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# Tai Xiangzhou's Parallel Universes

Richard Vinograd

Tai Xiangzhou's ink paintings have long visualized parallel worlds—both the historical realities of famous scholar's rocks, depicted to scale with meticulous recreations of their metamorphic shapes, and imaginary realms with explosive visions of cosmogenic scenes in his extended *Celestial Chaos* series. Both modes are represented in the present exhibition, sometimes further divided in their evocations. A mountain-form rock with pointed spires, titled *Scenery of Kunlun*, dense with descriptive detail of fissures and hollows, on closer inspection seems not only overgrown with twiggy vines and roots but partly composed from them, along with

ghostly shapes suggestive of horse and bird skulls. The cosmic realm is envisioned in most of Tai's images, very powerfully in a large triptych, aptly titled *Parallel Universe # 5*, where cloudy nebulae commingle with folded and hollow rocks, floating and hurtling through space, at times evoking vestiges of a starry paleontology.

All the other paintings presented here belong to a series titled *Kunlun*, another site of parallel, doubled associations, referencing both a physical mountain range in far western China and the Western Mountains of ancient Han Dynasty myth, legend, and artistic imaginings, the abode of the Queen Mother of the West

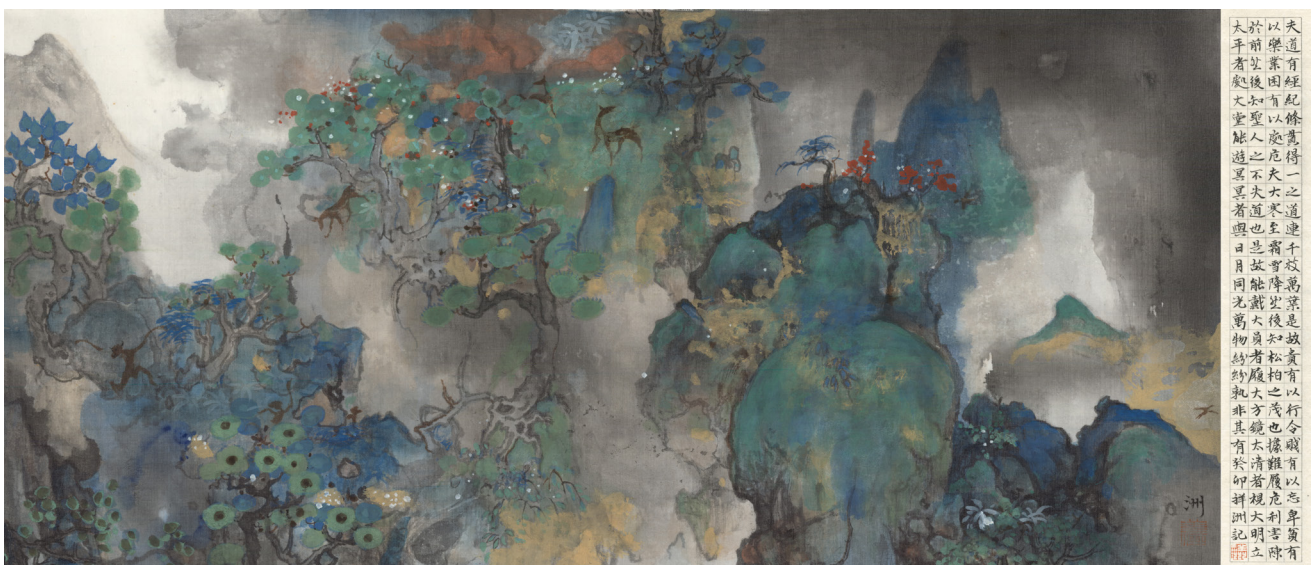


Figure 1. TAI Xiangzhou. *Grasses and Trees Luxuriantly Blooming*. Ink on silk, 12.4×28.9in, 2023. Qualia Contemporary Art.

天下有始以為天下母既得其母  
以知其子既知其子復守其母沒  
身不殆塞其兌閉其門終身不  
動開其兌濟其事終身不救見  
小曰明守柔曰強用其光復歸其  
明無遺身殃是謂彘常使我介  
然而有知行於大道惟施是畏大道  
甚夷而民好徑朝甚除田甚蕪倉  
甚虛服父彩帶利劍厭飲食資  
財有餘是謂盜夸非道也哉善  
達者不拔善抱者不脫子孫祭祀  
不輟脩之身其德乃真脩之家其  
德乃餘脩之鄉其德乃長脩之國  
其德乃豐脩之天下其德乃普故以  
身觀身以家觀家以鄉觀鄉以國  
觀國以天下觀天下吾何以知天下  
之然哉以此含德之厚比於赤子毒  
蟲不螫猛獸不據攫鳥不搏青弱  
筋柔而握固未和牝牡之合而皦作  
精之至也終日號而嗑不暖之和之至也  
知和曰常知常曰明益生曰祥心使  
氣曰強物壯則老是謂不道不道  
早已知者不言言者不知塞其兌  
閉其門挫其銳解其紛和其光同  
其塵是謂玄同不可得而親不可  
得而疏不可得而利不可得而害不  
可得而賤故為天下貴以正治國以  
奇用兵以無事取天下吾何以知其  
然哉以此天下多忌諱而民弇貧  
民多利器國家滋昏人多伎巧奇  
物滋起法令滋彰盜賊多有故聖  
人云我無為而民自化我好靜而民  
自正我無事而民自富我無欲而  
民自樸我無情而民自清祥洲



Figure 2. TAI Xiangzhou. Scenery of Kunlun. Ink on paper, 35.4×27.6in, 2023. Qualia Contemporary Art.

and her creatural retinues. In many of these, the phantasmatic forms that await discovery in the *Scenery of Kunlun* rockery become explicit renderings of dragons, phoenixes, hybrid creatures, and human transcendent and immortal figures thought to inhabit such regions. The new imagery in these paintings appears in *Spirit Roams with Transformations*, where a deer-like creature sits in a human pose atop a vaporous arc emitted by a blocky boulder floating above roiling waves, each element transforming into the next. Tai's paintings of celestial regions and earthly rocks always harbor the potential to generate illusory forms, but in the *Kunlun* series, these are specific, even though imaginary creatures, realized myths.

Most of the *Kunlun* paintings carry Tai Xiangzhou's essayistic calligraphic inscriptions as accompanying commentaries. These are couched in the language and discourse of early Daoist philosophers such as Zhuangzi, concerned with primordial metaphysics of origins and existences, and full of paradoxical constructions: "Before existence began, there existed nothingness; when Heaven and Earth had not yet been split open, *Yin* and *Yang* had not yet been separated, the four seasons not yet distinguished, the myriad things of the world not yet generated. The vast tranquility and stillness was limpid;

no one saw its form..."

Such passages are reminders that Tai Xiangzhou is a contemporary scholar-artist, who takes seriously his engagements with Chinese intellectual and creative traditions, and wrote a Ph.D dissertation on "Concept and Structure in Chinese Landscape Painting". Tai has occasionally recreated specific historical painting compositions in his own work, often by masters of Song-era monumental landscape painting such as Fan Kuan. In the present exhibition *Abundant Gloom on Jade Gate Mountain* incorporates vignettes from *Early Spring* by Guo Xi, another eleventh-century landscape painter, including a level-distance recession at the left edge and multi-layered waterfalls in the upper central area, interspersed among the vaporous mists and dynamic rocky bluffs of Tai's characteristic manner. A further step beyond art-historical reference appears in *Dragons Circle the Nine Heavens*, where a similar region of hollowed rocks, cliffs and brooding clouds is enlivened by a very tangible dragon plunging from behind a tall bluff, as if the metaphorical "dragon-veins" of landscape energies had come to life. The conceit calls to mind the late Song dynasty Daoist painter Chen Rong's famous scroll of *Nine Dragons*, where the creatures seem to have congealed from surrounding dynamic swirls of mist

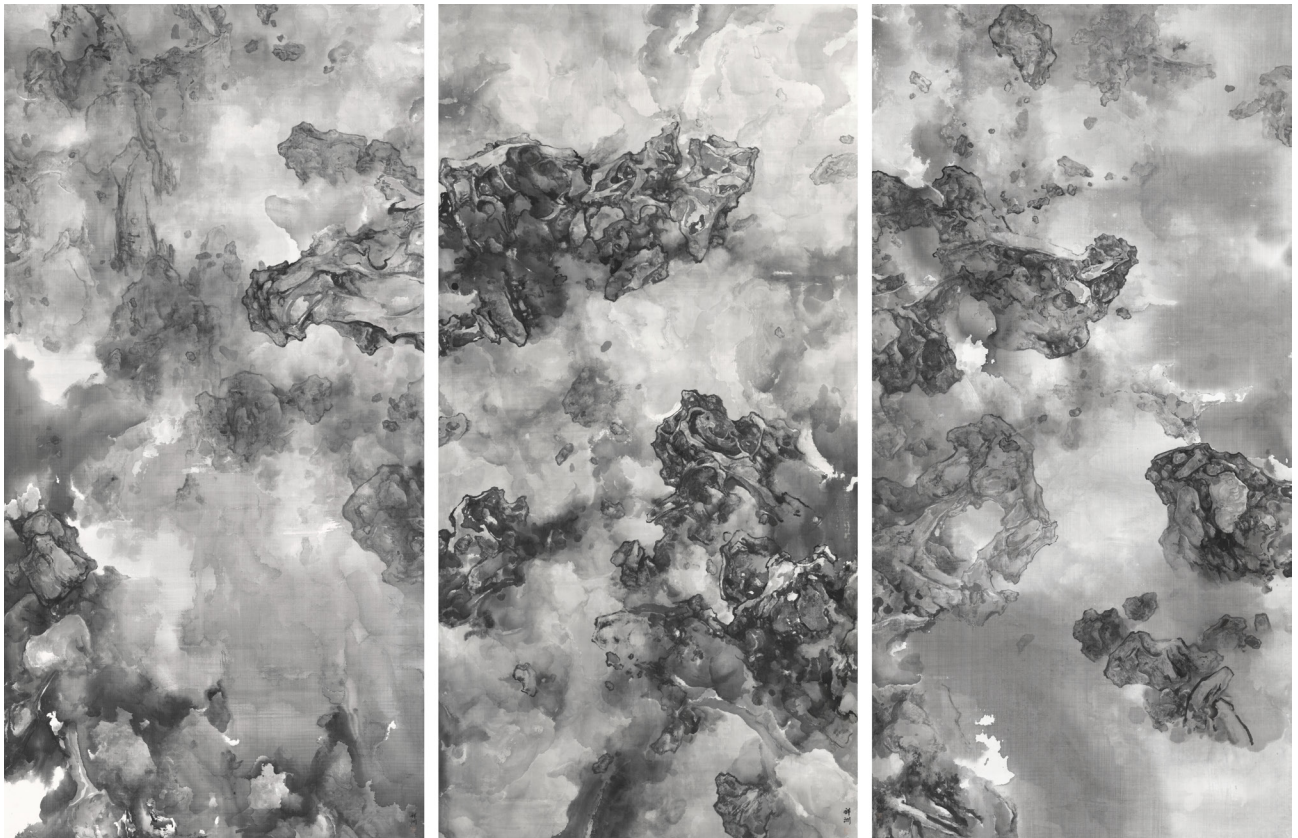


Figure 3. TAI Xiangzhou. *Parallel Universe No.5-Kang Chi, Tian Tian, She Ti*. Ink on silk, 78.7×39. 4in×3, 2023. Qualia Contemporary Art.



Figure 4. TAI Xiangzhou. *Dragon of Heaven*. Ink on silk, 51.6×46.9in, 2022. Qualia Contemporary Art.

and cliffs.

Tai Xiangzhou's pictorial realm of Kunlun is populated by a full array of real and imaginary creatures—oxen, dragons, phoenixes, deer and various hybrids of human and animal forms—as well as mythical wind and thunder spirits and figures such as Feng Yi, shown riding another dragon, one of several such pairings. These are mostly monochromatic regions of inky clouds and vapors, floating stones and roiling seas, but a couple of

images are brightly colored, including the horizontal composition *Myriad Things*.

Here a dragon-headed creature dressed in human costume kneels and gestures as if summoning the scene of mineral blue and green floating boulders and caverns, and a giant red-plumed bird. This seems another image of primordial coalescence, but *Grasses and Trees Luxuriantly Blooming* presents a blue and green forested landscape, occupied by flying birds, roaming deer, and

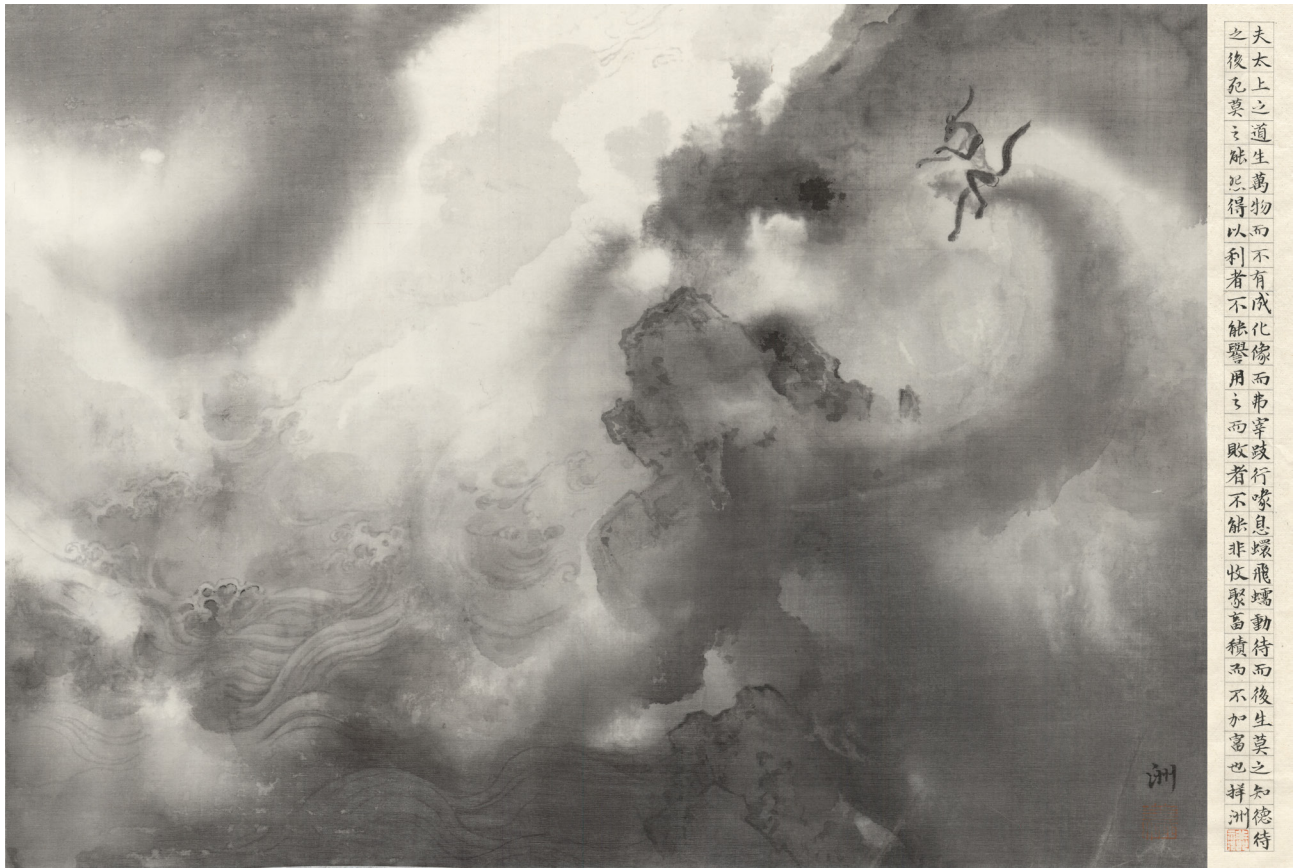


Figure 5. TAI Xiangzhou. *Spirit Roams with Transformations*. Ink on silk, 14×20.9in, 2023. Qualia Contemporary Art.

monkeys—still an imaginary region, but with the promise of habitat.

Richard Vinograd, the Christensen Fund Professor in Asian Art at Stanford University, has specialized in Chinese art since 1989. His research areas include Chinese portraiture, landscape painting, cultural geography, and art theory. He authored “Boundaries of the Self: Chinese Portraits, 1600-1900” and co-authored “Chinese Art & Culture” and “Ink Worlds: Contemporary Chinese Painting”. His latest book is “Facing China: Truth and Memory in Portraiture”. His scholarly contributions extend to numerous articles, chapters, papers, and essays on topics from tenth-century painting to contemporary transnational arts.

TAI Xiangzhou (b. 1968) studied under masters Hu Gongshi and Wang Wenjun, and Feng Qiyong, an expert in traditional Chinese culture. With academic credentials from Auckland’s Media Design School and Tsinghua University, Beijing, TAI divides his time between Beijing and Auckland. His works, featured in exhibitions worldwide, are held in distinguished collections such as the Art Institute of Chicago, Brooklyn Museum, Asian Art Museum, Seattle Art Museum, and Harvard University. His significant exhibition venues span across the U.S., China, the United Arab Emirates, Italy, and he is a notable presence in renowned international art fairs such as Art Basel Miami Beach and Hong Kong.

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