SHANSHUI PROJECTS: 1ST INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM

THE POETICS OF SILENCE

THE MOUNTAIN IN ART AND LITERATURE

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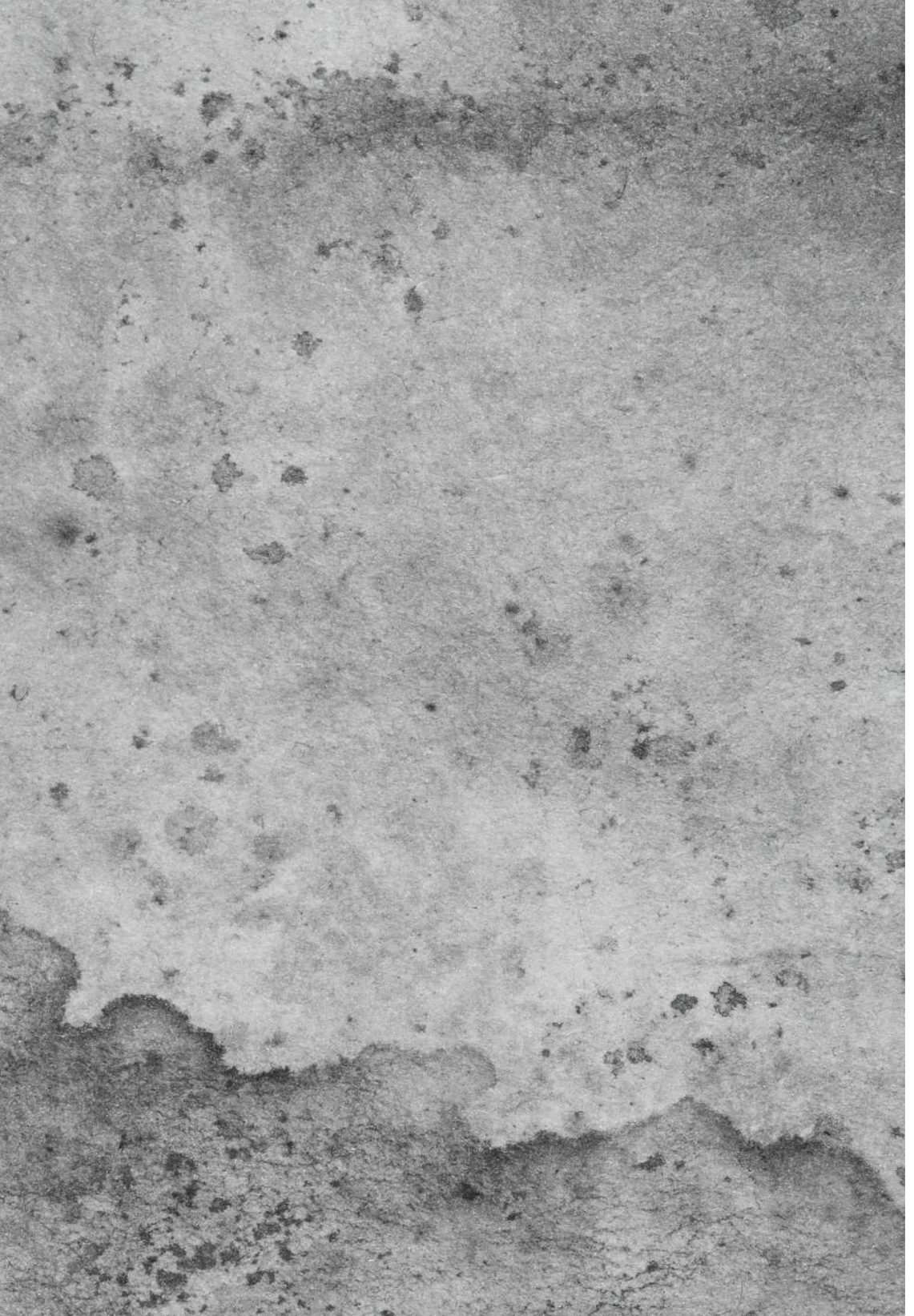

PROCEEDINGS OF SHANSHUI PROJECTS 1ST INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM, 18-19 OCTOBER 2024

THE POETICS OF SILENCE

THE MOUNTAIN IN ART AND LITERATURE

静谧的诗学

艺术与文学中的山

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PREFACE

At a time marked by climate crisis and an ever-widening rift between humanity and nature, the *Shanshui Projects 1st International Symposium: The Poetics of Silence – The Mountain in Art and Literature* invites reflection on the role of mountains in artistic and literary imagination—not merely as aesthetic subjects, but as spaces for ethical and ecological reckoning.

Mountains, with their imposing presence, have long inspired both awe and reverence, serving as thresholds between the earthly and the transcendent, the human and the wild. They challenge our relationship with the environment, questioning anthropocentric perspectives and opening pathways to deeper engagement with the natural world. This volume brings together multidisciplinary contributions that explore the mountain as allegory, as a realm of silence and resistance, a source of spirituality.

Through the voices of scholars and artists from diverse backgrounds, the proceedings of this symposium—organized by Shanshui Projects in collaboration with the College of Fine Arts of Huaqiao University and the Academy for West-Eastern Dialogue of Cultures (Akademie für west-östlichen Dialog der Kulturen)—seek to build bridges between cultures and disciplines. They suggest that art and literature can serve as vital tools in reimagining a more sustainable balance with nature.

Whether as pilgrimage destinations, sanctuaries, or symbols of a threatened wilderness, mountains call us to deeper contemplation—to an aesthetics of silence that may well be the only poetry capable of guiding us forward.

The Editors

Giacomo Bruni, Zuha Rasheed

Introduction

Since the dawn of civilization, mountains have held a privileged place in the human imagination. Far more than mere geographical features, they have emerged as powerful and ambivalent presences, embodying spiritual, philosophical, and aesthetic symbols of extraordinary complexity. They have been venerated as the abodes of gods, feared as inhospitable and untamed realms, and contemplated as sources of inspiration and introspection. This collection arises from a desire to explore how diverse cultural, religious, and artistic traditions have interpreted, represented, and experienced mountains, transforming them into mirrors of humanity's deepest tensions and aspirations.

In ancient cultures, the mountain stands as an axis mundi—a sacred pillar connecting heaven, earth, and the underworld. This archetype recurs in strikingly similar forms across traditions: Mount Meru in Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist cosmologies; biblical Sinai; China's Kunlun; or Greece's Olympus and Athos. Indigenous cultures, such as the Sámi, likewise recognize mountains as cosmic and sacred. It is no surprise, then, that this symbolic verticality inspired sacred architecture: Egyptian pyramids, Mesopotamian ziggurats, and Mesoamerican temples all sought, through form, to echo humanity's yearning for the divine.

In China, the mountain (*shan* 山) has held a central role in spirituality, aesthetics, and philosophy since antiquity. For Daoism, it is a place of retreat, regeneration, and the pursuit of immortality. Buddhism built temples and monasteries upon them, forging a profound symbiosis between natural landscape and spiritual presence. A quintessential example is the *Shanhai Jing* (《山海经》, Classic of Mountains and Seas, 4th century BCE), a mythological compendium describing peaks inhabited by fantastical beings, miraculous plants, and local deities. In *shanshui* (山水, "mountain-water") painting, mountains are never mere backdrops; they are living presences, interlocutors with whom humans seek harmony and contemplation.

In the West, the relationship with mountains has been more ambivalent. For centuries, they were viewed with suspicion—associated with primordial, untamed forces. The Greeks placed deities like Dionysus, symbol of ecstasy and chaos, upon their slopes; the Romans preferred cultivable, controllable lowlands. In the Christian Middle Ages, mountains were seen as sites of hermitage but also spiritual peril, where the devil tempted saints and nature revealed its harshest face. They were often relegated to the realm of wild beasts, outlaws, and those marginalized by civilization.

Yet even in medieval and Renaissance Europe, mountains inspired scholarly and contemplative engagement. A notable example is Valerio Faenzi's *De montium origine* (1561), a lesser-known but remarkable text compiling ten theories on the origins of mountains, revealing how Renaissance thinkers sought to reconcile scientific inquiry with lingering mythic and theological frameworks.

A pivotal moment in the Western imagination was Petrarch's ascent of Mont Ventoux in 1336. His account oscillates between awe at the alpine vista and a self-reproach (guided by Augustine) for admiring creation over the Creator and ourselves. Here, we glimpse an early, if unresolved, attempt to recognize landscape as an aesthetic category.

Until the 18th century, Western appreciation for mountains remained rare. Leslie Stephen (father of Virginia Woolf and a pioneering mountaineer) captured this tension in *The Playground of Europe*, recounting a Swiss mountain guide's preference for London's "dreary expanse of chimney-pots" over the view from Mont Blanc—a stark contrast to the Romantic reverence that would soon follow.

With Romanticism, mountains gained full aesthetic and symbolic dignity. Artists like Caspar David Friedrich and poets like Percy Bysshe Shelley enshrined them as realms of the sublime: spaces where humans confront their fragility before nature's grandeur, yet also find revelation and spiritual connection. In *Mont Blanc* (1816), Shelley writes: "The wilderness has a mysterious tongue / Which teaches awful doubt"—capturing the Romantic intuition of mountains as both wondrous and unsettling, elevating and humbling.

In our contemporary world, marked by climate crisis and a growing disconnect from nature, redefining humanity's bond with mountains becomes not just a cultural pursuit but an ethical imperative. Western radical environmentalism—from Arne Naess's deep ecology—echoes Daoist wisdom, urging a symbiotic rather than domineering relationship with the natural world.

This volume, then, is an invitation to rediscover mountains not as passive scenery or exploitable resources, but as living interlocutors and silent teachers. In their stillness, in the ancient wisdom of their peaks, lies a guide to renewed awareness. They offer paths to reconnection: with ourselves, with slowness, with resilience. They teach humility in an age obsessed with noise, spectacle, and speed. To retreat "into the mountains," as in Chinese tradition, is to suspend distraction and reclaim clarity. Each essay in this collection adds a tessera to the mosaic, revealing how mountains have inspired—and continue to inspire—poets, philosophers, and seekers of meaning.

If we learn to listen, mountains may yet be our greatest teachers. They lift the spirit, purify the mind, and quiet the heart. In a world racing toward the oblivion of its own soul, their ancient, silent presence might remind us how to live.

Giacomo Bruni

The Mountain as a Symbol of the Human-Nature-Society Relationship in Chinese Photography and 'Post-*Shanshui* Art'

By; Marco Meccarelli

Mountains have long been central symbols in Chinese culture, sacred spaces where humans, nature, and society converge. In traditional landscape painting (*shanshui hua* 山水画), mountains transcend their natural form to become metaphors for cosmic order, spirituality, and the pursuit of inner harmony. The depiction of roads or paths in traditional Chinese art often guides the viewer's eye deeper into the work. These pathways create a sense of physical and spiritual journey, inviting the observer to engage with the landscape on multiple levels. Traditional Chinese landscape painting conveys a sense of time within a static image by using compositional rhythm, depth, and symbolic cues, rather than relying on narrative progression. This blending of time and space creates a meditative experience, where the landscape is not merely a snapshot of nature but a reflection of a larger, cosmic order.

When photography was introduced in China and developed as an art form, many photographers adopted the visual and symbolic style of traditional *shanshui* painting. Mountains continued to link the spiritual and physical worlds, reflecting the same philosophical ideas as in the paintings. However, as China modernized rapidly, the role of mountains in art began to change, especially in the artistic movement known as "post-shanshui art". We explore how mountains have been reinterpreted in Chinese photography and post-*shanshui* art, showing the changing relationship between humans, nature, and society.

Certain compositional and aesthetic features of landscape painting

In the Chinese artistic tradition, painting has never been regarded as an isolated or autonomous art form; rather, it has historically been integrated into a broader system of literati practices that also includes calligraphy and poetry. Together, these 'Three Perfections' (*sanjue* 三绝) form a unified mode of expression, where image, writing, and gesture are interdependent and mutually reinforcing.[1] Still, it is understood as an integral component of brush arts, a triadic practice that encompasses poetry, calligraphy, and painting, typically in that hierarchical order of cultural significance. This interrelatedness reflects a broader aesthetic and philosophical unity wherein each medium enhances and complements the others. It is common for paintings to be inscribed with poems, composed by the original artist or added later by admirers, connoisseurs, or subsequent owners. These inscriptions serve not merely as decorative additions but as interpretive extensions that deepen the emotional and symbolic resonance of the visual composition. The poems guide the viewer's perception, enriching the landscape's affective and intellectual dimensions.[2]

1 Benedetti L. Meccarelli M. *Le tre perfezioni dei letterati cinesi.* Vol. 1: Dalle origini al XIV secolo (Roma: Orientalia editrice, 2024).

2 Jonathan Chaves, "'Meaning Beyond the Painting': The Chinese Painter as Poet," in *Words and Images: Chinese Poetry, Calligraphy, and Painting,* ed. Alfreda Murck and Wen C. Fong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 431-458.

Often described as "voiceless poems" (*wusheng zhi shi* 无声之诗), Chinese brush paintings aim to convey a sense of immediacy and expressive vitality.[3] The ideal painting, according to classical Chinese aesthetics, embodies *qiyun shengdong* 气韵生动, a concept that signifies the presence of rhythmic vitality and inner spirit. [4] This principle goes beyond technical proficiency, emphasizing the artist's capacity to animate the work with a living spirit that reflects both emotional depth and cultivated perception. *Qiyun shengdong* thus represents a synthesis of external form and internal energy, where the brushwork becomes a conduit for the dynamic expression of the artist's heart-mind (*xin* 心). Central to this aesthetic are spontaneity, freshness of perception, and the intensity of realization, qualities that are inseparable from the nature of the materials used. The ink, brush, and paper demand an immediacy of execution: once a brushstroke is made, it cannot be corrected or erased. As a result, the painter must carry a fully formed mental image before touching brush to paper, translating internal vision into external form in a single, fluid gesture. This method privileges not revision but the clarity of thought and the disciplined intuition that guides the hand in real time.

The artistic process in Chinese landscape painting begins with the artist deeply internalizing the external natural world as they perceive it. This means the painter first absorbs and contemplates the landscape, not just as a physical scene but as a source of spiritual and emotional inspiration. The next step transforms this natural environment into a symbolic expression of the artist's inner thoughts, feelings, and worldview. The resulting painted landscape thus becomes more than a mere depiction of nature; it acts as a cosmogram-a visual map or representation of the cosmos that reflects the artist's understanding of the universe and their place within it.[5] In this way, the painting embodies a harmonious unity between the external world and the artist's inner life, conveying profound philosophical and spiritual meanings rooted in the Chinese cosmological worldview.[6]

The elements of classical Chinese painting are thus not only depictions of nature but also representations of the features the artist considers most essential and meaningful within the natural environment. This synthesis of external and internal, spatial and temporal, makes Chinese landscape

3 The term "voiceless poems" in Chinese aesthetics often refers metaphorically to landscape paintings that evoke the silent poetry of nature-the hills and rivers themselves-as if they were poems without sound. This concept extends the meaning of poetry beyond words to the visual and emotional expression found in scenery, suggesting that landscapes can communicate poetic meaning silently through their forms and atmospheres.

4 Among the most influential concepts in the history of Chinese aesthetics are the Six Principles of Painting (*liufa* 六法), articulated by Xie He 谢赫 (died after 532) in the preface to his treatise *Gu Huapin Lu* 古画品录 (*A Record of the Classification of Ancient Painters*). The foremost principle, *qiyun shengdong*, refers to the dynamic and vital energy that animates a successful work of art. In this context, *qiyun* 气韵 signifies the inner vitality or essential nature of the subject, its intrinsic reality, captured through the painter's expressive brushwork and cultivated sensibility. See Wang Shixiang 王世襄, *Zhongguo hualun yanjiu* 中国画论研究 (*Studies on Chinese Painting Theory*)(Beijing: Sanlianshudian, 2013), vol. 1, 24–25.

5 Marco Meccarelli, "Painting with Light and Shadow: Theoretical and Technical Assumptions of Pictorial Landscape in Chinese Photography," in *Italian Association for Chinese Studies. Selected Papers 4*, ed. Attilio Andreini and Federica Passi (Venezia: Libreria Editrice Cafoscarina, 2022), 69–85.

6 A traditional understanding of the universe as an interconnected, dynamic system where nature, humans, and the cosmos are harmoniously linked, shaped by principles from classical Chinese thought. See Anne Birrell, *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

painting a profound reflection of both the world and the self.
Thus, in traditional art, the mountain was more than just a natural feature; it was a symbol of cosmic order and human striving for inner balance and unity with nature. It served as a metaphor for moral and spiritual ideals.

The Traditional Role of Mountains in Chinese Landscape Art

To understand how the role of mountains in art has changed, it's important to first look at their traditional role in *shanshui hua*. The term *shanshui* 山水, meaning "mountain-water," refers to the key elements of these paintings, which often carried deep philosophical meanings, particularly linked to Daoist and Confucian thought.[7] Daoist philosophy, with its emphasis on *wu wei* 无为, or non-action, and the pursuit of harmony with the *Dao* 道, deeply influenced this tradition, which values living by nature. Confucian ideals, stressing social order and the cultivation of virtue, encouraged a balance between humans and the world, viewing landscape painting as a means to contemplate moral principles. The way *shanshui hua* depicted mountains emphasized their height, using perspectives that made viewers feel as if they were being drawn upward, symbolizing spiritual ascent. The use of empty space around the mountains also reflected Daoist principles of *wu wei*. Rather than promoting literal inactivity, *wu wei* encourages acting in harmony with the natural flow of the universe, allowing things to unfold spontaneously without force or resistance. In this sense, empty space symbolizes stillness and openness, creating a balance that aligns with natural forces and invites a sense of tranquillity and unity with the environment. This approach embodies the idea that true harmony and effectiveness arise not from aggressive effort but from gentle, unforced alignment with the world's inherent rhythms.

Within the Chinese artistic tradition, each landscape — and consequently every mountain depicted in painting — was understood not merely as a representation of the external world, but as an expression of the *xin*, the heart-mind of the painter. Far from being a neutral or objective rendering of nature, the painted mountain embodied the artist's inner state, moral cultivation, and philosophical reflection. The act of painting a landscape was thus an introspective process through which the external scenery became infused with the rhythms, emotions, and thoughts of the individual. In this way, the mountain in Chinese painting served as both a mirror of the cosmos and a projection of the self, revealing the deep interconnection between inner life and the natural world.

7 These two natural elements—mountains and water—are not merely compositional features; they symbolize complementary forces within the cosmos, reflecting the Daoist principles of balance and harmony between *yin* and *yang*. The mountain, stable and unmoving, is associated with strength, stillness, and permanence (*yang*), while water, fluid and yielding, represents softness, adaptability, and impermanence (*yin*). Together, they articulate the dynamic equilibrium central to Daoist cosmology, which values the interdependence and cyclical transformation of all things in nature. In addition to their Daoist connotations, *shanshui* landscapes also resonate with Confucian ideals. Mountains were often linked with the moral integrity and elevated virtue of the *junzi* 君子, the cultivated gentleman-scholar. Painting or contemplating such landscapes was therefore not merely aesthetic, but also ethical and intellectual—a way to cultivate inner harmony, self-discipline, and moral clarity. Through *shanshui hua*, the artist did not strive to replicate the natural world as it appeared, but rather to express an inner vision of the world as it ought to be: ordered, harmonious, and infused with meaning. This synthesis of visual form and metaphysical insight distinguishes *shanshui* from Western traditions of landscape representation, anchoring it firmly within a Chinese cultural and philosophical framework.

Mountains are imbued with profound symbolic meaning in both Chinese and Indian cosmological traditions. In Chinese thought, they often represent the ascent of life—a metaphor for the individual's journey marked by winding, arduous paths toward self-cultivation and harmony with *tian* 天, a complex notion encompassing heaven, moral principle, and cosmic order.[8] The mountain thus becomes a liminal space between earth and sky, matter and spirit. Similarly, the mountain holds a sacred place in Indian cosmology, where it is frequently envisioned as the womb of the earth—a generative, maternal force that connects the human realm to the divine.[9] Across both traditions, the mountain stands as more than a physical landmark: it is a symbol of transformation, elevation, and the soul's striving toward transcendence.
In classical landscape painting, particularly during the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties—periods renowned for their flourishing arts and culture—mountains were often seen as symbols of the sacred and the sublime. These images were linked to ideas of immortality, spiritual enlightenment, and retreat from the troubles of the human world. Mountains were depicted as places where sages and hermits would go to meditate and connect with nature.

Mountains in Chinese Photography

With the advent of photography in China during the mid-nineteenth century, artists and intellectuals began to explore the medium not merely as a technological innovation, but as a new visual language capable of both documenting external reality and reimagining it through culturally resonant forms. Although photography initially entered China through Western scientific and colonial channels—introduced by missionaries, diplomats, and entrepreneurs—it was rapidly adapted to fit indigenous artistic paradigms. Most notably, Chinese photographers and critics sought to integrate it within the aesthetic and philosophical frameworks of *shanshui hua*.[10] Rather than treating photography as a purely mechanical act of visual capture, many Chinese artists perceived it as a potential extension—and in some cases, a reconfiguration—of the literati painting tradition (*wenren hua* 文人画). This approach emphasized subjective expression, the evocation of mood (*yi* 意), and the embodiment of moral or philosophical ideals, particularly those informed by Daoist and Confucian cosmologies. As Wu Hung has noted, early Chinese photographers often viewed their work not as a rupture with tradition, but as a dialogue with it, using the camera much like the brush—to interpret rather than to replicate nature.[11] Through careful manipulation of composition, perspective, light, and tonal gradation, these photographers emulated the spiritual depth and poetic resonance characteristic of *shanshui* painting, foregrounding the mountain as a natural motif and a symbolic site of cultural continuity.

This 'sinicization' of photography highlights the fluidity of artistic media in late Qing and Republican-era China, where adopting new technologies frequently entailed re-articulating

8 Michael Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002).
9 Diana L. Eck, *India: A Sacred Geography*, Harmony Books, 2012.
10 Marco Meccarelli, Foo Yee Wah, and Andrea Flamminii, "China and the West in the Art of the Nineteenth Century: A Cultural and Historical Review of the Relations between Painting and Photography," *Ming Qing Studies* 2013, 117–60.
11 Wu Hung, Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2004),17.

existing visual and metaphysical concepts. Here, the photographic image was not a break with the past, but a modern medium to express timeless Chinese landscape ideals: harmony between humanity and nature, and the cultivation of interiority through visual form.[12]

In traditional *shanshui* painting, the mountain is not merely a natural formation, but a site of cosmological, moral, and philosophical significance. Rooted in both Daoist and Confucian frameworks, these landscapes were often constructed from memory and imagination rather than direct observation. They functioned not as topographical records but as idealized environments in which human presence is minimized or rendered symbolic. When Chinese photographers began turning their lenses toward the natural world, many retained this conceptual orientation. The photograph became a space in which the temporal and spatial constraints of the medium were stretched to accommodate older modes of representation—those in which landscape serves not as a mirror of reality, but as a reflection of cultivated inner vision.[13]

One of the most influential early figures to explore the intersection of photography and traditional Chinese aesthetics was Long Chin-san 龙钦三 (Long Qingsan, 1892–1995), whose work occupies a critical threshold between classical ink painting and modern photographic practice. Trained in both literati painting and Western photographic methods, Long developed a hybrid visual language that profoundly shaped the trajectory of Chinese photographic art in the twentieth century. His engagement with photography was not grounded in the documentary realism typically associated with the medium in the West, but rather in a deeply philosophical and compositional approach drawn from Chinese art history.

Rejecting the idea of an instantaneous snapshot, Long meticulously assembled his images through a technique known as 'composite photography' (*jijin sheying* 集锦摄影), layering and combining multiple negatives in the darkroom to produce highly orchestrated landscapes. This method mirrored the traditional Chinese landscape painter's approach, in which nature was not copied directly but reimagined through the lens of cultural memory, moral contemplation, and artistic convention. Long Qingshan's montages not only resurrect the visual structure of shanshui painting but also aspire to its metaphysical depth and symbolic resonance.
His photographs frequently emphasize the vertical grandeur and spiritual symbolism of mountains, enveloped in swirling mists, threaded by meandering rivers, and punctuated by pavilions and lone figures—iconic elements evocative of Northern Song and Yuan dynasty landscape masters such as Fan Kuan 范宽 (ca. 960–1030), Guo Xi 郭熙 (ca. 1020–1090), and Ni Zan 倪瓒(1301–1374). The connection between photography and painting is so deeply ingrained in Long Chin-san's artistic vision that his work has come to be known, not coincidentally, as *huayi sheying* 画意摄影—"pictorial photography." This term underscores the extent to which his photographic practice draws upon, and reimagines, the compositional principles, aesthetics, and spirit of traditional Chinese painting.[14]

12 Ivi, pp. 27-28.
13 François Jullien, *La Grande Image n'a pas de forme ou du non-objet par la peinture* (Paris: Seuil, «L'ordre philosophique», 2003), 30–33.

14 Marco Meccarelli, "Painting with Light and Shadow: Theoretical and Technical Assumptions of Pictorial Landscape in Chinese Photography," 76–77.

Long Jingshan, *Drawing Water from the River at Dawn*, 1934

These works were not mere visual homages; they constituted a deliberate reinterpretation of classical ideals through a modern medium, embodying the persistence of Chinese cosmological thought—particularly the Daoist notion of unity between humankind and the natural world—within the evolving visual culture of Republican China.
Long's oeuvre thus stands as a foundational example of how photography was not simply assimilated into Chinese art but was reconfigured in ways that sustained and reactivated indigenous pictorial traditions. His legacy continues to inform the conceptual strategies of contemporary Chinese artists who navigate between the weight of tradition and the conditions of modernity.[15]

This approach—deliberate, meditative, and richly intertextual—allowed Long to create landscapes that resist the conventions of Western modernism, particularly the emphasis on spontaneity and the so-called "decisive moment."[16] Instead of privileging the transient instant, as figures like Henri Cartier-Bresson advocated, Long constructed time within the frame, allowing different temporalities to coexist in a single image. This conceptually layered treatment of space and time reflects the broader epistemological foundations of Chinese aesthetics, in which the landscape is not passively observed but actively composed according to metaphysical and poetic criteria.[17]

15 Zhang Pinxing 张品兴, Yin Dengxiang 殷登祥 ed., *Zhonghua dangdai wenhua mingren dacidian* 中华当代文化名人大辞典 (*Dictionary of Chinese Cultural Celebrities*), (Beijing: Zhongguo guang¬bodianshi chubanshe, 1992), 210.
16 Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Mind's Eye: Writings on Photography and Photographers*, ed. Michael Sand (New York: Aperture, 1999), 22–25.
17 Jason C. Kuo, "Landscape Painting and the Notion of Time in Chinese Aesthetics," in *Word and Image in Chinese Art: Essays in Honor of James Cahill*, ed. Ju-hsi Chou and Julia F. Andrews (Lawrence, KS: Spencer Museum of Art, 1991), 145–157.

The Shanshui hua in Chinese contemporary art

Long Chin-san's innovative approach to photography significantly impacted subsequent generations of artists. His legacy is evident in contemporary Chinese art, where artists continue to reinterpret the *shanshui* tradition. Long Chin-san's legacy can be felt in the work of contemporary Chinese artists and photographers who similarly seek to navigate the tension between tradition and modernity. Figures such as Wang Qingsong 王庆松, Yang Yongliang 杨泳梁, and Yao Lu 姚璐 continue to manipulate digital and photographic tools to construct landscapes that are simultaneously ancient and hypermodern, allegorical and political. These artists, like Long before them, resist the idea of the photograph as a transparent window onto the world. Instead, they use it as a means of constructing meaning—layered, unstable, and often critical. The enduring resonance of landscape as a symbolic system thus confirms the adaptability of *shanshui* aesthetics within a technologically mediated visual culture and underscores the persistent role of mountains as sites of memory, cultural continuity, and philosophical inquiry in Chinese art.

In the context of contemporary reinterpretations of the traditional Chinese relationship between humanity and nature, *shanshui hua* continues to exert profound influence. Several contemporary Chinese artists demonstrate this tradition's persistence by reframing classical motifs conceptually. Among them, Huang Yan 黄岩's *Chinese Landscape: Tattoo* (1999) stands out as a particularly compelling example. In this work, the artist transforms the human body, specifically the back, into a canvas for a traditional landscape painting. Rendered in the classical *shanshui* style, the ink-painted mountains follow the compositional logic of literati painting, yet they are inscribed not on paper or silk, but directly onto human skin.[18]

This radical displacement of the pictorial surface reconfigures the relationship between body, image, and nature. The human back is transformed into a symbolic site where natural forms and the human figure converge, thus giving visual form to the deeply rooted Chinese philosophical concept of the unity between Heaven and humanity (*Tianren heyi*, 天人合一).[19] In this worldview, which draws on both Daoist and Confucian traditions, the human being is not an external observer of nature, but rather an active participant in the cosmic order. Huang's choice of the back—an intimate and vulnerable part of the body—evokes both the somatic dimension of lived experience and the meditative journey toward harmony with the natural world. The title of the work, *Tattoo*, further reinforces this meaning. The tattoo, unlike paint or ink on paper, suggests permanence: an image that becomes inseparable from the body. In doing so, Huang underscores that the bond between humans and nature is not ephemeral, but inscribed into the very fabric of existence.
By merging the traditional aesthetics of *shanshui hua* with the corporeality of contemporary performance and conceptual art, Huang reactivates classical Chinese thought within a modern visual vocabulary. The landscape on skin ceases to be merely representational; it becomes an embodied statement on ecological entanglement, cultural continuity, and identity. This synthesis between heritage and experimentation is emblematic of a broader trend in post-socialist Chinese art, in which tradition is neither rejected nor simply repeated, but critically recontextualized.[20]

Liu Wei 刘伟's *It Looks Like a Landscape* (2004) similarly reaffirms the foundational Chinese concept of humanity's inherent interconnectedness with the natural world. Specifically, the work appears to depict a conventional photograph of the iconic karst topography associated with Guilin. However, closer examination reveals a startling subversion: what initially seem to be mountain forms are, in fact, nude human bodies, contorted and densely arranged to mimic the familiar silhouette of natural peaks. This visual deception destabilizes the boundary between the organic and the environmental, between the corporeal and the geographic.
Rather than documenting nature or merely replicating its visual codes, Liu constructs a composite landscape in which the human body is not only embedded in but ontologically indistinguishable from the terrain. This transformation operates on both aesthetic and philosophical registers. On a visual level, the work collapses traditional categories of figuration and landscape, erasing distinctions between bodily form and topographic structure. On a metaphysical level, it enacts a key tenet of classical Chinese cosmology: that the human is not external to the natural order but a constitutive element within it. This notion, rooted in the shared animating force of *qi* 气, underlies the aesthetics of *shanshui hua*, in which landscape

18 Maxwell K. Hearn, I*nk Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China, exh. cat.* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art,[2013]), 103.
19 François Jullien, *La Grande Image n'a pas de forme ou du non-objet par la peinture* (Paris: Seuil, «L'ordre philosophique», 2003), 115–17. Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 276–78.
20 Peggy Wang, *The Future History of Contemporary Chinese Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 112–17.

Huang Yan , *Chinese Landscape Series No. 3*, 1999

Liu Wei, *It looks like a landscape*, 2004

is not conceived as a passive backdrop but as a dynamic expression of the same vital energies that circulate through all phenomena.

Liu's intervention may be seen, therefore, not as a departure from tradition but as a reactivation of its philosophical core through contemporary media and conceptual strategies. Like Huang Yan, who inscribes classical landscape motifs directly onto the human body, Liu repurposes the grammar of *shanshui* to interrogate the ontology of landscape itself. Both artists critically engage with—and ultimately unsettle—the modern Western dichotomy between nature and culture, reasserting instead a Chinese paradigm of continuity and relationality. Their works demonstrate that classical landscape painting persists not merely as a visual genre but as a living epistemological framework, capable of reconfiguring how we envision the relationship between the human and the natural in an era of ecological and cultural transformation.

The Emergence of Post-Shanshui Art

The long-standing tradition of *shanshui hua* has undergone significant transformation in the face of contemporary environmental and sociopolitical challenges. As scholars and artists reassess the symbolic and aesthetic functions of landscape imagery, a new trajectory has emerged within Chinese art: post-*shanshui* art. This movement retains the visual grammar and philosophical underpinnings of classical *shanshui hua*, yet reconfigures them to respond to the complexities of the present era.

As Wu Hung observes, contemporary artists are no longer interested in presenting images of natural beauty in simple or unproblematic ways, nor are they concerned with creating visual pleasure through the contemplation of harmonious, easily accepted forms.[21] Instead, many artists engage critically with the theme of nature, often foregrounding the tensions between tradition and modernity, or between local and global contexts. Wu Hung notes that contemporary Chinese artists have shifted their focus toward exploring complex relationships between memory/history, nature/culture, and the local/global, frequently adopting experimental and performative approaches that challenge conventional aesthetic values. This transformation marks a decisive break from earlier traditions in which landscape and beauty were depicted as stable, universally appreciated ideals.

"Contemporary Asian art is no longer confined to a single geographical sphere, nor is it defined by the artist's ethnicity".[22]

As Wu Hung argues, this redefinition of artistic priorities and strategies has propelled Chinese artists onto the international stage. They interrogate and reinvent the visual language of nature and landscape, moving far beyond mere representations of beauty. Rather than celebrating untouched nature, many artists now engage critically with the consequences of rapid industrialization, urban expansion, and ecological degradation. Yin Jinan 尹劲南, a prominent scholar of traditional painting, has argued that these developments have given rise to a distinctly modern form: the "post-*shanshui* image in the postmodern era".[23] Gao Shiming offers a compelling interpretation of the transformation of shanshui painting in the twentieth century, asserting that it no longer functions merely as a medium for depicting harmonious natural beauty.[24] Instead, he argues, it reflects the devastation and disorder inflicted upon the landscape by modern Chinese history's cultural and political upheavals. This historical trauma, Gao suggests, has fragmented traditional symbolic forms, resulting in a visual language characterized by rupture and instability. Similarly, curator Lü Peng 吕澎 contends that in response

21 Wu Hung, *Making History: Wu Hung on Contemporary Art* (Hong Kong: Time Zone 8, 2008) and Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History 1970s–2000s* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014).

22 Wu Hung, Making History, 251.

23 Yin Jinan, "The Evolution of Chinese Contemporary Shanshui," in *Shanshui: Poetry Without Sound? Landscape in Chinese Contemporary Art*, ed. Peter Fischer (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 45. Elena Macrì, "Being, Becoming, Landscape: The Iconography of Landscape in Contemporary Chinese Art, Its Ecological Impulse, and Its Ethical Project," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 16, no. 1 (2017): 37.

24 Gao Shiming, quoted in Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 303.

Wang Wusheng, *Huangshan A104*, 1984

to this dislocation, contemporary artists increasingly turn to traditional Chinese culture, not as a fixed repository of meanings, but as a dynamic archive to be critically re-examined and reimagined.[25] He describes this process as an active "search for resources" within the classical tradition, pursued through the lens of contemporary sensibilities and concerns.

These observations highlight the dual orientation of post-*shanshui* art: a renewed engagement with classical modes of representation alongside a critical examination of the very conditions threatening the landscapes portrayed. The term "post-*shanshui*" signifies not simply a chronological succession after traditional landscape painting, but a methodological and thematic reinvention. In this contemporary idiom, mountains cease to be secluded spiritual retreat sites and become powerful symbols of ecological and social tension. Post-*shanshui* works are frequently visual indictments of pollution, consumerism, and humanity's alienation from the natural world. This redefinition of landscape reflects broader concerns about environmental sustainability and cultural continuity. In his 2011 study "The Evolution of Chinese Contemporary Shanshui", Yin Jinan examines how the rapid and often unregulated urbanization of Chinese metropolises has catalysed the emergence of post-*shanshui* as a new artistic paradigm. Here, the landscape is no longer a space for meditative contemplation but a terrain marked by rupture, crisis, and transformation. Rather than simply representing nature, post-shanshui artists foreground its destruction, articulating a visual language of warning and reflection.

A defining feature of post-*shanshui* art is its invocation of *guyi* 古意, often translated as "archaic meaning" or "the manner of the ancients." This concept does not signify a nostalgic return to the past, but rather a critical engagement with tradition as a source of conceptual and aesthetic innovation. Artists draw upon the motifs, brushwork, and symbolic vocabulary of classical *shanshui hua* to create works that address contemporary realities. In this way, tradition serves as a dynamic framework for interrogating the present, rather than a style to be merely replicated.
This critical engagement is particularly evident in the photographic works of Wang Wusheng 汪芜生 (1945-2018) and Yang Yongliang 杨泳梁. Wang's black-and-white images of Huangshan 黄山 evoke the misty atmospheres and tonal subtleties of Song dynasty painting, yet beneath their apparent timelessness lies a latent sense of fragility, as these natural wonders face increasing threats from tourism and environmental degradation. Huangshan has been a central motif in Chinese art for centuries, and Wang's photographs function as both homage and elegy. Yang Yongliang extends this dialogue by merging digital media with traditional landscape aesthetics.[26] In works such as *Phantom Landscape* and *The Peach Blossom Colony*, Yang Yongliang constructs vast mountainous vistas from urban detritus—high-rises, smokestacks, highways, and electrical wires. This jarring juxtaposition of traditional landscape forms with symbols of industrialization critiques the environmental cost of China's rapid development, forcing viewers to confront the dissonance between idealized nature and polluted reality. The result is a composite image that resembles a traditional ink painting from afar but, upon closer inspection, reveals the dystopian undercurrents of modernization. This strategy of digital montage continues the legacy of artists like Long Chin-san, who assembled photographic fragments to create unified yet artificial landscapes.

Yao Lu 姚璐 similarly, adopts the formal structure of *shanshui hua* to mount an environmental critique. His digitally altered photographs present idyllic mountain scenes that, upon closer viewing, are constructed from piles of garbage draped with green netting to mimic grassy slopes. The tension between beauty and decay in these works makes visible the costs of economic development. Mountains, once sites of cosmic balance and self-cultivation, become metaphors for degradation and loss.
In all of these examples, post-*shanshui* art functions as both a continuation and a rupture. It preserves the compositional strategies and philosophical concerns of classical *shanshui hua* while deploying them to critique the sociopolitical and ecological conditions of contemporary China. In doing so, post-*shanshui* not only reclaims the landscape tradition for the present but also reimagines its potential to articulate collective anxieties and aspirations.

Conclusions

Mountains in both traditional *shanshui hua* and post-*shanshui* art serve as profound symbols of the intricate relationship between humans, nature, and society. In traditional Chinese landscape painting, this relationship is rendered as harmonious, reflecting Confucian and Daoist ideals that emphasize alignment with the natural order. Mountains symbolized cosmic equilibrium and humanity's proper place within it, fostering a worldview in which society coexisted peacefully and respectfully with the environment.
However, in post-*shanshui* art, this equilibrium has been profoundly unsettled. Mountains are no longer depicted solely as serene and spiritual refuges; they have become powerful symbols of the tensions and contradictions of modern society. Central themes include environmental degradation, accelerated urbanization, and the deepening estrangement between human beings and the natural world. What was once a site of contemplation and harmony now expresses the fractures within the human–nature–society triad.
This transformation—from spiritual emblem to instrument of social critique—demonstrates how the function of art evolves in response to shifting cultural and societal values. While traditional *shanshui hua* presented an idealized vision of harmony, post-*shanshui* art confronts the complexities of the present, using the mountain as a lens to examine urgent environmental and sociopolitical issues.

Studying this evolution reveals how traditional visual symbols remain deeply resonant in contemporary discourse. The mountain endures as a potent and adaptable image—capable of expressing both timeless philosophical insights and pressing contemporary concerns. As China continues to face environmental and societal upheaval, the role of the mountain in art is likely to develop further, providing new perspectives on the evolving relationship between humanity and the natural world.
Post-*shanshui* art preserves the visual idioms of classical landscape painting

25 Lü Peng, *A History of Chinese Contemporary Art: 1949 to the Present* (Milan: Charta, 2010), 249.

26 J. Yao, "The Expanded Aesthetic: Landscape and Contemporary Art in China," in *Ershi shiji shanshuihua yanjiu wenji* (二十世纪山水画研究文集), ed. Huang Jian 黄剑 (Shanghai: Shanghai Shuhua Chubanshe, 2010), 358–59.

Yang Yongliang, *Phantom landscape*

while embedding them within frameworks of critique. It responds to the rapid transformations of China's urban landscapes by honoring tradition and simultaneously reinterpreting it to address modern tensions. In this context, mountains remain potent cultural icons, but now convey a heightened sense of warning and loss. Though the aesthetic vocabulary of traditional painting is retained, its message has shifted to underscore the growing discord between human society and the environment. Once a symbol of serenity and harmony, the mountain now evokes the dislocations wrought by industrialization and ecological destruction.

The depiction of mountains in Chinese art has thus undergone a substantial shift—from emblems of spiritual ascent and cosmological unity to platforms for critical reflection on environmental decline and social rupture. This reimagining mirrors broader societal transitions, as modernization continues to destabilize the balance between human life and the natural world.

The post-*shanshui* movement's deliberate recovery of *guyi*—the archaic or "ancient idea"—as a foundation for creative innovation adds further layers to this artistic evolution. By reengaging historical motifs in light of contemporary con-

cerns, artists establish a dynamic dialogue between past and present, enriching the aesthetic and philosophical dimensions of their work.

In post-*shanshui* art, the mountain largely relinquishes its role as a vessel of individual *xin* expression and becomes a privileged vehicle for political, ecological, and societal critique. This shift reflects a significant reorientation from inward reflection to outward engagement, foregrounding collective challenges over private introspection.

One may argue that what we observe in contemporary landscape art is not a break from tradition, but rather an intensification of a latent trajectory within it: a movement from a binary human–nature relation toward a triadic configuration that includes society as an indispensable third term.

While classical *shanshui hua* emphasized the spiritual harmony between the individual and the natural world, often as a mode of moral cultivation, post-*shanshui* practices expand this relational model to encompass the social. In doing so, they open the landscape genre to new semantic registers, addressing environmental injustice, urban displacement, and historical memory.

This broadened triad—human, nature, and society—reflects the entangled conditions of the Anthropocene, in which the separation between natural systems and human structures has become increasingly untenable. Rather than abandoning its philosophical roots, post-*shanshui* rearticulates them within a framework attuned to contemporary urgencies.

This study offers only a point of departure—a threshold from which to enter the rich, unfolding terrain of post-*shanshui* art. As China continues to navigate profound ecological and societal shifts, artists are reimagining the ancient legacy of *shanshui hua* in bold and unexpected ways. From this dialogue between past and present, new aesthetic visions will rise—visions attuned to the fractures and flows of the human–nature–society nexus, and charged with the power to both reflect and transform our collective future.

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