. The form of water imagery, aesthetic style, and technical efficacy all serve the artist's ideological stance. Technique is merely a means, not an end. Yet technique is also the most fundamental and challenging element—the primary pathway through which the form of water imagery transforms into aesthetic style. Therefore, in the transition from water as an element to water as a theme, we must dedicate effort not only to conceptual development but also to technical mastery. Only then can we achieve our purpose. The defining characteristics of ancient Chinese landscape painting are creating a realm and expressing the spirit. As Fang Shishu said: “The mind creates the environment; the hand guides the mind.”¹ As Li Gonglin said, “My painting is like a poet composing verse—merely an expression of my inner feelings.”² Both reveal the intrinsic connection between

spiritual expression and artistic techniques in landscape painting. Therefore, the inevitable logic is that if there is a deficiency at the level of thought and spirit, there must also be a deficiency at the level of creative practice.

1. Historical Causes and Constraining Mechanisms of the Absence of Water-Theme

1.1 The Internal Constraints of Cultural Structure

Renowned scholar Jin Guantao proposed a concept regarding Chinese history known as the “super-stable structure” theory. It provides an important perspective for understanding the unique characteristics of Chinese painting's development. The stability of this cultural structure has enabled the development of Chinese arts and literature to exhibit the characteristics of “early maturity, orderly progression, smoothness, and naturalness”³ (Chen Danqing). On the one hand, this

stability ensures the continuity of artistic traditions; on the other hand, it has also constrained artistic innovation and breakthroughs to a certain extent.

Traditional painting concepts particularly emphasize their role in cultivating the mind and nurturing the spirit. Wang Wei's discussion in *Discourse on Painting*—where he writes “Gazing upon autumn clouds, the spirit soars; facing the spring breeze, thoughts flow boundlessly”⁴—along with the consistent praise throughout history for landscape painting's function in self-cultivation and tempering the character, all direct painting toward the cultivation of inner spiritual refinement. The pursuit of personal perfection, shaped by Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, collectively led traditional painting to prioritize the cultivation of the mind and character over innovative breakthroughs. Within this value system, innovation has never been a core concern of art itself, which directly led to the smooth and natural trajectory of development described by Chen Danqing.

It is worth noting that discussions in traditional painting theory regarding the secular ethical functions of depicting spirits and deities and depicting father-son relationships often devolve into mechanical correspondences. Although Zhang Yanyuan advocated that painting should “cultivate moral education and assist human relations,” the highest achievements of traditional painting did not manifest in direct moral exhortation. Masterpieces such as the Dunhuang murals derive their artistic value primarily from the religious humanistic spirit that transcends specific doctrines. In essence, traditional painting functionalism ultimately converges upon the core proposition of “nurturing one's character and perfecting one's personality.”

This artistic philosophy, which aims at the perfection of character, has indeed produced a brilliant and highly refined traditional art. Yet it has also, in an intangible way, constrained the innovative development of painting studies. When innovation fails to become the core pursuit of artistic essence, the renewal and breakthrough of painterly language are naturally constrained, and the representation of water-element consequently struggles to achieve fundamental transcendence.

1.2 Systemic Limitations of the Performance System

Given this mindset, deficiencies in creative practice are inevitable. Regarding the creative practices of water-element in ancient Chinese landscape painting, its limitations are primarily manifested in the following three dimensions.

On the one hand, the forms of objects are monotonous. Although traditional painting theory emphasizes

drawing inspiration from nature, artistic practice has yet to fully capture the wonders of natural forms in the depiction of water and objects. In traditional painting, depictions of water often remain confined to stylized representations, failing to fully capture the richness of natural water. This phenomenon is closely tied to the inward-looking tendency found in traditional cultural spirit, as expressed in the saying: “Everything is already within me. By turning inward and being sincere, there is no greater joy”⁵ (Mencius). Taking seascapes as an example, although literary works such as the “Free and Easy Wandering” and “Autumn Waters” chapters of the *Zhuangzi* and Cao Cao's *Viewing the Vast Sea* have long offered vivid depictions of the ocean, traditional Chinese painting's representation of seascapes remains relatively monotonous. Its richness even falls short of Japanese painting, which was influenced by Chinese painting.

On the other hand, the aesthetic style system is weak. The uniformity of material forms directly limits the diverse development of aesthetic styles. Although Tang Zhichi proposed in his *Treatise on Painting* that “in painting landscapes, the most crucial aspect is capturing the spirit of mountains and waters,” emphasizing that “water should embody the surging momentum of waves, like brocade, like clouds, like a gallop, like fury, like a ghostly visage—thus the nature of water becomes my own nature, the emotion of water becomes my own emotion,”⁶ systematic discussions on the aesthetic qualities of water within traditional painting theory remain insufficient. The dynamic beauty, majestic grandeur, and ethereal charm of water—among other aesthetic dimensions—have not been fully explored, which directly impacts the richness of landscape painting's overall artistic expression.

Finally, there is insufficient innovation in creative techniques, specifically manifested in monotonous brushwork, primarily relying on central-axis strokes, and with insufficient application of diverse techniques such as side-axis and horizontal-axis strokes. In terms of ink wash techniques, exploration of methods such as water breaking ink, ink breaking water, water staining, and splashing water has been relatively limited, and experimentation with specialized materials has been insufficient. In terms of color expression, constrained by the notion that ink wash painting is supreme, the expressive power of color was not fully realized. In terms of composition and layout, the long-standing formula of prioritizing mountains over water persists, lacking innovative arrangements centered on water as the theme. These technical limitations collectively constrain the deepening of water's expressive potential in art. It is noteworthy that Dong Qichang's theory

of cultivation—which emphasizes that “reading ten thousand volumes and traveling ten thousand miles will purify the mind of worldly dust, allowing landscapes to naturally form within”⁷ while stressing the artist’s inner refinement, also reflects traditional painting’s relative neglect of technical innovation to some extent. Contemporary creation must build upon traditional foundations while breaking free from established conventions. Only through deep exploration across multiple dimensions—including brushwork, ink application, color techniques, and composition—can artists achieve true breakthroughs in depicting water-element.

These limitations in creative practice stem both from the influence of traditional concepts and reflect the inherent laws governing the development of artistic language itself. Only by embracing innovation while respecting tradition, and deepening theoretical reflection through technical exploration, can we drive the creative transformation of water-element into water-theme works, thereby achieving the contemporary development of landscape painting art.

2. From Water-element to Water-theme: A Case Study of Historical Transformation

2.1 Breakthroughs in Theoretical Definition

From the perspective of traditional painting theory, when mountains and waters are discussed together, mountains often serve as the central theme. More importantly, discussions concerning mountains tend to be more systematic. In contrast, discussions about waters are not only scarce but also lack diversity and systematic organization. It can be concluded that the so-called “primarily water-element” refers to the situation described above. So, what are the characteristics of the water-theme?

1. In the actual creative process, water serves as the primary element, and at times may even be the sole element. Of course, this does not preclude other coordinating elements. Moreover, such creative phenomena are not isolated occurrences but frequently emerge.

2. A rich, diverse, and systematic theoretical discourse on water in painting must exist. Only when such discourse forms a coherent system can a collective painting phenomenon centered on the water-theme emerge. Otherwise, it cannot function as a subject or even an independent element.

Only when the above conditions are met can it be said to have a water-theme, rather than merely a few isolated instances, such as Ma Yuan’s *Water Scene*. We can take landscape painting as an example. Why can

landscape, figure, and flower-and-bird stand independently and be mentioned together? Because they meet the two conditions mentioned above: they possess independence both in creative practice and in theoretical discourse. When we examine ancient Chinese painting treatises, we find that the theory of landscape painting constitutes an independent system within them. Not only are there scholarly works and specialized histories, such as Chen Chuanxi’s *History of Chinese Landscape Painting* and the *Landscape Painting Volume of the Specialized History of Chinese Painting Art* co-authored by Wang Huangsheng and Hu Guanghua, but scholars have also compiled volumes focusing on landscape painting content from ancient Chinese painting treatises. For instance, Yin Xiaolei’s *Essential Treatise on Ancient Landscape Painting Theory* is organized into sections including Functional Theory, Creative Theory, Theory of Form and Spirit, Theory of Dotting Moss, and so on. Of course, it is difficult to establish such a comprehensive theoretical framework concerning water, as this is the result of historical accumulation. Nevertheless, it should possess richer, more diverse, and relatively complete theoretical discourse. Unfortunately, this has yet to be achieved.

2.2 The Pivotal Significance of Ma Yuan’s *Water Scene*

After defining the water-theme above, this paper proceeds to analyze Ma Yuan’s *Water Scene* as a case study. As one of the few surviving works dedicated solely to the theme of water, this piece holds unique research value. Ma Yuan has long been known in art history as “Ma the Corner,” his compositions often focusing on partial landscapes, creating a distinctive form where “steep peaks rise straight up without revealing their summits; sheer cliffs drop down without showing their bases” (*Essentials of Antiquities Appraisal*). Ma Yuan’s *Water Scene* can be regarded as the culmination of hydraulic engineering techniques from the Sui and Tang dynasties through the Northern Song period, and it also laid an important foundation for the depiction of water systems in later generations. The twelve sections of the scroll depict various water scenes: *Golden Wind Rippling*, *Gentle Breeze over Dongting Lake*, *Layered Waves and Surging Tides*, *Clear Shallow Pond in Winter*, *Vast Expanses of the Yangtze*, *Yellow River’s Backflow*, (figure 1) *Autumn Waters Echoing*, *Clouds Rising over the Azure Sea*, *Lake Light Shimmering*, (figure 2) *Clouds Unfurl*, *Waves Roll*, *Dawn Sun Warms the Mountains*, and *Gentle Waves Drift*. Through meticulous linework combined with subtle ink washes, it precisely captures the diverse

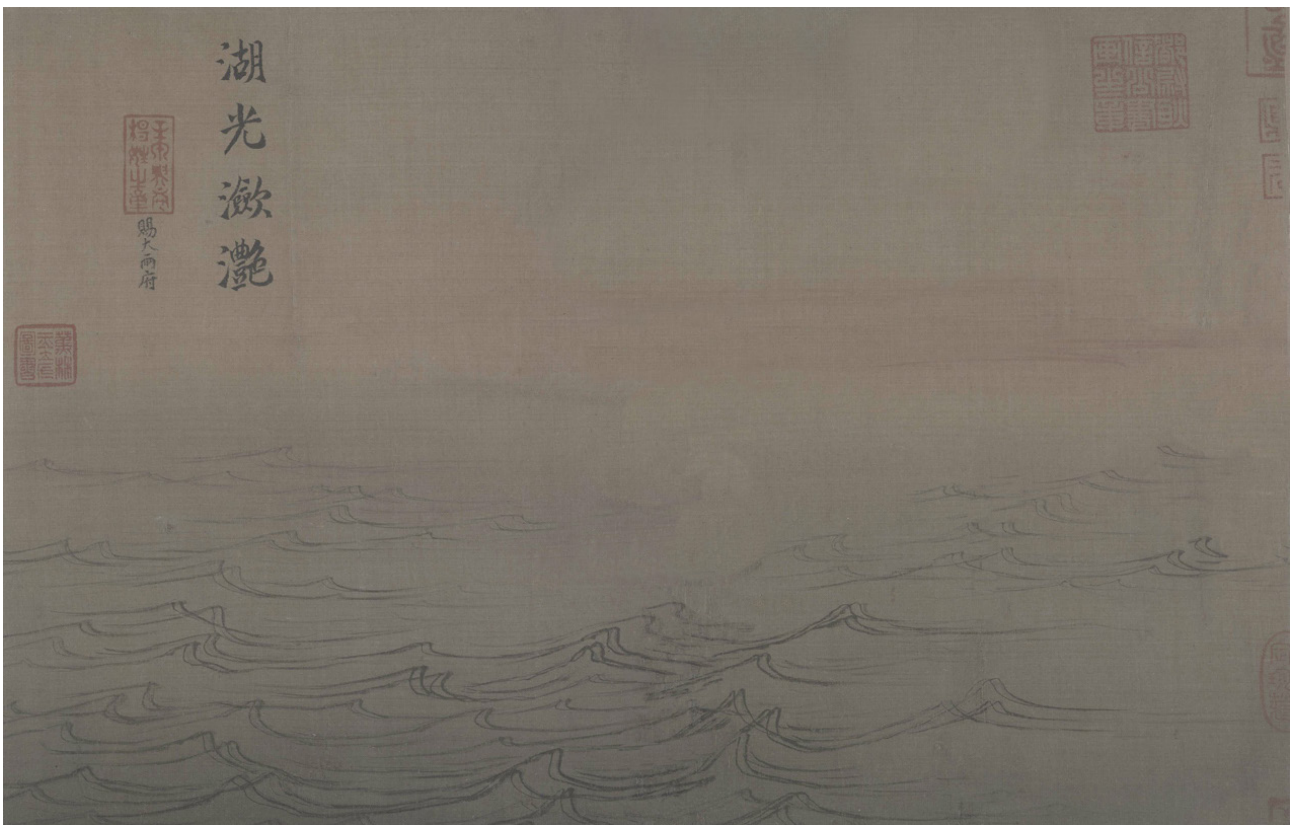


Figure 1. Ma Yuan, *Yellow River's Backflow* water landscape scroll, Southern Song Dynasty, silk scroll, 26.8×41.6cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

Figure 2. Ma Yuan *Lake Light Shimmering* water landscape scroll, Southern Song Dynasty, silk scroll, 26.8×41.6cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

forms of water across the changing seasons and shifting weather. The work demonstrates remarkable ingenuity in its technical execution: solid areas are rendered with line drawings to capture the dynamic flow of water, while ethereal spaces are rendered with light ink to evoke spatial ambiance. This creates a rhythmic cadence of interplay between solid and void, restraint and release. Particularly in passages like *Lake Light Shimmering* and *Autumn Waters Echoing*, the delicate depiction of shifting light and rippling waves immerses viewers in an aesthetic experience, achieving an artistic realm where nature and painting unite. Overall, the *Water Scene* captures the dynamic nature of water with remarkable precision, showcasing Ma Yuan's profound observation of natural water currents and his exceptional expressive power.

As evidenced by the colophons in the *Water Scene*, while traditional painting treatises contain numerous discussions on water techniques, systematic theoretical frameworks remain insufficient. Ma Yuan achieved a mastery of both form and spirit in his depictions of water. Li Rihua once remarked "When portraying objects, capturing their form is less important than capturing their momentum; capturing their momentum is less important than capturing their rhythm; and capturing their rhythm is less important than capturing their essence."⁸ He further noted "Essence is the innate nature of things, the culmination of skill. When skill reaches its peak, it reveals itself spontaneously, requiring no deliberate effort."⁹ This profound grasp of the essence of water has earned Ma Yuan's works the praise of being "true living water" (as described by Li Dongyang), achieving outstanding accomplishments in the form of objects, aesthetic connotations, and creative techniques. However, the creative focus of the *Water Scene* leaned more toward demonstrating techniques and preserving pictorial conventions, with a relatively weak emphasis on their status as independent works of art. This characteristic reflects the absence of a water-theme as an independent subject within the traditional painting system. Within specific historical and cultural contexts, painters found it difficult to break free from established creative paradigms. Consequently, the transmission of water techniques after Ma Yuan largely remained confined to technical mastery, failing to foster a conscious awareness or sustained development of water-themed artistic creation. This historical limitation indirectly underscores the necessity and contemporary significance of establishing a theoretical framework and creative practice centered on the water-theme. To avoid misunderstanding, it must be emphasized once again: reflecting on the water-element and advocating for the

water-theme does not negate the existing creative experience, aesthetic paradigms, and artistic achievements of traditional landscape painting. So, what is the significance of promoting the water-theme? In summary, first, it enriches the expressive power of traditional landscape painting. Chinese landscape painting is intrinsically linked to the humanistic philosophy, aesthetic concepts, and living conditions of different eras. Should these aspects remain unchanged, the expressive power of traditional landscape painting would become relatively rigid. We say that brushwork should evolve with the times; landscape painting once did so, and it should do so again today. Second, it helps in breaking free from the formulaic brushwork conventions of traditional landscape painting, liberating artistic creation from the obscuring and constraining effects of these rigid, established methods. Specifically, based on the perspective of water explored in this paper, we aim to expand and enrich its material form (which has always existed, yet remained excluded from creative practice due to the obscuring and constraining influence of ideological and spiritual frameworks), aesthetic style, and creative techniques.

3. Diverse Pathways in Modern and Contemporary Water-Themed Artistic Creation

3.1 Innovation Within Traditional Frameworks: Lu Yanshao's "Cloud-Water Method"

Since modern times, Chinese landscape painting has demonstrated new directions of exploration in water-themed creations, with the artistic practices of Lu Yanshao and Zhou Shaohua holding representative significance.

Lu Yanshao pioneered a unique "Cloud-Water Method" within the traditional ink-and-brush system. He breaks away from traditional watercolor techniques' reliance on linear strokes, using supple, curved brushstrokes to vividly capture the rhythmic flow of water. His work "*Scroll of Perilous Waters in the Gorgeous River*" (figure 3) employs a composition of "discontinuous lines with continuous intent," preserving the calligraphic quality of traditional ink brushwork while endowing the water's momentum with a powerful sense of dynamic expression. This highly abstract and generalized expression of water forms enabled Lu Yanshao to achieve a breakthrough in depicting water-theme within the traditional framework.

3.2 An Exploration Beyond Tradition: Zhou Shaohua's School of "Spirit and Momentum"

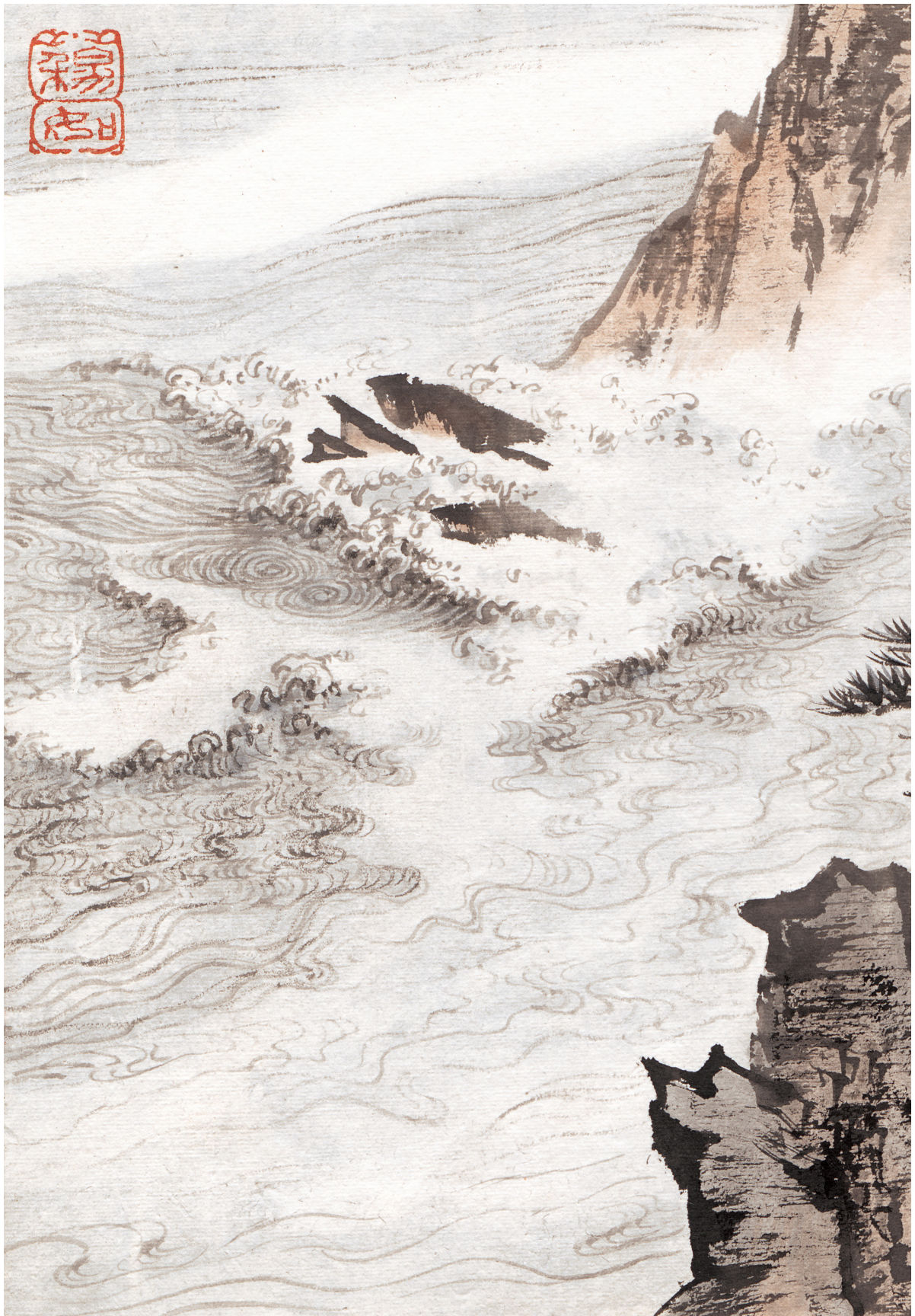


Figure 3. Lu Yanshao, *Scroll of Perilous Waters in the Gorgeous River* (Detail), 42×30cm.

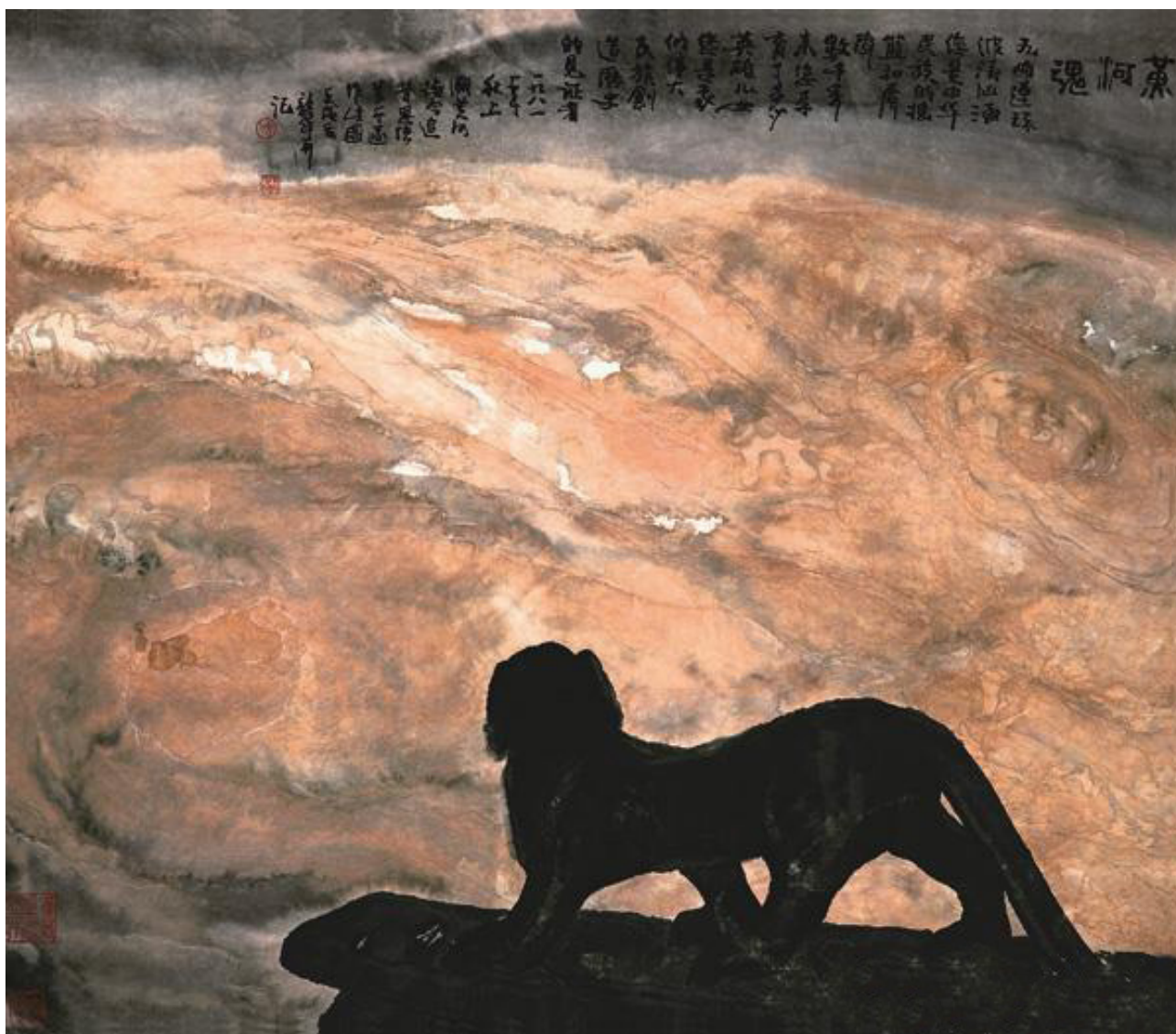


Figure 4. Zhou Shaohua, *The Spirit of the Yellow River*, 1982, ink on paper, 80×94cm. Collection of the National Art Museum of China.

Zhou Shaohua, however, adopted a more radical approach to innovation. Works such as *The Spirit of the Yellow River* and *Symphony of Turbulent Waves* (figures 4, 5) employ a comprehensive contemplation philosophy to construct visually grand and majestic compositions. Despite criticism that he lacks a traditional apprenticeship, Chen Chuanxi defends himself with the Zen principle of “following the law without adhering to the law,” arguing that this self-taught mastery precisely embodies the essence of artistic innovation. Philosopher Deng Xiaomang further points out that Zhou Shaohua’s practice lies not only in technical innovation but also in the pioneering of artistic spirit. In his creative work, technique and spirit form a dialectical unity: technical innovation provides a vehicle for spiritual expression, while spiritual pursuit in turn expands the boundaries

of technique. Though the two artists pursued distinct paths of exploration, they jointly propelled the modern transformation of water-themed expression in Chinese landscape painting. Lu Yanshao seeks breakthroughs within the traditional ink-and-brush system, while Zhou Shaohua pioneers new frontiers by reconstructing the language of brushwork. Their practices offer significant insights for contemporary water-themed creations.

3.3 The Practice of East-West Integration: Insights from Zhang Daqian’s Splashed-Ink Technique

In this section we focus specifically on Zhang Daqian. This is not because he achieved any breakthroughs in water-themed works, but rather due to his successful practice in the realm of mountains—namely, his renowned splashed-color technique. Of course, Liu



Figure 5. Zhou Shaohua, *Symphony of Turbulent Waves*, 1983, ink on paper, 125×248cm. Collection of the National Art Museum of China.

Figure 6. Zhang Daqian, *Ten Thousand Li of the Yangtze River*, 1968, ink on silk, 53.2×1979.5cm. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Haisu was also renowned for his splashed-color technique, but since the purpose here is not a comprehensive analysis, we shall focus solely on Zhang Daqian, a painter with a profound mastery of traditional painting techniques. Critics generally agree that his early works lacked a distinctive personal style. Zhang Daqian's splashed-ink practice emerged in the 1960s, a period when he had already traveled extensively in the West and his artistic vision had expanded beyond traditional painting. It is widely acknowledged in academic circles that Zhang Daqian's splashed-color technique drew inspiration from Western abstract oil painting (figure 6). Of course, on the other hand, there are also traditional references. Traditional landscape painting has always employed the splashed ink technique, and colored landscape painting has also been a longstanding tradition. Replacing ink with color simply becomes splashed color. Zhang integrates traditional brushwork

techniques into his splashed-ink paintings. The abstract elements of splashed ink are often complemented by figurative brushwork, evoking the imagery of verdant mountains and flowing waters rather than Western abstract art. Therefore, both the foundational techniques of brush and ink and the overall artistic conception are traditional, not Western.

The landscapes embody philosophical, existential, ethical, and political concepts central to the Chinese experience. Many of these concepts, or aspects thereof, carry distinct characteristics of their respective eras. When rendered through brush and ink, they consequently take on the defining spirit of their time. Of course, due to the exceptionally stable political and cultural structure of traditional China, these characteristics were sometimes not readily apparent, and this often manifested as a lack of distinctiveness in painting as well. However, this became more apparent in modern times because the

spirit of the times has undergone a significant shift. As we discussed earlier, ancient Chinese thinking on the essence of painting lacked an innovative philosophy—or rather, it did not place innovation at the highest priority. However, this changed in modern times, when people elevated it to the foremost position. Therefore, we can observe that the overall appearance of landscape painting exhibits a greater diversity than in any previous era. The most prominent manifestation of the spirit of the landscape era lies in the political consciousness embedded within landscape paintings. This is evident in the works of artists such as Huang Binhong, Fu Baoshi, Li Keran, Shi Lu, Qian Songyan, Lu Yanshao, Zhang Daqian, and others. Through their artistic practice, they forged a unique brush-and-ink language for landscape painting that defined this era. Such an artistic principle must continue to command our full attention.

4. Innovative Exploration from Water-element to Water-theme

This period, though brief, achieved considerable progress in exploration. The reason lies in the fact that transformation was the dominant intellectual current of the era. As the prevailing trend encompassed a comprehensive reexamination and critique of tradition—often extending to outright rejection—the shortcomings and deficiencies of tradition became strikingly apparent, accompanied by profound insights. This clarity, however, was frequently tempered by one-sidedness and extremism. Moreover, with the eastward spread of Western learning, artists of this era gained access to the characteristics, achievements, and experiences of foreign painting traditions, broadening their horizons beyond any previous dynasty. In summary, during this period, in terms of water-element and water-theme, compared to the entire preceding historical era, there were both achievements and shortcomings which are, respectively: first, works featuring water-theme have noticeably increased, meaning that explorations and achievements in the physical forms, aesthetic styles, and creative techniques of water have become more diverse and abundant, no longer as singular and thin as before; second, scholarly achievements in the theory and principles of painting concerning water remain scarce. While this period has seen tremendous progress and extremely rich accomplishments in painting theory and principles overall, the field of water-related painting has yet to undergo a qualitative transformation—or even significant quantitative change. In other words, we must continue to liberate and explore, forging new ground.

Beyond the insights of our ancestors, we must cultivate our own discernment and forge a primal connection with nature that is uniquely our own. Establishing this connection requires us to return to the ancient tradition of drawing inspiration from nature and its primordial wisdom, thereby building our own experience of mountains and waters. Here, the author's revision of drawing inspiration from ancient and modern times to drawing inspiration from East and West signifies that landscape painting is fundamentally a universal artistic theme. While Japan's influence from China is self-evident, Western artists have also made significant innovations in this genre. We must cultivate a broader artistic perspective, recognizing that creative practices from beyond our borders should also serve as valuable references. Zhang Daqian, as mentioned earlier, stands as a prime example of this approach.

Let us examine Pan Tianshou and Kong Zhongqi's collaborative work, *Waves of the East Sea* (figure 7). Based on a corner of Qianbusha Beach on Putuo Mountain, they personally visited the site to sketch from life, revising the draft three times before completing this monumental masterpiece. First, this is a classic example of drawing inspiration from nature, resulting in a significant breakthrough in the depiction of water's physical form. Second, the composition of this painting is highly distinctive: water occupies approximately eighty percent of the canvas, with only a small portion of mountains and pine trees in the lower left corner and some distant, rolling hills in the upper right. This highlights the theme of water, with the central expanse of water displaying an oceanic and surging momentum. This is a quintessential example of landscape painting of its era, meaning the artwork carries distinct messages of the spirit of the times.

In terms of creative techniques, there are also some new directions worth exploring. First, composition. Traditional landscape paintings often feature overly simplistic compositions of water, which is precisely the first limitation we must overcome. Beyond Pan Tianshou and Kong Zhongqi's *Waves of the East Sea* mentioned earlier, Fu Baoshi and Guan Shanyue's renowned painting, *How Majestic the Mountains and Rivers Are* also shows significant innovation in its layout. Second, in terms of brushwork and ink language, Lu Yanshao exemplifies this. Frankly speaking, there were scarcely any breakthroughs in this regard before the Qing Dynasty. Ma Yuan made the boldest and most diverse explorations, and few have surpassed him since. In modern times, there have been many welcome breakthroughs; however, in the author's view, this is far from sufficient. Third, in terms of coloration traditional



Figure 7. Pan Tianshou and Kong Zhongqi, *Waves of the East Sea*, 1960, ink on paper, 157×253.5cm. Collection of the Great Hall of the People.



Figure 8. Katsushika Hokusai, *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, 1831, Japanese ukiyo-e woodblock print, 26×38.5cm. Collection of Kanagawa Prefecture, Japan.



Figure 9. Liu Liping, *The Wise Find Joy in Water 97*, 2014, ink and color on paper, 100×55cm. Private collection.

approaches faced significant limitations and lacked truly groundbreaking explorations. However, remarkable breakthroughs emerged in mountain-themed works, extending into modern times. Examples include Zhang Daqian's splashed-ink technique mentioned earlier, as well as Li Keran's *Red Mountains*, another successful work that achieved a breakthrough in color expression. The monotonous treatment of water issues has been profoundly influenced by traditional philosophical perspectives. The author has undertaken a series of

creative explorations into the physical forms of six types of water: coastal waters, rivers and lakes, ponds and pools, streams and brooks, waterfalls, and snowmelt. For instance, inspired by Katsushika Hokusai's Japanese ukiyo-e print *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* (figure 8), the author created *The Wise Find Joy in Water 97* (figure 9). The colossal waves convey a sense of nature's majestic power. Breaking through conventional spatial visual effects, people and vessels are minimized to serve merely as decorative elements within the composition,

creating a stark contrast against towering waves. This approach disrupts traditional representations of maritime and riverine landscapes, emphasizing humanity's insignificance and insignificance within nature. It restores the mystique inherent in water's natural form and transcends human visual perception of spatial dimensions. Although inspired by Katsushika Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, this work differs in technique, material, and concept. Hokusai employed woodblock printing to depict the massive wave, utilizing a relatively realistic approach. In contrast, the author creates through experimentation with the forms of river and sea phenomena and the theme of water.

In summary, the treatment of water surfaces also differs from traditional landscape painting. The innovative approach to depicting water employs the technique of layered coloring, using mineral pigments or tube paints in Chinese painting. Through the accumulation of color and ink, the visual effect of shimmering water surfaces is achieved. Finally, a thin layer of color is applied over the entire composition, lending it a rich, rounded quality while maintaining transparent, vibrant hues (figure 10). This creates a realm of boundless artistic resonance. Of course, this is merely the transformation of practice into theoretical summaries. In actual practice, the techniques employed in each piece are unique. The highest realm of practice lies in the realm beyond words—where the absence of method itself becomes the method. This technique of painting water surfaces by applying color to the surface was not employed in ancient landscape paintings depicting water-element. Many contemporary landscape painters have consistently focused their creative endeavors on the water-element within Chinese landscape painting, aiming to elevate this element into a central thematic focus. Innovation in water techniques—ultimately, all innovation must be realized through technique. In terms of technical breakthroughs, the following attempts were made:

1. The breakthrough in composition, simply put, is about framing. Composition alters the visual form of a painting, and form dictates content. Trees, mountains, rocks, and waterfalls are rendered using a perspective that diminishes depth through a combination of distant and near planes, creating a sense of receding space. The composition centers on expansive water, employing a technique that blends color with ink. Water crashes against rocks, waves surge and roar. Lines and planes, color and ink, stillness and motion—mountain rocks and water form a striking contrast. Combined with the painting's large scale, the effect it presents is entirely different from traditional water landscapes.

2. By leveraging the inherent properties of rice paper, the ink

traces and marks naturally diffuse across the raw paper according to the flow of water, forming new water patterns that emerge from one's imagination.

However, this technique demands immense confidence and precision from the artist. Mastery over the volume, thickness, intensity, direction, speed, and form of water is essential to control the overall composition and render distant water patterns with ink and color that are both distinct and gradually fading.

3. In executing water techniques, one may incorporate materials like soy milk, milk, or laundry detergent into ink or color. Alternatively, collage or incense burns can be employed to create water ripple effects. Technically, every conceivable method should be explored—no means are off-limits, or rather, all means are utilized to serve the purpose. The core principle is to deeply explore water techniques and maximize their potential efficacy.

5. Conclusion

This paper systematically reviews the traditional depiction of water-element in Chinese landscape painting and conducts an in-depth analysis of innovative practices on the water-theme by modern and contemporary artists, including the author's own work. It proposes a theoretical framework for establishing the water-theme as an independent creative category. The significance of its advocacy for water-theme lies in two aspects: first, enriching the expressive power of traditional landscape painting; second, breaking free from the formulaic brushwork conventions of traditional landscape painting, liberating artistic creation from the obscuring and constraining effects of these rigid, established methods. The central idea of this study is that both theory and practice aspire to see more water-themed phenomena emerge, thereby expanding and enriching the connotations of traditional landscape painting.

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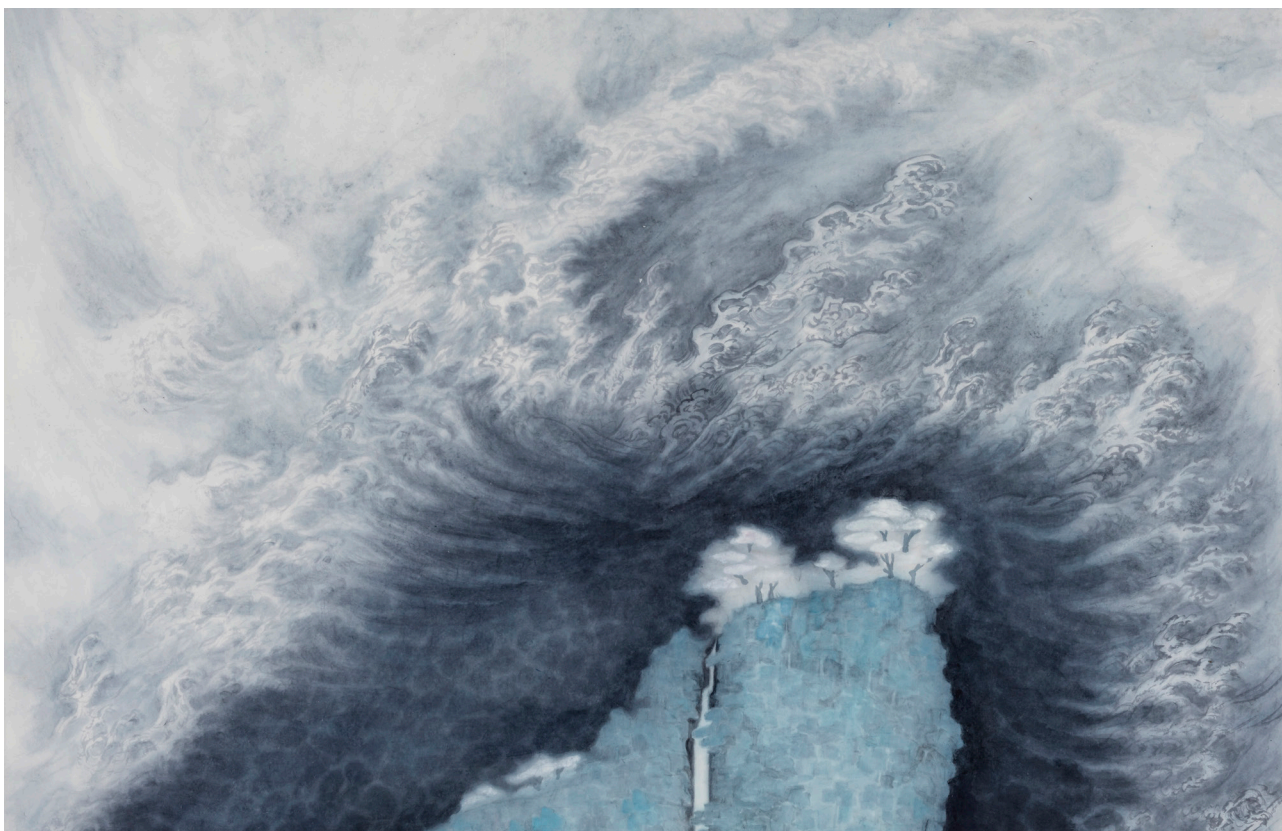


Figure 10. Liu Liping, *The Wise Find Joy in Water 177*, 2017, ink and color on paper, 225×143cm. Collection of White Space, Singapore.

ENDNOTES

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9. *Ibid.*

從水元素到水主題：中國山水畫的創作轉型研究

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摘要：本文突破傳統“山水合一”的研究範式，提出“水主題”獨立創作體系的理論主張。通過構建“水元素 - 水主題”的二元分析框架，系統梳理了傳統山水畫中水元素長期處於從屬地位的歷史成因，揭示了“超穩定結構”對水主題發展的制約機制。在分析馬遠《水圖》等歷史案例的基礎上，重點考察了近現代藝術家在水主題創作上的多元化探索，提出“師造化 + 意出中外”的創新發展路徑，為當代中國山水畫的轉型提供理論支撐和實踐參考。

關鍵詞：水主題；師造化；超穩定結構；創新；水墨語言