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

Liu Liping

Abstract

Moving beyond the traditional research paradigm of the "integration of mountains and waters" this paper proposes a theoretical framework for an independent creative system centered on the theme of water. By constructing a binary analytical framework of "water element - water theme", this paper systematically reviews the historical reasons why the water element has long been in a subordinate position in traditional landscape painting. This paper reveals the mechanism by which the "ultra-stable structure" constrains the development of the water theme. Based on the analysis of historical cases such as Ma Yuan's *Twelve Views of Water* this paper focuses on examining the diverse explorations of modern and contemporary artists in their water-themed works.

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 *Discussion of 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 character perfection jointly shaped by Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. This led traditional painting to prioritize the cultivation of inner character and nature over innovation and breakthroughs. Within this value system, “innovation” never became a core issue regarding the essence of art; this directly resulted in the smooth and natural developmental trajectory described by Chen Danqing.

It is worth noting that traditional theories of painting often fall into mechanical correspondence when discussing the secular ethical functions of “depicting ghosts and

gods" or "depicting fathers and sons". Although Zhang Yanyuan advocated "educating and educating, and assisting in human relations," the highest achievement of traditional painting is not reflected in direct moral admonition. Masterpieces such as the Dunhuang murals embody their artistic value primarily in the religious and humanistic spirit that transcends specific doctrines. In essence, traditional theories of the function of painting ultimately boil down to the core proposition of "cultivating temperament and perfecting personality".

This artistic concept, which aims at the perfection of personality, has created a brilliant and sophisticated traditional art, but it has also inadvertently restricted the innovative development of painting. When innovation fails to become the core pursuit of art itself, the renewal and breakthrough of the language of painting are naturally limited, and the expression of the water element is therefore difficult to achieve a fundamental transcendence.

1.2 Systemic Limitations of the Performance System

Given this general 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 Ocean* 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 *Huishi weiyan* (Small Remarks 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 diverse aesthetic dimensions of water—such as its dynamic quality, imposing grandeur, and ethereal beauty—have not been fully explored, which directly impacts the richness of the overall artistic character of landscape painting.

Finally, there is a lack of innovation in the techniques of painting creation. This is specifically manifested in a lack of variety in brushwork—relying primarily on centered-tip lines while making insufficient use of diverse techniques such as side-tip or flat-tip strokes. Regarding ink-wash techniques, there has been relatively limited exploration of methods such as “water breaking ink,” “ink breaking water,” water-staining, and water-splashing, and there is a lack of experimentation with the use of special materials. In terms of color expression, constrained by the notion that “ink-wash is supreme,” the expressive potential of color was not fully realized. In terms of composition, the established convention of making mountains the primary element and water the subordinate one has long persisted, resulting in a lack of innovative layouts that feature water as the central theme. These technical limitations collectively constrain the deepening of the artistic expressive power of the water element. It is worth noting that Dong Qichang's theory of self-cultivation of “Study widely and travel far; cleanse your heart of worldly clutter, so that landscapes form spontaneously in your mind.”, although it emphasizes the inner cultivation of the

artist, to some extent also reflects the relative neglect of technical innovation in traditional painting. Contemporary creation needs to inherit tradition, break through the constraints of established procedures, and conduct in-depth exploration from multiple dimensions such as brushwork, inkwork, color, composition, etc., in order to achieve a real breakthrough in the expression of the 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 "*Twelve Views of Water*". 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 "*Twelve Views of Water*"

After defining the water-theme above, this paper proceeds to analyze Ma Yuan's "*Twelve Views of Water*" as a case study. As a rare surviving work centered on the single theme of water, this piece holds unique research value. Ma Yuan has long been known in art history as "Ma the Corner". His compositions mostly take parts of the landscape, forming a unique form of "either a steep peak goes straight up without seeing its top; or it goes down from a cliff without seeing its feet" (Ge Gu Yao Lun). Ma Yuan's "*Twelve Views of Water*" can be regarded as the culmination of techniques

for depicting water developed from the Sui and Tang dynasties through the Northern Song; it also laid a crucial foundation for the representation of water in later eras. 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 a combination of fine-brush outlining and light ink washes, the diverse forms of water—shaped by the changing seasons and shifting climate—are precisely rendered. The solid areas are depicted with lines to outline the dynamic movement of the water, while the abstract areas are rendered with light ink to create a sense of space and atmosphere, forming a rhythmic and melodic effect that is both solid and abstract, with both restraint and expansion. In particular, such as *Lake Light Shimmering* and *Autumn Waters Echoing*—with their exquisite depiction of shifting light, shadow, and undulating waves—offer the viewer an immersive aesthetic experience, achieving an artistic realm where the spirit and the painting become one. The “*Twelve Views of Water*” (Shui Tu) captures the dynamics of water—exhaustively portraying its myriad transformations—and demonstrates Ma Yuan's profound observation of natural water currents alongside his superb artistic mastery.



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

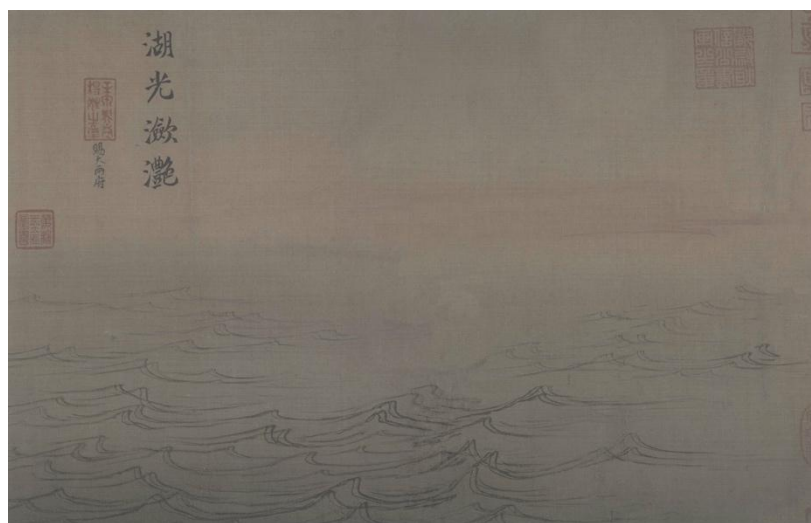


Figure 2. Ma Yuan *Lake Light Shimmering* water landscape scroll, Southern Song Dynasty, silk scroll, 26.8×41.6cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

As evidenced by the colophons and inscriptions associated with the “*Twelve Views of Water*”, while traditional painting treatises contain no shortage of discussions on the depiction of water, a systematic theoretical framework remains lacking. Ma Yuan achieved a level of mastery in depicting water that perfectly captured both its form and spirit; Li Rihua once remarked, “In the depiction of objects, capturing their form is inferior to capturing their momentum; capturing momentum is inferior to capturing their rhythm; and capturing rhythm is inferior to capturing their essential nature.”⁷ He further noted, “Nature is the spontaneous endowment of the natural order; as for technical mastery, when proficiency reaches its peak, it manifests of its own accord, requiring no conscious effort.”⁸ This profound grasp of the essential nature of water led to Ma Yuan’s works being hailed as “truly living water” (in the words of Li Dongyang), achieving outstanding success in the depiction of forms, aesthetic resonance, and creative technique. However, the creation of “*Twelve Views of Water*”, was oriented more towards demonstrating techniques and preserving pictorial motifs, with a relatively weak intent to create it as an independent work of art. This characteristic reflects the lack of independence of the water theme within the

traditional painting system. In a specific historical and cultural context, it was difficult for painters to break through the existing creative paradigm. As a result, the inheritance of water methods after Ma Yuan mostly stayed at the technical level, failing to form a conscious awareness and sustainable development of water-themed creations. This historical limitation, in turn, underscores the necessity and contemporary value of constructing a theoretical system and creative practice based on the theme of water. To avoid misunderstanding, it must be emphasized again that reflecting on the "water element" and advocating for the "water theme" is not about negating the existing creative experience, aesthetic paradigm, and artistic achievements of traditional landscape painting. So, what is the significance of championing a "water theme"? In summary: First, it enriches the expressive power of traditional landscape painting. Chinese landscape painting is intimately linked to the humanistic philosophies, aesthetic concepts, and lived realities of different eras; if these elements remain static, the expressive power of traditional landscape painting risks becoming relatively rigid. We say that brush and ink should keep pace with the times. This was true of landscape painting in the past, and it should hold true today as well. Second, break away from the stylized brush-and-ink language of traditional landscape painting, liberating artistic creation from the state of obscurity and constraint imposed by these rigid, formulaic conventions. Specifically, based on the perspective of water studied in this article, we should expand and enrich its physical form (in fact, the physical form has always been there, but due to the shielding and restraint of ideological and spiritual ideas, we have not incorporated it into creative practice), aesthetic style and creative techniques.

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

3.1 Innovation within a traditional framework: Lu Yanshao's "Cloud and Water Method"

Since modern times, Chinese landscape painting has shown new directions in the

creation of water-themed works, among which the artistic practices of Lu Yanshao and Zhou Shaohua are representative.

Lu Yanshao pioneered the unique "cloud and water method" within the traditional system of brush and ink painting. He breaks away from the traditional reliance on a single type of line, vividly capturing the rhythmic flow of water through dynamic, curved brushstrokes. The work **Scroll of Perilous Waters in the Gorges** (Figure 3) employs a linear composition characterized by "broken strokes yet continuous intent"; this approach not only preserves the calligraphic quality of traditional brushwork but also imbues the surging waters with a powerful sense of dynamic movement. This ability to highly generalize and abstractly express the forms of water enabled Lu Yanshao to achieve a breakthrough in the representation of water themes within the traditional framework.

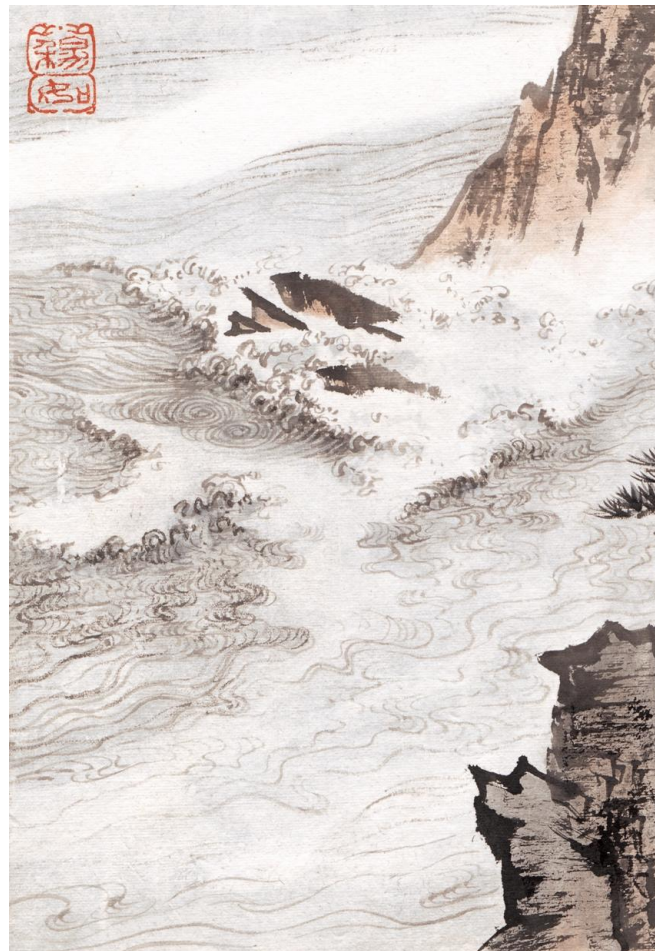


Figure 3. Lu Yanshao, *Scroll of Perilous Waters in the Gorgeous River* (Detail), 42×30cm.

3.2 Explorations Beyond Tradition: Zhou Shaohua's "Vigorous Momentum School"

Zhou Shaohua, on the other hand, displayed a more radical innovative attitude. His works, such as "The Soul of the Yellow River" and "Symphony of the Raging Waves" (Figures 4 and 5), construct magnificent visual patterns with the philosophical thinking of "all-round perspective". Despite criticism that he lacked traditional mentorship, Chen Chuanxi defended him with the Zen principle of "the Dharma is without form," arguing that this "self-taught" approach precisely embodies the essence of artistic innovation. Philosopher Deng Xiaomang further pointed out that Zhou Shaohua's practice lies not only in the innovation of techniques, but also in the pioneering of artistic spirit. In his works, 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. Although the two artists explored different paths, they jointly promoted the modern transformation of the expression of water themes in Chinese landscape painting. Lu Yanshao sought breakthroughs within the traditional ink painting system, while Zhou Shaohua opened up new realms by reconstructing the language of ink painting. Their practices provide important inspiration for contemporary water-themed creations.

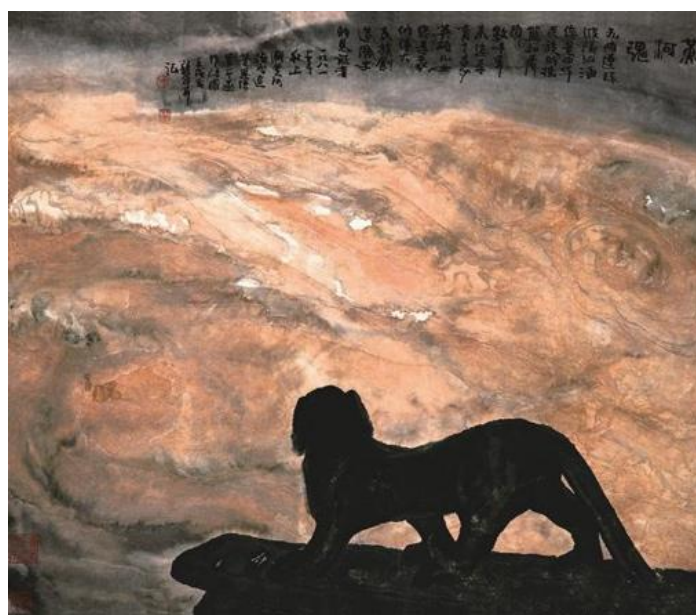


Figure 4. Zhou Shaohua, *The Spirit of the Yellow River*, 1982, ink on paper, 80×94cm. Collection of the

National Art Museum of China.



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

3.3 The Practice of Blending East and West: Insights from Zhang Daqian's Splashed-Ink-and-Color Style

In the section on innovative exploration of water, we specifically discuss Zhang Daqian. This is not because he has made any major breakthroughs on the subject of water, but because of his successful practice in mountains, which is the famous splashing color. Through the example of Zhang Daqian's splashed-ink-and-color technique, we open up our aesthetic horizons regarding water. Of course, Liu Haisu also achieved renown for his "splashed-color" style; however, as the aim here is not a comprehensive analysis, the discussion is limited to Zhang. Zhang Daqian was a painter with profound mastery of traditional painting techniques; critics generally consider his early works to lack a distinctive personal style. Zhang Daqian's practice of the "splashed-color" technique emerged in the 1960s; by then, having traveled extensively in the West, his artistic vision had already transcended the confines of traditional painting. It is a widely accepted view in academic circles that Zhang Daqian's "splashed-color" style 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.



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.

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 is the political ideology in landscape paintings. For example, we see Huang Binhong, Fu Baoshi, Li Keran, Shi Lu, Qian

Songyan, Lu Yanshao, Zhang Daqian and so on. Through their practice, they created the unique brush and ink language of landscape painting of this era. And such a law of artistic creation must continue to attract our sufficient attention.

4. Innovative exploration from the water element to water-themed concepts.

Although this period was brief, the achievements of its explorations were significant. This was because the prevailing intellectual current of the era was one of transformation; with the dominant trend involving a comprehensive re-examination and critique—and at times even a wholesale rejection—of tradition, the flaws and shortcomings of the past were perceived with great clarity and profound insight, even if such views were often accompanied by one-sidedness and extremism. Moreover, with the eastward spread of Western learning, artists of this era were able to draw upon the characteristics, achievements, and experiences of foreign painting traditions, broadening their horizons far beyond those of any previous dynasty. In summary, this period, in terms of the water element and water theme, has both achievements and shortcomings compared to the entire previous historical period. They are as follows: First, there has been a marked increase in works featuring water as a theme; in other words, explorations and achievements regarding the physical forms, aesthetic styles, and creative techniques associated with water have become far more diverse and rich, moving beyond the previous state of monotony and lack of depth. second, there are still very few academic achievements in the theory of water painting. It is said that during this period, the achievements of the entire painting theory and painting theory were very great and the results were extremely fruitful. However, only the aspect of water still had no qualitative changes, and even the quantitative changes were not much. In other words, we still need to liberate our thinking and explore new paths in order to open up a new situation. In addition to the ancients, we need our own insights and establish a primitive connection with nature that is not the ancients but our own. The establishment of this connection requires us to return to the ancient tradition and original wisdom of "learning from nature" and establish our landscape experience.

Here, the author changed "transcending the past and present" to "transcending China and foreign countries" because landscape painting is actually a global subject. Japan, which is influenced by China, goes without saying, and Western painters have also made many innovations in this area. We should have a broader artistic vision, and the creative practices of paintings from other countries should also become our references. For example, Zhang Daqian, mentioned earlier, is a clear example.

Let's take a look at "The Waves of the East China Sea" (Picture 7), a collaboration between Mr. Pan Tianshou and Mr. Kong Zhongqi. It was based on a corner of Thousand Steps of Sand in Putuo. They went to sketch in person and revised the draft three times to create this masterpiece. First of all, this is a typical case of "learning from nature", which makes it a great breakthrough in the physical form of water; secondly, the entire composition of this painting is also very unique, with water occupying about 80% of the area, except for some mountains and pine trees in the lower left corner, and some stretching distant mountains in the upper right corner. This highlights the theme of water; the water in the center, in particular, conveys a sense of vastness and surging power. It is a quintessential example of "landscape painting of the era"—meaning the work clearly embodies the spirit of the times.



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.

Regarding creative techniques, there are also some new directions worth exploring: first, composition. The composition of water in traditional landscape paintings is too simple. This is the first thing we have to break through. In addition to Pan Tianshou's *"The Waves of the East China Sea"* mentioned above, there is also the famous painting *"So Many Beautiful Lands and Mountains"* created by Fu Baoshi and Guan Shanyue, which also has great innovation in layout. Second, in terms of brushwork and ink language, Lu Yanshao exemplifies this. To be frank, there were hardly any major breakthroughs in this regard prior to the Qing Dynasty; Ma Yuan undertook the boldest and most diverse explorations, and few have surpassed him since. However, in recent times, there have been many gratifying breakthroughs. Yet, in the author's view, this is far from enough. Again, in terms of coloring. The tradition is extremely limited and there are no eye-catching explorations. However, there have been very eye-catching breakthroughs in the theme of mountains. Until modern times, such as Zhang Daqian's color splashing technique mentioned above, and Li Keran's *"Ten Thousand Mountains Are Red"*, which are also successful works with huge breakthroughs in color. The monolithic approach to the issue of water has been profoundly influenced by traditional philosophical views. The author have undertaken a series of creative experiments exploring the physical forms and imagery of six types of water: seas, rivers and lakes, ponds and pools, streams and ravines, waterfalls, and snowmelt. For example, inspired by the Japanese ukiyo-e artist Katsushika Hokusai's *"The Great Wave off Kanagawa"* (Figure 8), the author created *"The Wise Man Enjoys Water 97"* (Figure 9), with the huge waves giving people a sense of the magnificent power of nature. Breaking through the original spatial visual effects, shrinking people and ships, only embellishing the picture, forming a sharp contrast with the huge waves, breaking the traditional spatial form of sea and river objects, reflecting that people are small and insignificant in nature, restoring the mystery of the object form of water in nature and a sense of visual space that transcends humans. Although this work draws inspiration from Katsushika Hokusai's *"The Great Wave off Kanagawa"*,

it differs in terms of technique, materials, and conceptual approach. Although the work was inspired by Katsushika Hokusai's "The Great Wave off Kanagawa", it is different in techniques, materials and concepts. Katsushika Hokusai used printmaking to express huge waves, which is a relatively realistic expression technique. The author creates by experimenting with the physical forms of rivers and seas and the theme of water.



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.

In short, the treatment of water surface is different from that of traditional landscape painting. The innovation of water is to use the form of surface color addition. Using mineral materials or pipette paints of traditional Chinese painting, the water surface is squeezed out to create a shimmering visual effect by layering colors and ink. Finally, a thin layer of color is applied to glaze or render the entire picture, making the picture thick and rounded, and the colors transparent and bright (Figure 10), presenting a realm with infinite connotations. Of course, this is merely the theoretical distillation of practice; in actual practice, the techniques employed vary with every piece—a state where "having no method is the true method." Ultimately, the highest realm of practice defies verbal description. This method of depicting the water surface by applying color to the surface planes is absent from the representation of water elements in traditional landscape painting. 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. In addition, due to its large size, the effect presented is completely different from traditional water paintings.

2. Leveraging the inherent properties of rice paper, the traces of ink and brushwork naturally diffuse across the absorbent surface, following the flow of water to form new aquatic patterns envisioned in the mind's eye.

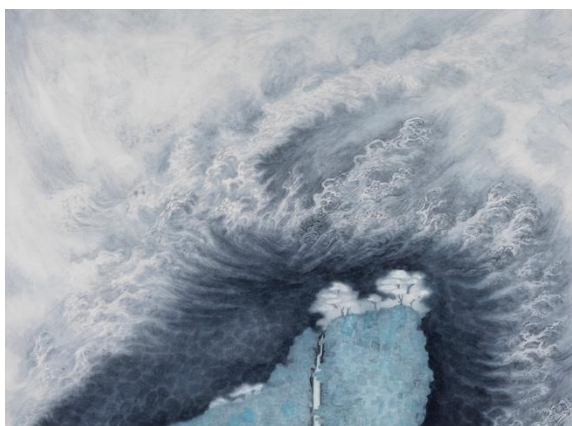


Figure 10. Liu Liping, *The Wise Find Joy in Water* 177, 2017, ink and color on paper, 225×143cm.
Collection of White Space, Singapore.

However, this method requires the author to be very confident, write accurately, and have very high control over the amount, thickness, shade, direction, speed, and shape of the water in order to control the overall picture and make the ink and color of the distant water lines clear and fade away;

3. When rendering the effects of water, one can incorporate additives such as soy milk, cow's milk, or laundry detergent into the ink or pigments, or employ techniques like collage and the use of burning incense sticks to create water-like patterns. In terms of methodology, one should explore every possible avenue—adopting any and all means—with the ultimate aim of deeply mining the potential of these water-rendering techniques and maximizing their effectiveness.

5. Conclusion

By systematically reviewing the traditions of depicting water in Chinese landscape painting and conducting an in-depth analysis of innovative practices regarding the water theme—undertaken by both modern/contemporary artists and the author—this paper proposes a theoretical framework for establishing the "water theme" as a subject for independent artistic creation. 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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ENDNOTES

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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。

關鍵字：水主題；師造化；超穩定結構；創新；水墨語言