

Unframing and Reframing *Shanshui*

by

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- a. Bachelor of Double Honor Degree in Art and Science, University of Saskatchewan, 2009
- b. Master of Fine Art, University of Victoria, 2013

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We acknowledge with respect the Lekwungen peoples on whose traditional territory the
university stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples, whose historical
relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the philosophical and aesthetic continuities and changes of the *shanshui* genre and the ongoing relevance of Chinese philosophy, in particular Daoism, within a subfield of modern and contemporary Chinese art. This dissertation has been created in dialogue with these traditions. Reflections on how this research has impacted my own art practise is intertwined with the historical and analytical discussion. This multi-threaded, multi-disciplinary dissertation has been written as a form of dialectical discourse which employs both analytical and personal writing. As such it combines elements of visual art-making as both artistic expression and research process; art historical research and analysis; and, ongoing self-reflections around both practices. In addition to the analysis of the art of a selection of contemporary Chinese artists, my art-based research led to the creation and discussion of a series of artworks, including the core painting series and exhibition titled, *For a Moment, Silence* in 2016. My research led me to the conclusion that *shanshui* is much more than a traditional visual form in Chinese art history for it offers a unique modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging. This, in turn, is based on a fundamental and dynamic perception of the interrelatedness of all things in the world, a perception which is embedded in a classical Chinese worldview. I demonstrate from various angles that by connecting the personal with the art historical, as well as with a philosophical and a pragmatic understanding of traditional Chinese philosophy, the experience of *shanshui* can be internalized through contemporary art practice as a method of reflective and experiential learning.

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Preface

“There is nothing there in the desert, except us, and sands,” said my mother.

“So how about the scenery in the desert?” I asked.

“Just sands, carried by wind and blocking my vision, scattering around all over our place. There is no scenery in the middle of nowhere. We don’t see it, we don’t care,” she answered.

“We worked, and we survived. It is just that simple.” My mother continued, “It is meaningless to appreciate the sands. We have no time to do something like that.”

“Do you see your experience as some kind of suffering?” I queried, trying to evoke her emotions.

“I’m not a poet, I don’t use terms like that. I just accepted the arrangement from above,¹ and I don’t dwell on my past.” She spoke each word indifferently.

Silence, and that is the end of our conversation.

The Qaidam Basin, Qinghai Province, is a barren land in the northwest of China. On the northeast side of the Tibetan Plateau, the Qaidam Basin is about 3000 meters above sea level and approximately one third is covered with desert. As Chinese engineering soldiers working on the earliest Qinghai-Tibet railway project during the 1980s, my parents lived a very hard and disciplined life in this remote desert for three years. Belonging to a detachment of signalers, they were part of the railway project and were responsible for improving regional infrastructure, particularly in the field of communications. After three years of heavy labour, they hardly remembered details about the wild and barren scenery. For three years, every day, they woke up before dawn to shovel sand out of their tents, sand that had crept inside during the night. No matter how tedious this sounds, the only way to get out of their temporary shelter and start another day’s work in the desert was to deal with the sand. This repetitious work during the railway construction remains fresh in their memory; what they remember most is the monotony.

The Qinghai-Tibet railway, which includes the section between Xining and Golmud that contains the efforts of my parents, was only fully completed and opened to traffic in 2006. This

¹ This is not a reference to God, but to her superiors in the Communist Party.

was the first time that the Tibet Autonomous Region had been connected by rail to any of China's provinces. My parents are proud of their contribution and think of themselves as pioneers because, by 1984, the section they worked on had already been completed. For many years after that, I heard them planning, again and again, to re-visit the desert and to travel along the railway track they helped create. However, to this day, they have never yet made that dream come true.

The grandeur of the desert was beyond my parents' vision. Even though they lived in the wide-open spaces during that three-year timespan, they didn't have the individual space necessary to process the vastness; instead, they had to focus on the actual engineering process of the project. Perhaps aesthetic appreciation for landscape seemed rather pointless, even useless for those with an engineering mindset and given the collective consciousness promulgated during those years? My parents were like worker bees, the nameless ones of the colony, working efficiently to construct the hive. Within this structure of swarm-workers, the sacrifice of their individuality was subsumed into the splendid collective accomplishment of the railway. As a symbol of human power, the railway² pierced the silence of the endless desolation and became the only definite line in the landscape. The desert dances with the wind, while the railway remains imperishable, seemingly unchanged.

For my parents, the landscape of the desert takes shape within the realm of their Communist beliefs and materialist expectations. Their understanding of the natural world is heavily rooted in a rigid subject-object dichotomy and expansive rationalism. In this way of thinking, following Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong's perspective that humans could force nature into obedience, landscape is a detached and objective entity, a representation of natural forces that can only be understood scientifically. This is in direct opposition to the centuries old,

² With the completion of this project in 2006, train travel between Beijing and Lhasa now only takes 41 hours.

traditional Chinese interpretation of landscape, which encourages a primitive and intuitive engagement between us and the world so as to eliminate the clear boundaries that are believed to separate the physical from the spiritual.³ However, due to the ideological control imposed during Mao's era, this traditional Chinese perspective of nature and its cosmic ecological value was systematically ignored by the Communist Party.

Intuitively, I know my parents are trapped in their memories, looking for a path to become reconciled with them. They can neither embrace nor walk away from these memories. They are lost and unprepared in the emotional moment of the recollection. On the one hand, they believe they are the nuts and bolts of this glorious achievement. For the railway, for the good of the future and the country and at the cost of their youth and freedom, their value was realized through collectivity. As members of the Communist Party, they derive enormous meaning from this experience and they believe that their tremendous struggle, in the name of socialism, is priceless. However, on the other hand, their memory of this time in the desert is the cause of great disappointment and frustration. My mother has said that she, "never had a choice to realize [her] personal dreams." Merged in the collective way of life, couched in the ideology of Maoism, my parents unknowingly lost their sense of individual being. Haunted by the ghosts of the past, now they have doubts, and these conflicting feelings cannot be digested easily.

In the long process of modernizing China, my parents are but two of millions of nameless ones who are just dust, lost in the grand history, and within this context my parents' past is negligible. However, from a different perspective, if we consider the huge historical moments of

³ In this dissertation I use the word "spiritual" in a broad sense to refer to the understanding of contemporary spirituality, which is not limited by any detailed religious burdens, emphasizing the beyond-physical quality of finding one's individual path toward the all-inclusive world. In the context of this spirituality, echoing traditional Chinese philosophy, the individual sees everything as in relationship, as interconnected, as essentially one even when not identical in outer form.

the country, their sacrifice of individual freedom in the name of collectivism and political ideology, and the subsequent transformation of the people's perception of nature, these all converge in these memories of my parents' and become significant. Their recollections of events create space for both individual memory and collective experience of history to co-exist; within this in-between space that allows for self-formation, the general authority of history was shrouded by a sense of spontaneous emotion through the personal involvement with the collective past. I am intrigued by this dynamic overlapping of personal narrative and grand history.

My mother once showed me a sun-bleached photograph of herself, testing the communication circuits on a telegraph pole [Figure 1]. She looks so vigorous and young and I was captivated by her youthful charm. She told me the story of how one afternoon, out of the blue, the desert began to rage – a sandstorm suddenly kicked up and swept through the work site. Panic took hold of her and she couldn't move. She couldn't hear what was happening on the ground and she could see nothing through the stinging sandstorm. The air became gritty and aggressive. The impact took away her breath, and she lost all sense of time, sense of direction and sense of the whole world. By contrast, she was suddenly aware of the sensations pulsing through her own body. Stranded alone and in midair – with the sand stinging the side of her face and the sound and feel of her own heart thumping – she strongly felt her existence through her fear. At that moment, my mother realized there was something vital in the sandstorm; the desert was not a lifeless being but part of the living whole. She felt it through the energy accessed and then released from her every pore, reminding her of the ephemeral nature of existence. Yes, for my mother, that was a precious fleeting moment of awakening and a primordial reflex of life.

To me, there is a sense of the surreal in this personal narrative, which tells of an encounter with this life-force, this impossible-to-demonstrate vitality. I was attracted by this narrative as it

shows a more primordial experience of nature. At that precise moment, in the Daoist sense, one could say that my mother and nature, as an alive force with both agency and will, were united. Even more profoundly influenced by materialist thinking as promoted by Mao, the Party and the army, my mother strongly believed that everything comes from a physical basis and disbelieved that a spirit could intervene in natural processes. Until that afternoon, she believed in an objective reality that could only be sensed with our eyes, nose, ears, taste and fingertips. However, the near-mystical quality in the energetic flow of nature that my mother experienced was beyond human understanding shaped by the perspective of empirical science.

In the conversations we shared about these experiences, we naturally chose the Chinese word *fengjing* to refer to the English word “scenery” and the more art history-loaded term “landscape”. The other alternative word option, *shanshui*, which is also the key term of this dissertation, was totally, yet unintentionally, neglected by both of us. Why did this term *shanshui* slip so naturally from our patterns of thinking and conversation? My first reaction while researching this dissertation was that in modern China we no longer see *shanshui* as an active word in our daily vocabulary. Nowadays, the more applicable word for the human-centric view of the modern world is *fengjing*. In contrast, *shanshui* is seen as merely an aristocratic art genre in the history of traditional Chinese painting because it represents the idealized worldview of the literati of the past.

However, does this claim really stand up to scrutiny? In fact, it is not difficult to find that behind this self-assured assumption lies the subjective, systematic and ideological petrification and semantic narrowing of *shanshui*. As defined in the *Contemporary Chinese Dictionary*, the term *fengjing* refers to “a specific area, a scenery for people to view, formed by mountains, water,

flowers, trees, buildings, and some natural phenomena [such as rain and snow].”⁴ Including both natural and cultural scenery, *fengjing* implies an extracted and framed view from the world-as-a-whole to facilitate human observation from distance. In contrast, the same dictionary defines *shanshui* as being simply “mountain and water.”⁵ When interpreted in the context of traditional Chinese philosophy, the meaning of *shanshui* becomes extremely simple yet extremely rich – as both “shan” and “shui” become signifiers indicating philosophical concepts other than just “mountain” and “water”. The term has open-ended potential to represent both the physical and the spiritual and, simultaneously, the projection and expression of the spiritual through internalization of the physical. In this regard, when the sensation of my mother was awakened in the sandstorm, her perceptual experience was immediately embraced by an affectual experience. A sense of spirit resonance emanated from this interaction and thus the literal view of the landscape expanded into something present but less tangible; at that moment, her view of the surroundings, then, was transformed from “*fengjing*” to “*shanshui*”.

Looking at the photograph again, and then looking up at her face in reality, I realize that as time passes by, my mother’s fragmented memory will be lost. Considering my parents’ memory as one type of historical narration allows me to reach out to the contingency, complexity and pluralism of history. In this way, I can creatively weave the cultural fragments deposited in the nation’s history both in my artwork and writing.

By 2020, forty years after my parents contributed to the railway construction as

⁴ *Contemporary Chinese Dictionary*, 7th ed. (The Commercial Press, 2016), s.v. “fengjing.” Translated by Yang Liu from the Chinese definition: 一定地域内由山水、花草、树木、建筑物以及某些自然现象（如雨、雪）形成的可供人观赏的景象。

⁵ Please note, in one of the oldest Chinese dictionaries, *Shiming (Explanation of Names)*, which is believed to date from 200 CE, “shan” and “shui” are used as chapter titles (chapter three and four respectively) to include all semantically related terms. See: <https://zh.m.wikisource.org/zh/%E9%87%8B%E5%90%8D>, accessed August 16, 2021.

engineering soldiers, China became the country with the longest high-speed rail network in the world. In the wake of China's rapid infrastructure miracle, many Chinese mega-cities – including my hometown Jinan – now feature soaring skylines and countless neon lights. The shiny modern look of this new China reveals a widespread modernized and capitalized version of the Maoist idea that the development of a society should be founded on technological advancement and domination of nature. A clear subject-object dichotomy and expansive rationalism was/is deep rooted and heavily enforced and this, in turn, mediates our understanding of the natural world. In the Mao era and beyond, the traditional Chinese philosophical view of the complex interaction between the myriad cosmic processes – including the symbiotic mutuality of nature and human beings – has been gradually lost. Instead, it has been replaced by the objectification of nature as an external source following a sense of ontological privilege. As I was growing up in urban China, the world I perceived was gradually covered by more and more skyscrapers. Sometimes I wondered how I could find an opportunity to resonate with what my mother had been through during that particular moment of spontaneous interaction with the natural world.

According to my mother's narrative, even as she was encouraged to have the faith and determination to conquer the barren land, she also authentically experienced the sublime aspect of nature in its dynamic tension, even if only for a few fleeting moments. My dissertation, which is an interdisciplinary conversation between academic qualitative, analytical research and my own individual art-based research, is a journey which spirals around this particular event. As an artist and as a relatively new-comer to art history and visual studies, I have been drawn to the work of contemporary Chinese artists of my generation who share similar histories and interests. Also, this journey has been important on personal and philosophical levels: one of my goals with this research has been to embrace a deeper sense of self-integration and a complementary form for

engaging spontaneous unknowing. On this journey, I have not only deepened my academic knowledge and skillsets but have also rediscovered the spiritual cultivation of the individual within a cosmological context in a contemporary world. Through my exploration of this specific moment, as a way of merging analytical and experiential learning, I return to intuition, seeking the integration between mind and heart⁶ and the invisible connection to past, to history, to memory, to cosmos, and eventually, to self.

⁶ Mind and heart share the same character “xin” in Chinese language and culture. Traditionally, the heart is the organ for both thinking/reasoning and intuition/feeling. Other than a symbol only referring to the physical heart, it is also recognized as the pivot of human cognition. In this way, the integration of mind and heart, as shown in the Chinese character “xin”, represents a sense of wholeness echoing traditional Chinese philosophy.

Chapter One: Introduction

Proceeding from its philosophical and aesthetic trajectories, this interdisciplinary dissertation aims to explore *shanshui* from multiple viewpoints. It delivers an art historical analysis of the development of *shanshui* in modern and contemporary Chinese art, from 1949-2020, and is illustrated by discussions of selected Chinese artists' work. In addition, echoing the ideas presented in this dissertation and as an integral part of the interdisciplinary project, an artistic self-exploration of *shanshui* is included and discussed through the prism of personal feelings, understandings and narratives. In this multi-threaded, multi-disciplinary research, echoing both my mother's and my own experience of human-nature relationships in different periods of China's modernization, the grounding concept of *shanshui* will be firstly examined in the transformation of its visual representation in both the Mao era and the contemporary era. By analyzing the shifting but abiding relationship between philosophy and practice in selected works related to *shanshui* by artists in the seven decades since the establishment of the PRC (People's Republic of China), I explore how the notion and application of *shanshui* has developed. No longer bound to its narrow definition of traditional art genre it has expanded and become a unique modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging. In addition, and in order to engage with a more intuitive and somatic understanding of *shanshui*, I draw on my own artistic explorations and will demonstrate the impact that interacting with *shanshui* creatively and pragmatically has had on me. In this process, I use my artmaking as an example to reflect on the meaning of *shanshui* when exploring the possibilities of a spiritual relationship between the individual and the cosmos in this contemporary world.

1.1 Thesis Statement

Tracing the philosophical and aesthetic transformations and continuities of the *shanshui* genre and the ongoing relevance of Chinese philosophy,⁷ I examine the concept and practice of *shanshui* in the work of select Chinese artists since the founding of the PRC in 1949 to the present day. I argue that, more than being just a classical visual form in Chinese art history that the Maoist ideology attempted to transform, *shanshui* continues to this day to offer a unique modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging, based on a philosophy that embraces a dynamic and fundamentally interrelated worldview. Moreover, despite the Maoist attack on the philosophical foundations of *shanshui*, I demonstrate that *shanshui* offered and continues to offer opportunities for Chinese artists to deconstruct the notions of objectification and purely scientific/technical perspectives on the world in both the Mao and post-Mao contemporary era. In addition, since the beginning of the 21st century, along with the deconstruction of *shanshui* as an historical visual and cultural symbol, a significant number of Chinese artists have expanded their artistic explorations into the contemporary, immersive and somatic dimensions of *shanshui* as represented in a broad range of contemporary art forms and media. Drawing on the discussion of my own art-making related to *shanshui*, I argue that by connecting the personal to the world as a whole, in correlation with both a philosophical and a pragmatic understanding of traditional Chinese philosophy, the experience of *shanshui* can be internalized as a form of reflective and experiential learning through art practice. This process can supplement more conventional academic tools, such as critical thinking, deconstructing and reconstructing power-relations, and will open up new ways of thinking that access localized meaning and knowledge. In this dissertation, that straddles the divide between theoretical and empirical knowledge, I aim to extend the use of *shanshui* – and in a broader sense, traditional Chinese philosophy – by promoting it as a generalized and non-

⁷ As relates to Daosim, in particular.

theoretically formulated theory, which is a form of experiential learning and a way of being that will augment postmodernist notions of hybridity, impurity and multiplicity.

1.2 Background to Project

In the context of art history, *shanshui*, a subject once regarded as the highest genre in traditional Chinese literati painting, has undergone enormous changes over the last seventy years in response to the drastic transformation in Chinese art and culture since the establishment of the PRC. Leaving a detailed examination of the definition of the term “*shanshui*” and its comparison to the term “landscape” to chapter two, in this section I will briefly expand on its interpretation to introduce the trajectory of *shanshui* as it relates to the development of Chinese art since the founding of the PRC.

After 1949, during the Mao era, the painting of *shanshui* underwent a severe decline in status owing to its connection to history, the classical Chinese worldview and its related ontological, metaphysical and epistemological foundations. In the words of American-Chinese philosopher Tu Weiming (1940-):

The Chinese belief in the continuity of being, a basic motif in Chinese ontology, has far reaching implications in Chinese philosophy, epistemology, aesthetics, and ethics. The Chinese have regarded the world and man as uncreated, as constituting the central features of a spontaneously self-generating cosmos having no creator, god, ultimate cause, or will external to itself. The fundamental assumption about reality is that all modalities of being are organically connected. [...] Since nothing is outside of this continuum, the chain of being is never broken. This motif of wholeness is directly derived from the idea of continuity as all-encompassing.⁸

⁸ Tu Weiming, “The Continuity of Being: Chinese Visions of Nature” in *Confucianism and Ecology: The Interrelation of Heaven, Earth, and Humans*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Berthrong (Cambridge, Mass: Distributed by Harvard University Press for the Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, 1998), 105.

Under the guidance of a Marxist theory of class analysis, this classical Chinese worldview was held to be antithetical to the principles of People's art as enunciated by Mao. The sense of inner clarity and self-eliminating transcendence – as expressed through traditional *shanshui* painting – were held as philosophical and spiritual obstacles to the nation-wide substantial redirection of the detailed, pragmatic and human-labour-oriented narratives of the new political dogma. As a result, traditionalist artists were compelled by the Communist Party to adopt realistic approaches in their paintings, visually observing and recording the details of the world in a scientific and neutral way.

The ideological system established by the Communist Party aimed to create a comprehensive culture that would promote the ideals of Chinese collectivism and materialism. Under the framework of a highly controlled Communist cultural policy and a large-scale destruction/reconstruction of nature, *shanshui* assumed additional propagandistic and nationalistic implications as it began to promote Mao's political ideology in visual form. In this sense, and to be reflected in the new art under Mao, *shanshui* was no longer the mountain and water for human and other forms of life to reside in as integral parts but became an iconograph, symbolizing nature as the hostile other to be conquered and overcome by communists. Mao's famous line, "Battling with nature is boundless joy,"⁹ became synonymous with this attitude and the consequent actions toward the non-human world. Nature was no longer the "container" for human and other forms of life; instead, human beings were privileged and raised above everything else, as beings with the legitimacy to control and dominate.

Even while artists were forced to cooperate with the stringent narrative of communist ideology during the Mao era, some traditionalist painters continued their art practice of *shanshui* and devised innovative ways to hold their ground against the notion of an externalizing and

⁹ The lines are quoted in, *The childhood and youth of Comrade Mao Zedong* (Beijing: People's Press, 1951), 33.

dominating world. After the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, and with the onset of the “open door” policy, another factor began to influence the course of Chinese art: Chinese artists were gradually granted access to contemporary Western art and the aesthetic theories of post-modernism. This trend in China, which first appeared in the early 1980s as an edgy way to bring attention to a fresh and controversial perspective, led to many innovations both in Chinese culture and in how art was explored and understood. Post-modernism gave licence to experimentation, and the resulting combination of new and old artistic approaches led to the rediscovery and recontextualization of *shanshui* in contemporary Chinese art and the deconstruction of its iconic meaning. Freed from both the pre-existing historical burden of the literati class and the not-yet-dissipated cultural influence of Communist ideology, my research reveals how the notion of *shanshui* was explored by these artists and, also, illustrates how it provided both philosophical underpinnings and space for the psychological and/or spiritual intermingling and correlation of the “self” and the “world”.

In my open-ended research for this Interdisciplinary PhD, and following the road map proposed above, the questions I explore regarding post-1949 *shanshui* in art are as follows: How did artists in the past seven decades conform with, and react to the multi-faceted understandings of *shanshui* in their art practice? How might the artistic rediscovery and expansion of *shanshui* in a contemporary world be described and analyzed? How can we today, as individuals, make use of *shanshui* to eliminate self-boundaries in our interactions with the world; and, on the collective level, how can *shanshui* inspire the opening up of institutionalized categories, methods and ways of knowing?

1.3 Theoretical Framework & Methodology

In this dissertation, the theoretical and the methodological aspects are closely linked. I draw on art historical analysis, art-based research and Daoist philosophy to construct the foundational framework.

Traditional art historical research offers valuable tools toward the examination of *shanshui*, such as the study of form and style and the iconographic analysis. German art historian, Heinrich Wölfflin, (1864-1945) formulated a set of methods to evaluate the form and style of European art from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Considered to be one of the founders of the discipline, his book *Principles of Art History* (1929) is seminal. Another key scholar in the early development of the discipline is the German-Jewish art historian Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968). His discussion of iconography and iconology in, *Studies in Iconology: Humanist Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (1939) is of equal importance to my art historical analysis. Foundationally, the framework of art history offers a starting point for this dissertation, particularly as it relates to: the examination of visual representations with the aim exploring and explaining changes; and, in my case, the examination of the visual transformation of *shanshui* as an art genre. Moreover, since the 20th century, the field of art history has gradually developed an interdisciplinary quality and now incorporates theories from philosophy, psychology and aesthetics amongst others. Useful for my methodology, for example, are: Austrian-born art historian, Ernst Gombrich's (1909-2001) notion of "making and matching" and his use of the psychology of perception to question the "objective" and "true" meaning of an artwork itself; and, the ideas of English art critic, John Berger, (1926-2017) that were incorporated in a documentary television series from 1972, which examined "the ways of seeing," and addressed the importance of the primacy of seeing before language. These works are important, for they open up possibilities

for me to combine art historical research with other theoretical and methodological aspects.

In this dissertation, my academic art historical research includes: a chronological study of the visual transformations of *shanshui* since the founding of the PRC; the contextual examination of the iconography of *shanshui* in its transforming process in modern and contemporary Chinese art;¹⁰ and, the formal and interpretative analysis of various artworks from a selected range of Chinese artists in the past seven decades. The first purpose of this exploratory research is to examine the concept of *shanshui* in its drastic visual transformation in Chinese art after the establishment of the PRC and then, to provide a visual analysis and philosophical interpretation of this transformation within the context of art history. The second is to examine the process of adopting *shanshui* as a modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging, in a broader sense of philosophy and aesthetics. The selection of artworks for visual analysis is based on two considerations: the artworks' relevance to the visual paradigm of traditional *shanshui* painting¹¹ as a historical art genre; and, the artworks' relevance to *shanshui* as a world outlook and guiding principle for artistic creation and engagement. To interpret the transformation of *shanshui* within the art historical framework, I will examine *shanshui* as a visual form. From traditionalist artists' struggling reinventions of the Mao era to contemporary artists' free experiment in the post-Mao

¹⁰ In this dissertation I identify the end of the Qing Dynasty (1911) as the starting point of modern Chinese art. It irrevocably changed China's political structure and accelerated the debate over traditional culture. Many influential artists adopted or fused Western painting media and techniques to express willingness to modify inherited cultural traditions. In addition, the mid-1980s is recognized as the beginning of contemporary Chinese art, as the '85 New Wave art movement subverted the notions of art in the context of Modernism. In this dissertation, I mainly discuss artworks after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (1949).

¹¹ Here, I use the term "traditional *shanshui* painting" as a general term to refer to mountain-water-based ancient Chinese literati paintings before the influence of western Modernism in the early 1900s. The Song Dynasty (960-1279) is known as the golden age of Chinese *shanshui* painting. During this period *shanshui* painting flourished, various brush-ink techniques were developed and compositional tropes were established. These became the foundational elements of this genre. The rhythmic movement and expressiveness of brush strokes, the multi-spot perspective, and the harmony of compositions become key features of its visual paradigm. For an intuitive understanding of the visual paradigms of traditional Chinese landscape painting along with the brief summary of its history, please refer to: Yang Jianfeng, ed., *The Complete Works of Chinese Landscape Painting* (Foreign Languages Press, 2011). This two volume book features about 600 paintings from the Jin Dynasty till modern times.

era, the visual transformations of *shanshui* I discuss will provide context and a sense of continuity. In this regard, artworks are selected based on their inherited resemblance to the visual paradigms of traditional *shanshui* painting. I analyze them as representative examples of the overall field, outlining the trajectory of the modern and contemporary visual transformation of *shanshui*. Then, emerging out of my art-based research, this dissertation explores the spiritual response to antiquity in relation to the world view rather than the visual forms of *shanshui*. In the past twenty years, I see that many contemporary Chinese artists have begun to explore *shanshui* as a frame of mind by detaching their *shanshui*-related art practice from the visual resemblance of historical literati painting visual paradigms. Following this direction, many artists adopt an intuitive, somatic and beyond-linguistic approach to phenomenologically encounter the world in their experimental artworks. In this sense, many artworks selected for discussion no longer bear the obvious relevance to the traditional notion of *shanshui* as a two-dimensional art form. Instead, these artworks demonstrate how *shanshui* is being understood and applied as a modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging.

In the section regarding my own artistic experiments with *shanshui*, art-making is applied as a formal methodology of knowledge building, as well as a personal path toward embodied and experiential learning. In 1998, the term “art-based research” was defined by American scholar Shaun McNiff (1946-). It was first formulated as, “the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies.”¹² In this sense, art-making as a formal research methodology brings the notion of intuitive and emergent knowledge to the context of traditional academic research. Later, in an

¹² Shaun McNiff, “Arts-based research” in *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspective, Methodologies, Example and Issues*, eds. J. Gary Knolwes and Ardra J. Cole. (Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks, 2007), 83.

article called, “A Paradigm Analysis of Arts-Based Research and Implications for Education,” dated 2010, American scholar James Haywood Rolling provides a persuasive argument as to why this creative approach is valid. He states: “arts-based research methodologies are characteristically emergent, imagined, and derivative from an artist/researcher’s practice or arts praxis inquiry models” and, crucially, that “they are capable of yielding outcomes taking researchers in directions the sciences cannot go.”¹³ My art practice as research is an important component in this dissertation because it provides a different but complementary way of looking and knowing. As American sociologist and novelist Patricia Leavy (1975-) observes, it will allow me to both, “access and represent the multiple viewpoints made imperceptible by traditional research methods”¹⁴ and, to “jar people [in this case me] into seeing things differently, to transcend differences and to foster connections.”¹⁵

In addition to the general discussion of art-based research, I would like to focus on the concept of the “Neonarrative”, as discussed by Australian scholar Robyn Stewart. She writes:

The Neonarrative approach is guided by narratology, the study of stories. This is a qualitative method that offers an interpretive reconstruction of an aspect of a person’s life. The resulting neonarrative is concerned with developing a plausible meaning-giving account that blends the personal histories of the people concerned with the social histories of their field. This is a process that theorises praxis.¹⁶

I applied this concept when making my painting series, *For a Moment, Silence*, when I began fabricating new stories from old. I created imaginary landscapes based on the reconstructed narrative of my mother’s fragmented memory of her experience as an engineering soldier during

¹³ James Haywood Rolling, JR, “A paradigm Analysis of Arts-Based Research and Implications for Education,” *Studies in Art Education: A Journal of Issues and Research*. 51:2 (2010): 110.

¹⁴ Patricia Leavy. *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice*. (New York, The Guilford Press, 2012), 15.

¹⁵ Patricia Leavy. *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice*. (New York, The Guilford Press, 2012), VIII.

¹⁶ Robyn Stewart, “Creating New Stories for Praxis: Navigations, Narrations, Neonarratives” in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, eds. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (London New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019), 195.

the 1980s in China, which she has shared with me over the years. Following the method of neonarrative, my resulting art practice gives voice to personal meanings and experiences in a newly constructed space, both as a collaborative process and as self- and family- research. In this space, the basically indescribable feelings and ambiguous reflections of individuals can be creatively recorded, and a subjective understanding and individual interpretation can be emphasized. In this way, “a new story [neonarrative] is constructed when the processes that inform the conditions under investigation are theorised and reconceptualised.”¹⁷

American educational theorist David Allen Kolb (1939-) proposes that direct personal experience is the cornerstone of experiential learning. As an active, holistic learning method, experiential learning offers the possibility to reflect and acquire knowledge from direct experiences as we interact with and adapt to the world. Another proponent of this model, English scholar Jennifer A. Moon, states: “learners mediate their own experience through the processes of bringing prior experience into the present, and bringing them to bear on the new material of learning.”¹⁸ In this process, experience is transformed into knowledge, furthering and solidifying research and new learning. Complementing the objective and conclusive knowledge gained through traditional academic research, experiential learning, which is art-based research in this case, will provide an alternative form of knowledge acquisition.

In addition, Daoist philosophy plays a crucial role as a theoretical framework of this dissertation. In the context of Daoist philosophy, the sense of continuity, wholeness and interrelatedness is expressed through the cosmic process of spontaneous arising, which not only challenges the notion of origins of historical consciousness but the linear temporality of history as

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Jennifer A. Moon, *A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning: Theory and Practice* (London New York: Routledge, 2004), 77.

well. Within this theoretical framework, a scholar can transform their understanding of history from one that has a structure or sequence, to a new understanding of history as an immersive and participatory self-experience. According to the editors of, *Daoism and Ecology: Ways within a Cosmic Landscape*, the Daoist universe is simultaneously, “one and nameless, but infinitely diverse and particular. Its diversity is a function of the complex interaction of the myriad cosmic processes. The universe is a single, vital organism, not created according to some fixed principle.”¹⁹ Nature does not give priority to, “the notion of *logos* as the ‘rational way’ to provide the primary or only means of explaining things.”²⁰ Thus using Daoist philosophy as a framework will give voice to a more internal and organic perspective. This is especially important in my discussion of the authentic Chinese experience of *shanshui*, which breaks with the logical and grammatical constants and constraints. It offers an alternative way of thinking, that complements the linguistic foundation of Logocentrism and challenges the concrete perception of the world based on logocentric metaphysics, the notion of the all-encompassing wholeness and the transforming continuity of being that thus limits the dominance of syntactical and semantical rationalism. In the context of Daoist philosophy, language is non-referential and subjectively and aesthetically ordered. In this way, I can encounter *shanshui* in a self-reflective manner, without the restrictions of logocentric understanding of the world.

The foundation of *shanshui* as used in this dissertation – both as an art genre and a modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging – cannot be detached from traditional Chinese philosophy, especially the philosophy of Daoism. Being identified by mainstream historical

¹⁹ N. J. Girardot, James Miller and Xiaogan Liu, *Daoism and Ecology: Ways within a Cosmic Landscape* (Cambridge, Mass: Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2001), xlviii.

²⁰ David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Anticipating China: Thinking Through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 23.

scholars and aestheticians as the foundation of Chinese aesthetics, philosophical Daoism proposes a basic theoretical framework for the creation of *shanshui* in both traditional Chinese art and art of the present.²¹ In addition, the semantics of “mountain” and “water” offer us an holistic thought pattern, which questions the idea of a linear and single-ordered world and speaks to the dynamic and flexible Daoist philosophy and humanism of Chinese civilization. When the natural world is disrupted and even shattered by the conflicts in history and the progress of modern civilization, the complex inner linkage – that which lies between the visual paradigm of traditional *shanshui* painting and the classical Chinese worldview – is severed by the process of modernization. As a consequence, the holistic view from traditional *shanshui* painting becomes obstructed by cars, highways, the internet, digital humanity, economic boom, population, industrialization, urbanization and numerous other new phenomena. The human-centric way of thinking that the industrialized and westernized China fully embraces, stands in opposition to the holistic perspective of Chinese philosophy, and only offers us a rationalized and reductionist way to experience nature. However, the philosophical constancy of the *shanshui* tradition in Chinese art, while seriously challenged and attacked for a number of decades by this scientism, was never wholly lost in contemporary China and thus will help us reconnect with alternate ways to perceive and be in our world.

In my dissertation, I argue that art-based research also echoes the spirit of *shanshui*. In the earliest Chinese essay on *shanshui* painting, *Hua Shan Shui Xu (Introduction to Scenery Paintings)*, the author Zong Bing (375-443) was the first to introduce the concept of unity of form

²¹ In this dissertation, I have no intention to make a clear distinction between theory and philosophy. Coined by Pythagoras (c.570-495 BCE), the word philosophy literally means “love of wisdom”. It is basically the study of fundamental questions about knowledge, logic, aesthetics and metaphysics. Theory, in contrast, usually refers to a set of ideas intended for process of rational thinking and generalized explanation. I prefer to use the term philosophy over theory in most occasions, as I tend to eliminate the observational/objective/logical sense of the word theory.

and spirit, stating the spirituality of mountain and water can be channeled by and interact with individuals through the practice of art. Zong Bing's renowned "*changshen*" theory, as a theory of the unobstructed spirit, offers a way to sublimate the understanding of the world to the artistic and meditative comprehension of the eternal interaction of the opposing-correlation of Yin and Yang. During the art-making process, the unfettered interplay of mind and subject matter, which transcends the limits of place and time, will result in a great creative work. The unobstructed spirit is achieved through the realization of the world in all its infinitude and plenitude in artmaking. As a manifestation of traditional Chinese philosophy, gained and realized through the process of painting *shanshui*, attainment of the unobstructed spirit is central to the art genre and this dissertation. The depiction of the physical and geographical features of the natural elements in traditional *shanshui* painting is one of the many methodologies used to reach a state of mindful awareness of the world-as-a-whole. The artistic process is more important than the visual paradigm shown in the resulting art work, for it creates space for the artist to experience the free flow of their mind and unobstructed spirit. In this sense, *shanshui* is not only a historical art genre but rather, at a more profound level, a modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging. It is a framework and method which can transcendently guide the artists' mind to the conductive and generative flow of every encounter, both metaphysically and physically. In my art-based research, echoing the "*changshen*" theory proposed by Zong Bing, I interacted with *shanshui* in this broader sense: when being interpreted as a philosophical view, which emphasizes the integration and inherent relationship between human beings and world, I came to understand that it not just a genre of art but is much richer.

The embodied experience of *shanshui* is crucial to both this dissertation and my art practice yet complicated to approach since it is phenomenological in nature. However, as stated

above, art-based research allows an intuitive self-integration with/and a more primordial involvement in the world. Following the path of literati artists in history, I believe artmaking is one of the most meaningful approaches to re-establishing our aesthetic sensibility with the contemporary world. Moreover, and echoing the Daoist spirit, I see art-based research as a way to augment the logocentric framework of academic methods. Through art-making and visual expression, I return to intuition, then find the invisible connection to the past, to history, to the world, and back to self within the idiom of *shanshui*. I see my artistic exploration as a tool to develop the unobstructed spirit, and from this unique experience I seek to reflect something that resonates beyond the personal via the combination of an art historical exploration into modern and contemporary Chinese art combined with a textual analysis of my own art.

In this dissertation, the focus shifts from the study of visual representation and iconography of *shanshui* to contemporary reflections of the unique Chinese worldview as reflected in *shanshui* and, eventually, to a holistic and pragmatic direct experience of *shanshui*. By adopting and combining art-based research and Daoist philosophy as my primary theoretical framework, I have the opportunity to switch back and forth between the conventional academic positions of seeing, observing, analysing and writing and the complementary positions of contemplating, immersing, making and feeling. In other words, the adoption of multiple but related theoretical frameworks logically underpins the continuity and consistency of this dissertation as it allows me to freely travel between the roles of observer and participator, academic scholar and artistic creator. In this way, I can explore the correlation of the “self” and the “world” in a creative manner in my self-reflection of *shanshui*.

1.4 Literature Review

My literature review includes three key aspects. First, I study *shanshui* as a traditional art genre, drawing attention to the study of traditional *shanshui* painting following the paradigm of art historiography. Secondly, I research sources that discuss the Chinese philosophical complex. Here, I consider scholarly works with a particular emphasis on the unique philosophical appreciation related to *shanshui*. Lastly, I explore literature focused on illustrating the outline of modern and contemporary Chinese art and the up-to-date exploration of *shanshui* in this context. As I am not trained as an art historian, many of the following books, articles and essays accumulate important background information. I came to this research as an artist with undergraduate and graduate degrees in artmaking. My growing interest in *shanshui* led me to an interdisciplinary approach to explore this subject at the doctoral level. As I did not train during undergraduate and MA level studies as an art historian, and the Interdisciplinary PhD does not constitute an Art History PhD, many of the following books, articles and essays listed below were consulted for foundational art historical background and information.

A number of accounts discuss the historical development of *shanshui* painting and one in particular, an early survey of Chinese painting by James Cahill, *Chinese Painting* (1977), features a prominent discussion of *shanshui*. Offering an important contribution to the general understanding of *shanshui* painting for the Western audience, James Cahill examines the development of the art genre from the Six Dynasties to the early Qing Dynasty. Sherman Lee's, *Chinese Landscape Painting* (1977) review that considers the history and the various styles of Chinese *shanshui* painting proved useful, as did another *shanshui*-themed chronological book by Michael Sullivan, *Symbols of Eternity: The Art of Landscape Painting in China* (1979), which includes a detailed account of the development of *shanshui* painting in pre-modern and early-

modern China. In a later survey of traditional Chinese art by Wen C. Fong, *Beyond Representation: Chinese Painting and Calligraphy, 8th-14th Century* (1992), the depiction of *shanshui* is examined together with narrative painting and calligraphy. In this book Wen C. Fong describes *shanshui* as a unique visual expression of, “a cosmic vision of man’s harmonious existence in a vast but orderly universe.”²² In *History of Chinese Landscape Painting* (2001) Chinese art historian, Chen Chuanxi offers a comprehensive chronological view of the development of *shanshui* painting from its birth to the Mao era. All of these books illustrate a clear linear progression of *shanshui* as a painting genre in Chinese art history, they helped me in my initial research and provided a useful timeline. In particular, my first impression of how Chinese *shanshui* painting was examined in the context of art history was generated through my contact with the books of James Cahill and Michael Sullivan. In addition, this impression was enhanced by reading Chen Chuanxi’s book, written in Chinese, which offer a more detailed explication of the historical background of the transformation of *shanshui*.

Due to the complicated history of 20th century China, there are very few books in English or Chinese that cover the period of this dissertation from a chronological perspective and/or include what I argue are philosophically related but visually different modern and contemporary *shanshui*²³ artworks – such as, one of the collaborative performative works I include titled, *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* (1995) [Figure 2]. However, there are studies based on highly specialized topics, which feature specific artworks and/or perspectives that are relevant to my discussion. These offered insights with a sense of specificity and allowed me to examine

²² Wen C. Fong, *Beyond Representation: Chinese Painting and Calligraphy, 8th-14th Century* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2012), 71.

²³ In this dissertation, I use the term “modern and contemporary *shanshui*” to refer to *shanshui*-themed artworks in the period of modern and contemporary Chinese art (see note 10). Influenced by non-Chinese philosophies and theories, modern and contemporary *shanshui* are related yet different from traditional Chinese *shanshui* painting in appearance.

shanshui from different but unique perspectives. For example, in the book, *Summer Mountains: The Timeless Landscape* (1975) Wen C. Fong provides an analysis of a particular Northern Song *shanshui* painting, *Summer Mountains* (1050). In *Existence: A Story* (2016), David Hinton explores the complicated Chinese philosophy and aesthetics by closely examining just one traditional *shanshui* painting by the early Qing (1644-1911) artist Shitao (1644-1707). Craig Clunas', *Chinese Painting and Its Audiences* (2017) is useful for it includes *shanshui* in relation to audience reception, and reinforces the concept that meaning is formed by the viewer. In an essay titled, "Classical Chinese Landscape Painting and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature" (2009), Matthew Turner challenges Western attitudes toward the objects of nature through his appreciation of the aesthetic experience in traditional *shanshui* painting. Ideas put forth in James Elkins', *Chinese Landscape Painting as Western Art History* (2010), proved useful particularly his proposition that it is imperative to apply a non-Western method of art analysis when researching Chinese *shanshui* painting because when placed solely within the context of art history, as a discipline that is inherently Western, meaning is disrupted and comparisons to Western art are unavoidable.

In a generalized sense, the scholars mentioned above provide a knowledge of traditional Chinese philosophy and related aesthetics that was helpful when identifying the unique worldview that is specific to *shanshui*. In addition, Li Zehou's synthesis of the history of Chinese aesthetic culture, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* (2009) was most constructive. By analyzing the trajectory of Chinese aesthetics via the lens of Confucian ideas, Daoism and Chan Buddhism, Li Zehou argues that the uniqueness of the Chinese aesthetic tradition is based on a transcendental, intrinsic and super-sensuous metaphysics. Another scholar, Ye Lang, offers a comprehensive

understanding of the developmental history of Chinese aesthetics from before the Qin dynasty²⁴ to modern China. In the eight volumes of, *The History of Chinese Aesthetics* (2014), Ye Lang – in the dual role of chief editor and writer – provides a chronological framework that clarifies the origin and transformation of traditional Chinese aesthetics. Multiple authors provide an introduction of the Daoist view of the Earth and cosmos in an anthology titled, *Daoism and Ecology: Ways Within a Cosmic Landscape* (2001), within which they illustrate the importance of Daoist philosophy in the interpretation of human-nature relationship in our contemporary world.

Also, of note were two books by Francois Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness: Proceeding from Chinese Thought and Aesthetics* (2004) and *The Great Image Has No Form, or On the Nonobject through Painting* (2009), in which he applies his understanding of Chinese aesthetics to the analysis of the visual paradigms of traditional *shanshui* painting. Jullien successfully analyzes the detailed Daoist and Confucian concepts as revealed in the painting principles of *shanshui*. These two books comparatively investigate the theoretical conditions of Chinese aesthetics and challenge the Western perspective of art. He explores unique non-Western concepts – such as blandness and the nonobject – through both literary and visual examples. Indeed, *In Praise of Blandness*, Francois Jullien argues that the blandness in Chinese aesthetic traditions is not the absence of defining qualities but, instead, an unnameable union of all potential values. In *The Great Image Has No Form*, he investigates the concept of nonobject in order to unpack the myth of why Chinese landscape paintings do not seek to represent observable surroundings.

The final part of my literature review pertains to the general situation and development of modern and contemporary Chinese art since the founding of the PRC, as well as writings focused on the rediscovery of *shanshui* in today's art world. Books and papers in this section offer

²⁴ The pre-Qin period refers to the long period before emperor Qinshihuang's unification of ancient China in 221 BC.

basic background information of the art world in China after 1949. Joan Lebold Cohen's, *The New Chinese Painting 1949-1986* (1987) and Ellen Johnston Laing's, *The Winking Owl: Art in the People's Republic of China* (1989), both include discussions of the artistic innovations of *shanshui* painting. In *The New Chinese Painting 1949-1986*, Cohen examines the individualist experimental approach of *shanshui* in colour and abstraction after the death of Mao; and, in *The Winking Owl: Art in the People's Republic of China*, Laing discusses the visual innovation of *shanshui* during the Mao era by analyzing artworks from artists such as Guan Shanyu, Li Keran and Fu Baoshi. Also of note to this area of research is Julia Andrews who provides a thorough examination of art, artists, and artistic policy during the first three decades of the PCR in *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979* (1994). In addition, Julia Andrews and Shen Kuiyi offer a brief overview of the chronological evolution of Chinese art from the end of imperialism to the present day in *The Art of Modern China* (2012). Both of these latter books have included some *shanshui*-themed artworks as examples to reflect the ongoing transformation of Chinese art.

As the first Chinese writer and curator to bring Chinese contemporary art to the world, Gao Minglu articulates a comprehensive survey of the development of contemporary Chinese art within the context of China's history. In his books, *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art* (2005) and *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (2011), Gao Minglu's emphasis is on the foundation of contemporary Chinese art within the framework of the avant-garde, particularly as it relates to the change of politics and social life in China. Although useful in that it provided a solid background, unfortunately, *shanshui* rarely entered the discussion. Similarly, edited by Wu Hung and Peggy Wang, *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents* (2010) brings together hard-to-find primary documents in chronological order to illustrate the development of Chinese art from 1976 to 2006. However, most essays included

specifically relate to China's social and economic transformation and, again, the topic of *shanshui* representation in contemporary Chinese art has been for the most part left out. More recently, two comprehensive survey books of contemporary Chinese art, Wu Hung's, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History* (2014), and Jiang Jiehong's, *The Art of Contemporary China* (2021), were of interest. Wu Hung's *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History* (2014), investigates the evolution of Chinese art from the 1970s onwards with the introduction of major art movements and trends. Jiang Jiehong's, *The Art of Contemporary China* (2021), is a comprehensive survey that contextualizes the concepts and practices of contemporary art in China and reflects on the revitalisation/reinvention of tradition within the work of contemporary Chinese artists. In these two books *Shanshui* is mentioned as a traditional art form and a renewed interest in the possibilities this genre presents is indicated.

In addition to the broad sketch of modern and contemporary Chinese art above, there are writings focused on the contemporary rediscovery of *shanshui* as a topic that have garnered much interest in recent years. These writings led me to consider the discursive and expanded exploration of *shanshui* in combination with non-art history ideas and concepts in recent years, inspiring me to take my research of *shanshui* out of its original context as a traditional cultural symbol. For example, the exhibition catalogue *Shanshui: Poetry Without Sound?* (2011), featuring valuable *shanshui*-themed essays by Uli Sigg, Hu Mingyuan and Ai Weiwei, explores the aesthetic path of *shanshui* from classical literati paintings to the art of today. Similarly, another exhibition catalogue *Longing for Nature: Reading Landscapes in Chinese Art* (2020), features writings by Alfreda Murck and Wang Ching-Ling. This catalogue offers curatorial reflections on a wide variety of perspectives, ranging from social positions to political resistance, philosophical insights and personal feelings. In an early article on the topic, "Landscape as a Cultural Consciousness in

Contemporary Chinese Art (2003)”, Shen Kuiyi recognizes *shanshui* as a dynamic medium and intends to deconstruct *shanshui* as a genre from its centrality in art historical accounts. In the essay, “Landscape without nature: Ecological reflections in contemporary Chinese art (2016),” Chang Tang examines the appropriation of traditional *shanshui* visual paradigm with images of modernized and industrialized elements, showing us the ecological sensibilities embodied in the contemporary rediscovery of *shanshui*. In another essay, “Being, Becoming, Landscape: The Iconography of Landscape in Contemporary Chinese Art, Its Ecological Impulse, and Its Ethical Project (2017),” Elena Macrì justifies contemporary artists as activists as they have adjusted their social roles to explore new meanings in *shanshui* to reflect current environmental issues. John Clark, offers a case study based on Xu Bing’s creative *Background Stories* series in his writing “Behind the Painting: Xu Bing’s Hybrid Landscapes (2020).” Through the analysis of Xu Bing’s *Background Stories*, John Clark examines the relationship of nature and symbols in the contemporary appearance of *shanshui*.

Of all the books I note above, the essays from Chang Tang, Elena Macrì and John Clark provided profound insights on how *shanshui* can be discussed not only as an art genre within the context of art history, but also as a multidisciplinary topic that can be combined with other contemporary issues. In addition, the exhibition catalogue *Shanshui: Poetry Without Sound?* (2011) shows the emergence of a broadening of the discussion of *shanshui* in curatorship in early 2010s, which inspires me to explore the path to interact with *shanshui* in a pragmatic sense as a form of reflective and experiential learning in this dissertation.

1.5 Chapter Overview

After my chronological ordering of the development of *shanshui* as both an art genre and as a philosophical concept in modern and contemporary Chinese art in Chapter two, I focus on three eras, namely: the period from the founding of New China to the first two decades of the reform period; the twenty-first century onwards; and, my individual reflections on *shanshui* as a contemporary artist. These themes are expounded independently and respectively, in Chapters 3 to 5. In each of these chapters I will provide an introduction to situate readers, then I will demonstrate how the notion of *shanshui* is being preserved, reactivated and rediscovered in the reflection of modern and contemporary Chinese art.

Chapter Two: *Shanshui* and Chinese Philosophy is in two sections and as such it provides a detailed discussion of the concept of the term *shanshui* as compared to its western landscape counterpart. Subsequent to the explanation of the fundamental differences between these two terms, the specific cultural implication of *shanshui* leads to the unfolding of related aesthetic principles and philosophies. Focusing on key philosophical debates and discussions around *shanshui* in the history of China, this chapter lays the philosophical foundation for the understanding of traditional Chinese philosophy as reflected in both traditional *shanshui* painting and its later developments in contemporary art.

Chapter Three: Re-creation in Repression begins by demonstrating the paradox of *shanshui* painting in socialist New China. In the context of communist ideological control, it was almost impossible to personally encounter nature and use it to reflect individual artistic enquiry, whether along traditional or modern means. Instead, artists could only engage with nature as part of a collective consciousness, which led to a pre-defined experience and artistic dialogue. The oversimplification and radicalization of the binary opposition between subject and object, selfness and otherness, friend and enemy, was intensified by the polarization of this human-nature

relationship. Even so, traditionalist painters made great efforts to preserve the all-encompassing modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging in their *shanshui* paintings. After a discussion of selected artists during the Mao era, this chapter brings attention to the ramifications of an increased interest in the use of colour and abstraction during the reform period, how appreciation of these two Western-inspired approaches encouraged Chinese artists to reengage with individual experience and led to their rediscovery of *shanshui* painting.

Chapter Four: Hybrid in Form, Traditional in Spirit addresses the divergent explorations and discussions of *shanshui* in contemporary Chinese art. Since the early 2000s – and springing from both the visual paradigms and philosophical framework of traditional *shanshui* painting – artistic experiments of *shanshui* underwent extraordinary visual transformation and were remodeled into various non-conventional forms. Following an overview of *shanshui*-themed exhibitions held during the past decade and an analysis of selected contemporary artworks, this chapter examines the influence of post-modernism on various *shanshui*-based contemporary artists and art practices in China. This chapter discusses the convergence of philosophical Daoism and postmodernism; it investigates the deep and intricate common grounds that they share.²⁵ Furthermore, along with the examination of the appropriation, deconstruction and reconstruction of *shanshui* in contemporary art practice, this chapter explores the non-institutional and somatic experience of *shanshui*, and recognizes these artistic approaches as a move returning to the notion of a dynamic and boundary-less world of traditional Chinese philosophy.

²⁵ Other newly developed contemporary philosophical assertions, Ecocentrism and aboriginal environmental epistemology direct attention to the long-disregarded part of nature beyond/not human, which strongly echoes the concepts of “wholeness” and “interrelatedness” in the discussion of *shanshui* from its unique non-anthropocentric/indigenous ways of thinking. In indigenous perspectives of nature, the human being is just one element of the whole ecosystem. The human is identical to every animate and inanimate beings. Thus, in the context of this relational view of self and nature, indigenous groups have always sought unique paths to embrace the concepts of “wholeness” and “interrelatedness.” Even though Daoist philosophy does not directly speak of ecology and environmental ethics in the Western cultural sense, it has strong connections with the newly developed ecological movements and theorizing.

In addition to my academic research, **Chapter Five: Developing a Personal Relationship with *Shanshui*** analyzes how I, as a contemporary²⁶ artist, have used different visual media to articulate the spirit of *shanshui* in my own process of art as research. This resulted in both an exhibition of and a body of work that sprang from the research in this chapter. This personal approach is less theoretical than the earlier chapters but will provide insights and offer a different yet equally valid reading. As an alternative form of knowledge acquisition and research contextualization, art-making helps me visualize my thesis from an individual, embodied perspective. Via the analysis of my studio work, the discussion in this chapter both echoes and dialogues further with the ideas in my academic research in previous chapters. As a consequence, my art practice offers a personal space to experiment with new visual articulations in response to *shanshui* as a unique modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging.

²⁶ In chapter five I intentionally choose the word contemporary as a culturally neutral term to avoid the historical and cultural entanglement of Western modernism/postmodernism in the discussion of my own work.

Chapter Two: *Shanshui* and Chinese Philosophy

This overview of the key concept *shanshui*, and the comparison to its counterpart in English “landscape,” will provide insights into how and why this historical art genre became important as a means of expressing complex notions within a unique modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging in China from about the 5th century onwards. I consider the term “landscape,” its Western legacy and cultural specificities, so that we can expand rather than limit our understanding of *shanshui*. In this chapter, I explore the origin of these two terms and their fundamental differences. Then, in the discussion that follows, I reveal the necessity of importing the term *shanshui* into the existing Western interpretive vocabulary. More specifically, I examine how Daoist, Chan Buddhist and Confucian thought combine to create a philosophical framework for both artists and viewers in their appreciation of *shanshui*. Instead of introducing the development of *shanshui* by following a chronological order and listing objective facts about its visual transformations, I focus on philosophical insights, receptions and reflections from various examples of classical Chinese literature.

2.1 *Shanshui* vs. Landscape

Since the aesthetic and philosophical implications of the word “landscape” varies from culture to culture and through time, care must be used in discussions that cross cultural boundaries. This is particularly true when used to discuss *shanshui* as an art genre, since the term “landscape” is better understood through the paradigm of Western art history and tradition. Although the term “landscape” has been widely adopted in the discourse of Chinese art in English scholarship, the rich historical context and philosophical implication of *shanshui* usually becomes invisible in the process of cross-cultural translation.

According to the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, a landscape is composed of “all the visible features of an area of land, often considered in terms of their aesthetic appeal.”²⁷ In the early 16th century, landscape, a derivation of the Dutch word “landschap,” acquired its artistic connotation and began to be referred to art historically as a distinct art genre featuring the visual depiction of natural scenery.²⁸ In a recent publication, *The Routledge Companion to Landscape Studies*, geography scholar, Marc Antrop (1946-) traced the origin of the term in a more detailed manner. He states:

The origin of the word ‘landscape’ comes from the Germanic languages. One of the oldest references in the Dutch language dates from the early thirteenth century when ‘lantscap’ (‘lantscep’, ‘landschap’) referred to a land region or environment. It is related to the word ‘land’, meaning a bordered territory, but its suffix -seep refers to land reclamation and creation, as is also found in the German ‘Landschaft’ — ‘schaffen — to make. Its meaning as ‘scenery’ is younger and comes with Dutch painting from the seventeenth century, international renown of which introduced the word into English but with an emphasis on ‘scenery’ instead of territory. When ‘land’ refers to soil and territory, ‘landscape’ as ‘organized land’ is also characteristic of the people who made it. Landscape expresses the (visual) manifestation of the territorial identity. The earliest realistic representations of landscape date from the fifteenth century, in particular in Renaissance painting (Vos, 2000) and emphasize visual character and symbolic meanings. Landscape became also an expression of human ideas, thoughts, beliefs and feelings.²⁹

From the perspective of European history, then, the origin of the term comes with the connotation of human-centred cultivation and is a form of organized exchange between the human and the natural. With its emphasis on the sense of physicality, landscape is a human-centred cultural construct that places nature in the position of other. In the context of Western art history and despite the influence of Modernism on the development of landscape painting, to draw and/or paint a landscape usually requires the artist to keep a distance from the subject for observation; the binary

²⁷ *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2010), s.v. “landscape.”

²⁸ *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 3rd ed., (Oxford University Press, 2010), s.v. “landscape.”

²⁹ Marc Antrop, “A Brief History of Landscape Research” in *The Routledge Companion to Landscape Studies*, ed. Peter Howard, Ian Thompson and Emma Waterton (Abingdon, Oxon New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 12.

position within this concept of landscape painting implies the structure of power and places these binaries in artificial opposition. In other words, armed with the preference of, “rest and permanence over becoming and process”³⁰ and the science-based interest in observing space and light, European artists paid most attention to a human-centred, and often realistic, depiction of an enclosed landscape, one that encompasses a “sense of relation and comparison.”³¹ As a result, landscape in Western art becomes a reflection of, “what the viewer has selected from the land, edited and modified in accordance with certain conventional ideas about what constitutes a ‘good view’.”³²

Chinese landscape representation is different from its Western counterpart in that it is less concerned with presenting this “good view”. Often generalized as being closer to a spiritual communication between artist, landscape and viewer, Chinese landscape representation can become a vehicle for reaching a culturally transcendent ideal; it is a unique method of human-nature communication through the exploration of the invisible energetic flow hidden in nature’s form. *Shanshui*, the term which represents the Chinese notion of landscape – in characters which are themselves pictographs depicting a mountain with three peaks and the flowing pattern of water – offers more artistic and cultural space to deliberate on the relationships and philosophies evoked by Chinese landscape representation. When translated in most simple terms, *shanshui* – mountain and water – represents the physical nature of the landscape, however, when these elements come together the meaning becomes complex, for combined they symbolize the perceptible dynamic force of relationship, conversation, and change, the myriad things of all nature and the selfless inner spirituality that emerges through highly conceptual and intellectual artistic processes.

³⁰ David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Anticipating China: Thinking Through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 23.

³¹ Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into Art* (London: Murray, 1976), 29.

³² Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 1999), 5.

Mountain and water, as symbols of Yin and Yang, speak to a complementary rather than oppositional relationship that together achieve harmony. They cannot be separated and the force they apply on each other creates the energetic flow of the world. In the Daoist context, based on the dynamic tension from the Yin-Yang Oneness, harmony means the inclusion of the dualities and the endlessly diverse forms that are generated from these dualities. As ancient symbols from the basic eight trigrams of the I Ching, both “mountain” and “water” contain significant philosophical meanings in the system of traditional Chinese philosophy. When combined as a specific, composite term, *shanshui* – as mountain and water combined – implies the vehicle that contains the limitlessness, the shapelessness and endlessness of the universe. In this sense, rather than focusing on the mimesis of nature in realistic depiction, the painting of *shanshui* means to capture the spirit and resonance in terms of universal dynamism. As Song literati scholar Su Shi (1037-1101) states in poetic form, “anyone who judges painting on its likeness shows merely the understanding of a child.”³³ Following the theory of the unification of nature and humanity, in the long history of *shanshui* as an art genre, traditional literati artists rarely placed great emphasis on the precise recording of the appearance of nature. Instead, reverentially and almost ceremonially, Chinese artists sought correspondence between human beings and the universe through their meditative exploration of the world-as-a-whole.

In contrast to the Western notion of landscape³⁴, *shanshui* offers a different experience in

³³ This text is translated by Yang Liu from the original poem of Su Shi: 论画以形似，见与儿童邻。

³⁴ While I do not have the space to go more deeply into it here, there are many stylistic and cultural sub-categories in the western landscape painting tradition which approach more closely to the philosophical ideas of Chinese approaches to *shanshui* in art. It is a fact of the rationalist dominance also of Western art history that, since the late 1800s onwards, the mystical, religious, spiritual, indigenous, etc., has not been given its due since it did not fit the dominant way of thinking of the increasingly science-driven culture. However, artists such as J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851), Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919), Claude Monet (1840-1926), Henri Matisse (1869-1954), etc., offered their unique understanding of landscape art through experiments and innovations. This offers the possibility for the discussion of philosophical middle space where Western and Chinese approaches to landscape meet, which I explore below in chapter three.

its visual manifestation. Indeed, according to American scholar Matthew Turner:

The Chinese attitude toward visual representations of nature is such that it provides us with a way to look at Western attitudes toward the objects of nature in a different light. These specific methods of visual representation, along with their theoretical and philosophical underpinnings, direct our attention toward certain important and valuable elements of nature.³⁵

This proposition is supported and further explained by Belgian art historian, Nathalie Trouveroy.

Her comparison of the Western and Chinese notion and experience of landscape in painting further nuances our understanding of the differences. She states:

Whereas the European painter wants you to borrow his eyes and look at a particular landscape exactly as he saw it, from a specific angle, the Chinese painter does not choose a single viewpoint. His landscape is not a 'real' one, and you can enter it from any point, then travel in it; the artist creates a path for your eyes to travel up and down, then back again, in a leisurely movement. [...] The Chinese painter does not want you to borrow his eyes; he wants you to enter his mind. The landscape is an inner one, a spiritual and conceptual space.³⁶

By pursuing the unification of human beings and nature, this traditional painting genre, *shanshui*, delivers a truly non-linear, non-binary and no-boundary experience in a spontaneous manner. Thus, when looking from the present, we come to understand that the traditional literati visual paradigm of Chinese *shanshui* painting is a visual manifestation of the unique nature-human world outlook of Chinese civilization. However, the differences run deeper. As revealed by American scholar David L. Hall (1937-2001):

Western philosophers learn to understand Being as a universal property or common structure that qualifies all distinct beings. The absence in classical Chinese of any notion of Being as existence per se means that there is no notion of Being as ontological ground and no need for a metaphysical contrast between Being and beings. It suggests a world without ultimate ontological foundations.³⁷

³⁵ Matthew Turner, "Classical Chinese Landscape Painting and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Spring, 2009, Vol. 43, No. 1 (Spring, 2009): 107.

³⁶ Nathalie Trouveroy, "Landscape of the Soul: Ethics and Spirituality in Chinese Painting," *India International Centre Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (SUMMER 2003), 6.

³⁷ David L. Hall, "From Reference to Deference: Daoism and the Natural World" in *Daoism and Ecology: Ways within a Cosmic Landscape*, ed. N. J. Girardot, James Miller, Liu Xiaogan (Cambridge, Mass: Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2001), 246.

This world “without ultimate ontological foundations” proposed by Hall, as being reflected in the painting of *shanshui*, offers us, “norm-less, non-theoretical characterizations of the modalities of human experience.”³⁸ More specifically and in relation to the painting of *shanshui*, Francois Jullien further explains:

We find ourselves immersed in it. There is no “nature” that “presents to the eye,” for nature is nothing but the continual interaction between the aforementioned poles and will not be instantiated as a separate agent. Nor is there an “observer” to face the landscape, no one to remain outside and delimit the horizon by virtue of his position.³⁹

As a channel for Chinese people, and, as I argue in my conclusion, for anyone to know and communicate with the universe, the concept of *shanshui* delivers more. As a reflection of the macro world, the mountain and water within landscape painting are more than just representations of their concrete counterparts, they take on a range of meanings and can be used as tools to help us access the inexpressible but palpable energetic flow of the world.

These contrasting notions of landscape in Western and Chinese art have also been considered from within the Chinese art world. Indeed, discussions about the distinctions between Western and Chinese landscape painting can be traced back to almost a century ago. In 1926, French-trained Chinese artist, Lin Fengmian (1900-1991), expressed his preference for Chinese *shanshui* painting over Western landscape painting.⁴⁰ He states:

Western landscape painters depicted the natural scenery realistically, representing the surface of nature. Therefore, their painting did not have a lyrical feeling and was very mechanical. Chinese landscape painting, however, was the expression of personal mood and imagination. Chinese painters travelled through beautiful scenery, then used painting as a vehicle to express their moods. The formal likeness was never their main concern. Therefore, Western landscape

³⁸ Ibid, 246.

³⁹ François Jullien and Pedro Rodríguez, *Living Off Landscape: or the Unthought-of in Reason* (London Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2018), 16.

⁴⁰ I do not know what western landscape paintings Chinese artists had access to in the time of Lin Fengmian. I assume Lin was mostly looking at landscape paintings from the school of French Academism and was not aware of the variations other than realism – such as the exploration of spiritualism via fantasy and romanticism, impressionism and post-impressionism, expressionism, abstraction, etc.— we now know about today.

painting is the representation of objects; Oriental landscape painting is the expression of impression.⁴¹

Similarly in 1953, Chinese literati painter and art historian, Huang Binhong (1865-1955) also commented on the uniqueness of *shanshui* painting in comparison with Western oil landscape painting from the perspective of likeness. To his understanding, “Western art specializes in realism, while the art of our country [China] seeks impression in form of symbolism. The realist takes the appearance, and the impressionist pursues the spirit through symbolic meaning [of *shanshui*]. This is the uniqueness of Eastern *shanshui* art.”⁴²

Despite Lin Fengmian and Huang Binhong’s neglect of the phenomenological progression of landscape painting in the West during the late 19th and early 20th century, this perspective, which recognizes and acknowledges the philosophical differences between *shanshui* and landscape painting, has been further nuanced by contemporary Chinese artists and scholars. For example, according to art historian, Shen Kuiyi (1954-):

A century ago, using the word *shanshui* in China was relatively simple because it usually indicated the ink or coloured painting of natural scenery. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the word “landscape,” which was translated into *fengjing*, appeared in art terms in China, when western style oil painting was introduced to China. In the circle of traditional Chinese ink painting, however, people still used *shanshui* and avoided using *fengjing*. *Fengjing* became a special term used for the landscape painting in Western media, such as oil or watercolour. This situation has continued to the recent day. For example, in 1998, the organizer of the “International Art Festival” still insisted using the term for the title of their exhibition, Contemporary Chinese *Shanshui* Painting and Oil Landscape Painting Exhibition.⁴³

⁴¹ Lin Fengmian, “The Future of Oriental and Western Arts,” 1926, quoted in Shen Kuiyi, “Landscape as a Cultural Consciousness in Contemporary Chinese Art,” *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Volume 2, Number 4, December 2003, 35.

⁴² Huang Binhong, *Huang Binhong: Selected Writings on Arts* (Henan mei shu chu ban she, 2007), 132. Translated by Yang Liu from the original: 西人之艺术专尚写实，吾国之艺术则取象征。写实者以貌，象征者以神。此为东方艺术独特之精神。

⁴³ Shen Kuiyi, “Landscape as a Cultural Consciousness in Contemporary Chinese Art,” *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Volume 2, Number 4, December 2003, 34.

As an approach to allow different cultures to intermingle without losing their separate identities, the word *fengjing* was assigned to a particular genre of Western oil landscape painting. Meanwhile, the word *shanshui* retained its original context in Chinese art history. In this sense the unique philosophical implication of *shanshui* as an art genre can be reserved in the cross-cultural development of Chinese art.

Another scholar, Chinese art historian Zhu Qingsheng (1957-) discusses the different perspectives adopted by *shanshui* and landscape painting in, “The General Theory of Shanshui Society (2017)”. He writes: “Shanshui painting takes on a multi-spot perspective, while Western landscape painting takes on focal perspective. These two different perspectives reveal two different forms/systems of observing and presenting things.”⁴⁴ This statement is also seconded by contemporary Chinese artist Xu Bing (1955-) when he speaks to his art production, particularly as it relates to the series *Background Story*. In his 2015, inaugural lecture at Heidelberg University, Xu Bing states:

[In *shanshui*], a mountain represents all mountains and a pine tree represents all pines. This is different from strict realism in Western paintings, especially classical works; when a mountain or a tree is depicted, it represents a certain mountain and a certain tree somewhere. In contrast, European classical paintings are similar to drawings that train artists to look as if one is peering through a camera obscura. In order to be a good artist, one’s eye has to be as precise as a camera. One cannot see light in the dark areas. Although in the Renaissance there was no modern camera, European painting demanded absolute realism. The different philosophies of nature explain why the methods I used for the *Background Story* series cannot re-enact European realistic oils but expressive and semiabstract Chinese painting.⁴⁵

Following this comparison, in 2017, the Vice President of China Academy of Art, Gao Shiming

⁴⁴ Zhu Qingsheng, “The General Theory of Shanshui Society,” 2017, accessed June 30, 2021, <http://www.zhishifenzi.com/depth/humanity/1297.html>. Translated by Yang Liu from the original: 山水画采用散点透视, 风景画采用焦点透视。散点与焦点, 是对事物观察和呈现的不同形态。

⁴⁵ Xu Bing, “Reactivating Tradition,” in *Xu Bing: Beyond the Book from the Sky*, ed. Sarah E. Fraser and Yu-Chieh Li (Singapore: Springer, 2020), 6-7.

(1976-) echoes Xu's voice from a philosophical perspective:

The relationship between Chinese literati painters and the world is not based on mimesis, but spontaneous arising. Spontaneous arising happens at the moment when primordial feelings and artistic intentions are generated from the coexistence between and unification of the world and us. Therefore, the world mentioned at this point is neither the physical world that is under the observation from the lens of empirical science, nor the so-called cognitive object of epistemologists, but that of Creation and Transformation, the world as a whole. This world as a whole is generated in response to primordial feelings of the very moment. At that very moment, everything is here for me and I am here [for transcendental experience and art creation].⁴⁶

Therefore, beyond the visual paradigm of *shanshui* as a traditional art genre, *shanshui* as a concept carries the unique Chinese philosophical view and provides an alternative modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging, both in the making and appreciation of Chinese art. For this reason, I argue that *shanshui* is useful as a term in global art history both within and beyond China.

Still today, well into our globalized world, the chastening singular model of art criticism applied to contemporary art continues to deny the presence of non-Western values. However, as an alternative mode of thinking, perceiving and engaging, *shanshui* should neither be ignored nor confused with the implications of its Western counterpart, landscape. British art historian David Clarke (1954-) appeals to this idea of the need to embrace alternative perspectives. In “Contemporary Asian Art and Its Western Reception” he states:

What I am arguing here is not simply a more extensive coverage in the art historical literature of previously marginalized Asian modern and contemporary art, but the opening up of new perspectives on the whole of art history which work to decenter the existing hegemony. Only when a multiplicity of such perspectives exist, in dialog but with none granted in advance any particular

⁴⁶ Gao Shiming, “The Crisis of Shan Shui,” Sohu, accessed Jun 17, 2020, https://www.sohu.com/a/364347881_455444. Translated by Yang Liu from the original: 中国文人画家与世界所发生的最重要的关系不是模仿 (mimesis), 而是起兴。起兴是在时、机之中由一物一景引发感怀兴致, 世界与我的共在关系由此情兴激荡而出。所以此时所说的世界, 既非寻常实证科学所欲观察的自然世界, 亦非知识论者所谓认知对象, 而是“造化”, 是浑然天地, 此浑然天地应情兴而当下生成, 当是时, 万物皆备于我而有我在焉。

priority, can we talk of art history as having become globalized as a discipline. Globalization requires an insight into the local nature of meaning which rules out the possibility of a panoptic mastering viewpoint.⁴⁷

In this light, *shanshui* is one of the many ways in which all artists in all cultural contexts can respond to alternative modernity and contemporaneity in their own practice of art. This is crucial, for the proposition of reviving *shanshui* in the context of contemporary art will broaden the discourse: it is not a resistance to Western aesthetics but it is a means to resist West-centric globalization. In this way, this dissertation can distinguish the experience of *shanshui* from the historically burdened and predetermined research trajectory of the term landscape.

2.2 The Philosophical Trajectory of *Shanshui* in History

The philosophy of Daoism, as identified by mainstream historical scholars and aestheticians as the foundation of Chinese aesthetics, proposes a basic philosophical framework for the understanding of the world. As early as the Spring and Autumn Period (771-476 BCE), the legendary founder of philosophical Daoism, Laozi (6th -5th century BCE), delivered his insight on the human-nature relationship in the twenty-fifth chapter of the writings collected in the Daoist classic *Dao De Jing*:

Man models himself on earth,
Earth on Heaven,
Heaven on the Way,
And the way on that which is naturally so.⁴⁸

Further, Laozi proposed several significant philosophical concepts that influenced subsequent

⁴⁷ David Clarke, “Contemporary Asian Art and Its Western Reception” in *Contemporary Art in Asia: A Critical Reader*, ed. Melissa Chiu and Benjamin Genocchio (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2011), 160-161.

⁴⁸ Translated by D.C. Lau from the original “人法地，地法天，天法道，道法自然。” Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. D.C. Lau (Penguin Books, 1963), 82.

literati *shanshui* painting, such as “Dao”, “Qi”, “Xiang,” “Dan” and “Yin-Yang”. “Dao” is the key term in the system of Daoist cosmology and spirituality. It has been translated concretely as “Way” or “Path” in various English translations of different Daoist texts. However, despite these definitions, “Dao” remains indefinable. It is a concept that comes with multidimensional and fluid meanings that refer to the interconnectedness of all things and its constant change. “Qi” is the vital force, which is spontaneously generated out of “Dao”. “Xiang” is the image, the visualized form of things, in which the “Qi” resides but is not bound. Thus, the relationship between “Dao”, “Qi” and “Xiang” forms the foremost theory of Chinese aesthetics: “Xiang” can never be separated from “Qi” and “Dao” since the latter two concepts constitute the essence of life and the universe. An image may be taken into the realm of aesthetics only when it reveals the vital energy of life and the state of balance and harmony, which “Dao” signifies. The concept of “Dan” represents blandness, which implies a sense of inner detachment from the explicit and quickly-consumed visual, aural and gustatory stimulation. “Yin-Yang” is the interaction of the two coexisting but contrary forces of “Qi”, which lays the philosophical ground for the explaining and understanding of the universe in the context of a traditional Chinese cosmology.

As one of the cornerstones of traditional Chinese culture,⁴⁹ the philosophy of Laozi combined with other derived concepts and schools of thought over time. In the Warring State (475-221BCE), the Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi (369-286 BCE), as successor to Laozi, broadened and supplemented the philosophy of Daoism further. He proposed the idea of the “ultimate joy”, which transcends ordinary life by achieving the goal of mental emptiness, stillness, and clarity. As explained by renowned scholar Li Zehou (1930 -), the only way to achieve this goal is to, “shed all subjective goals, intentions, perceptions, or demands, and become united with the objective

⁴⁹ It offers a comprehensive set of systematical methodologies for people to cognize the universe, nature, society and self.

regularity of nature.”⁵⁰ As shown from descriptions above, none of these philosophical terms can be concretely defined. Instead, according to the unspeakable quality of Dao, the traditional Daoist aesthetic was intentionally fabricated through subtle yet perceptible non-lingual-oriented concepts. Furthermore, Chinese traditional *shanshui* painting is motivated by a form of ontological humility; it never sees the human-world relation as being superior to any/every other sort of relation.⁵¹ By insisting that ontologically a human being should follow the Dao and be respectful of nature, Daoism guides artists to connect with the energetic flow of nature and then to mindfully embrace and fuse with nature through the art practice of *shanshui*.

The importance of a mindful, harmonious relationship between man and nature is not limited to Daoism. In its discourse, Confucianism – which does not subscribe to the attitudes of detachment and transcendentalism in Daoism – contributes to the history of Chinese philosophy by proposing the idea of “Ren”, which is “humaneness”. Although the concept of “nature” held a somehow secondary position in Confucianist theory – since it postulated that nature is incapable of generating beauty by itself without the involvement of human beings – this concept of “humaneness”, however, combines the idea of “beauty” with that of “goodness”. By focusing on the consolidation of aesthetic appreciation and the inner moral power of human beings, Confucius posited the appreciation of *shanshui* as an indicator of the level of consciousness of humanity. In the twenty-first chapter of *Lun Yu* (the *Analects of Confucius*), the Master illustrates the closeness of the relationship between nature and a person of noble character. He writes: “The wise find joy in water; the benevolent find joy in mountains. The wise are active; the benevolent are tranquil.

⁵⁰Li Zehou and Maija B. Samei, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2010),81.

⁵¹ This aspect of Daoist philosophy is closely linked with eco-centric and indigenous ways of knowing and seeing the world. Many western scholars in the twentieth century – for example, Arne Næss (1912-2009) and Aldo Leopold (1887-1949), who both embrace a nature-centered system of values – cite anthropocentrism as being the primary cause of various global environmental crises. Scholars into the study of Animism and indigenous philosophies, such as Vine Deloria Jr. (1933-2005), David Abram (1957-) and Graham Harvey (1959-), point their research in similar directions by offering a relational view of self and nature.

The wise are joyful; the benevolent are long-lived.”⁵² This intimate relationship with nature shows the veneration for mountain and water by ethically well-cultivated men as defined by Confucius.

The development of aesthetics in the Six Dynasties was greatly influenced by the arrival of Buddhism, also. For the literati, Buddhism appeared to share much with Daoism since Daoist terminology was used in the oldest translations of Buddhist texts.⁵³ Moreover, Chan Buddhism, which began to develop in the 6th century, is described as a cultural hybrid that stemmed from the interminglings of Mahayana Buddhism and Daoism. From the perspective of *shanshui* in art, Chan Buddhism aims to construct a spiritual space through the appreciation of nature, helping both the artist and the viewer to reach a subtle awakening in the complete absence of all ostensible causes of phenomena. Thus, in the domain of aesthetics, *shanshui* painting historically offered the ideal platform for Chinese literati to experience sudden enlightenment, in Chinese *dunwu*, which refers to the, “function of personal readiness [a root meaning of the term, *dun*] to engage in enlightened/enlightening conduct—a function of the keenness or dullness with which one enters into liberating resonance with others.”⁵⁴ For example, when expounding on the process of Chan mediation, the Song dynasty Chan Buddhist monk, Qingyuan Weixin, proposed three ways to see *shanshui* and recounts:

Thirty years ago, before practicing meditation of Chan, I saw mountain as mountain and water as water. Later, when I attained the knowledge for myself on the path to the entrance, I saw mountain not as mountain, and water not as water. Now I am at a resting place, I see mountain as just mountain, and water as just water.⁵⁵

⁵² Translated by Yang Liu from the original: 知者樂水，仁者樂山。知者動，仁者靜。知者樂，仁者壽。

⁵³ Peter Herschok, “Chan Buddhism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2019), Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Archive, accessed August 23, 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/index.html>.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ I rephrased this saying from the original words of his teaching. The original texts in the following is from *Record of Pointing At the Moon: Scroll 28: The 6th Patriarch’s 14th Generation* (指月录.卷二十八.六祖下第十四世): 老僧

Using the above three-stepped appreciation of mountain and water as an example, the Chan master mapped out the trajectory of training a mind: at the beginning the unenlightened mind perceives all forms as constant, fixed and permanent; after attaining a first-level degree of enlightenment through meditation the mind is open for a more fluid understanding of the world; and, eventually, after having experienced thorough awakening from meditative practice, the mind naturally discards the fundamental difference of the physical and the spiritual by recognizing that the names are arbitrary, and what is important is the realization of emptiness as being shared by everything in the world. As explained by Japanese Scholar, Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki (1870-1966), the “ultimate standpoint” of Chan Buddhism, as reflected in the teaching of Qingyuan Weixin, is:

[that] we have been led stray through ignorance to find a split in our own being, that there was from the very beginning no need for a struggle between the finite and the infinite, that the peace we are seeking so eagerly after has been there all the time.⁵⁶

Inextricably linked since the Six Dynasties (220-589), Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism were considered as being mutually complementary by scholars and the class of literati.⁵⁷ By absorbing the Chan Buddhist concept of a sudden and intuitive awareness of the world, Chinese literati developed the sparing use of imagery in their *shanshui* painting to help attain spiritual

三十年前，未參禪時，見山是山，見水是水。及至後來親見知識，有個入處，見山不是山，見水不是水。而今得個休歇處，依前見山只是山，見水只是水。大眾，這三般見解，是同是別？有人緇素得出，許汝親見老僧。

⁵⁶ Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism, first series* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 24.

⁵⁷ The unification of Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism is known as “Sanjiao Heyi” (literally “three teachings as one”), which describes the harmonious aggregation of the three teachings in Chinese history. The three teachings can be considered as three major aspects of the established framework of traditional Chinese philosophy. The concept of the unification of these three schools of philosophy experienced several periods of development in the history of China. It was firstly proposed in Wei-Jin period and became a mature concept in Ming and Qing dynasty. Please refer to the chapter titled “Chinese Faith Triangle: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism” in the book *Major Aspects of Chinese Religion and Philosophy* (2012) for more information.

Chun Shan, *Major Aspects of Chinese Religion and Philosophy: Dao of Inner Saint and Outer King* (Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg, 2012), 3-22.

enlightenment. Enlightenment, for the literati class, was paramount. What interested them was not the religious belief and related thoughts of Buddhism but as Li Zehou notes: “[the] theoretical, philosophical, and emotional pursuit of metaphysical transcendence carried out by Chan Buddhists.”⁵⁸ Instead of replacing and repressing each other, Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism continued to evolve over time, independently refining and building within themselves. However, when united in some measure by the literati to create their unique artistic expressions these three philosophies amalgamated, like strands of a rope, and thus form a strong conceptual foundation for not only *shanshui* as an art genre, but Chinese art in general that continues to this day.

By the Six Dynasties, in China’s earliest written landscape painting theory *Hua Shan Shui Xu* (*Introduction to Scenery Paintings*) authored by artist Zong Bing, *shanshui* was identified as being a means to realize “Changshen,” the unobstructed spirit. In the context of Daoist philosophy and according to Song scholar and educator Zhang Zai (1020-1077), “Shen,” translated as spirit, is the, “unpredictable interaction and unity of Yin and Yang.”⁵⁹ To paraphrase and translate Zong Bing’s statement, artists build up a personal connection with physical nature and then echo the spirituality of nature in the art-making process. A good *shanshui* painting resonates with the spirit of both the artist and audience and leads to an inward and pure joy that transcends the experience of ordinary life. For Zong Bing, the invisible spirit of the Dao is hidden in the visible contours of *shanshui*. He declared:

If response by the eye and accord by the mind [to nature] is considered a universal law, when similitude is skillfully achieved, eyes will also respond completely and the mind be entirely in accord. This response and accord will

⁵⁸Li Zehou, and Maija B. Samei, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2010),161.

⁵⁹ Translated by Yang Liu from the original : 气有阴阳, 推行有渐为化, 合一不测为神。 This explanation of the concept “Shen” is from the most well-known writing of Song scholar Zhang Zai, titled *Correct Discipline for Beginners: The Devine Character* (正蒙: 神话) .

affect the spirit and, as the spirit soars, the truth will be attained.⁶⁰

From these words, we see the proposal of a highly conceptual process in the spiritual dimension of *shanshui* painting: perception of the Dao may be achieved during the painting process and this interactive meditative exploration of the spiritual dimension resides in the visual reflection of nature. Following Zong Bing's theory, in the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (907–979), artist and art theorist Jing Hao (855–915) proposed six essentials for the creation of *shanshui* painting. In *Bifa Ji (Art of the Brush)*, he states:

In painting [of *shanshui*], there are six essential elements. The first is qi, [vital force], the second is yun [resonance], the third is si [thought], the fourth is jing [scenery], the fifth is bi [brush] and the sixth mo [ink].⁶¹

Similarly, the energetic flow of the inner spirit and its ripple in the artists' mind was deemed the most important element in the hierarchy of Jing Hao's painting theory. By following this theory, in the painting process an artist can, "focus on the essential and eliminate the superfluous details that would make his painting vulgar."⁶² Later, during the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127), artist Guo Xi (1020-1090) offered this similar insight from the perspective of the viewer in, *Lin Quan Gao Zhi (The Lofty Message of Forest and Streams)*:

There are ways of appreciating works of *shanshui* as a viewer. If we approach them with the heart of forests and streams, the value of *shanshui* is high; but if we approach them with the eyes of pride and extravagance, the value of *shanshui* is low.⁶³

⁶⁰ Susan Bush and Hsio-yen Shih. *Early Chinese Texts on Painting* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 37. The original text is: 夫以应目会心为理者，类之成巧，则目亦同应，心亦俱会。应会感神，神超理得。 According to my own interpretation, in Susan Bush and Hsio-yen Shih's translation, the word "similitude" does not refer to the "realistic depiction of the form to achieve likeness in appearance." Instead, it refers to one of the steps of the whole painting process, which is to "artistically transform the visual experience of the external world into an internalized art creation."

⁶¹ Translated by Yang Liu from the original: 夫画有六要：一曰气，二曰韵，三曰思，四曰景，五曰笔，六曰墨。

⁶² Nathalie Trouveroy, "Landscape of the Soul: Ethics and Spirituality in Chinese Painting," *India International Centre Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (SUMMER 2003), 10.

⁶³ Translated by Yang Liu from the original: 看山水亦有體，以林泉之心臨之則價高，以驕侈之目臨之則價低。

From Guo Xi's perspective, the value of a *shanshui* painting is varied and dependant on the mindset of the audience. To get the most value from a *shanshui* painting, one should embody nature in their sensitivity and embrace their naturalness in art appreciation.

The importance of *shanshui* painting, as a vehicle for the in-depth understanding of and interaction with the world, is emphasized, again, during the early 12th Century. In *Shan Shui Chun Quan Ji (The Pure Album of Shanshui)*, the Song artist, Han Zhuo, wrote:

The ancients said: "painting is measurement," but it is more than that. With it, one can probe into anything within the universe, manifest what is not illumined by the sun and moon. By wielding a fine-tipped brush one can reveal myriad things from one's mind. By exercising one's abilities one can create a thousand li within the palm of one hand. Is it anything but the brush, then, that completes what has been created [by nature]? ⁶⁴

Thus from Han Zhuo's perspective, we see that painting *shanshui* is truly a spiritual process, for the artist becomes part of a dynamic and holistic experience of the world from within. In other words, painting *shanshui* is a meditative path toward the unification of human beings and the cosmos. Later, the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) artist Wang Lyu (1332-1391) echoed his predecessors in *Hua Shan Tu Xu (The Introduction to the Album of Mt. Hua)*. He said: "I take my heart-mind to be my teacher. It takes as its master my eyes, which in turn revere Mt. Hua as their teacher."⁶⁵ In this statement, the phenomenological experience of Mt. Hua is the origin and foundation of the artist's creation. The artistic accomplishment of *shanshui* as an art genre cannot

⁶⁴ Robert J Maeda, *Two Twelfth Century Texts on Chinese Painting: Translations of the Shan-shui Ch'un-ch'üan Chi by Han Cho and Chapters Nine and Ten of Hua-chi by Teng Ch'un* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Center for Chinese Studies, 1970), 11. Translated by Robert J Maeda from the original text: 古云：画者，圣也。盖以穷天地之至奥，显日月之不照。挥纤毫之笔，则万类由心；展方寸之能，则千里在掌。岂不为笔补造化者哉！

⁶⁵ Translated by Canadian art historian Kathlyn Maureen Liscomb from the original text: 我师心，心师目，目师华山。 Kathlyn Maureen Liscomb, *Learning from Mount Hua: A Chinese Physician's Illustrated Travel Record and Painting Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1.

be detached from the artist's direct and intuitive encounter with nature and this mindful relationship between nature, artist and art production continues through the centuries. In the words of Qing artist Fang Shishu (1692-1751):

Mountain, river, grass and trees are the elements from nature, which compose the visionary world of the real. In contrast, artists create art [*shanshui* painting] from their inner feelings, which compose the visionary world of the virtual/conceptual. To echo [unify] the real by [with] the virtual/conceptual, is to practice *shanshui* between brush and ink.⁶⁶

To Fang Shishu, painting *shanshui* is about capturing the artist's inner feelings toward a nature scene with brush and ink. When the artist's sentiments engage strongly with the natural scene, there is resonance between the real and the conceptual and this is reflected in the painting.

As demonstrated in this short introduction to the philosophical trajectory of *shanshui* throughout history, we see how the art genre was elevated. Over time, *shanshui* moves beyond its traditional visual paradigm and becomes a means to showcase a distinct Chinese philosophical viewpoint. The brief comparison with the Western conception of landscape at the beginning of the chapter allows for a better understanding of how *shanshui* as a concept has empowered Chinese artists with a unique process of art making and appreciation. In the following chapters, I will delve further into the development of *shanshui* as an art genre in modern and contemporary China after the founding of the PRC to discover how *shanshui* as a philosophical method both corresponds to and challenges the modernization and reformation of Chinese society. I will investigate the different ways in which modern and contemporary Chinese artists – those who are both descendants of the Chinese *shanshui* painting traditions as well as part of a global, cosmopolitan art culture – use their unique methodologies from their philosophical, political, local and global

⁶⁶ Translated by Yang Liu from the original: 山川草木，造化自然，此实境也。因心造境，以手运心，此虚境也。虚而为实，是在笔墨有无间。

cultural surroundings to navigate a path toward *shanshui* as a unique modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging.

Chapter Three: Re-creation in Repression

In mainland China during the Mao years⁶⁷ (1949-1976), *shanshui* as a traditional painting genre underwent dramatic changes due to extreme ideological interference, indeed, even appreciation of the genre was problematized by severe political disapproval. As opposed to spiritually-tinged philosophy, the value of materialism espoused by Mao was emphasized, particularly through, “mass distribution of new printed matter made to the Communist Party’s specifications.”⁶⁸ As art historian Michael Sullivan (1916-2013) summarized: “the Party apparatus and its Marxist-Maoist ideology exerted so tight a control over cultural life that it is natural for the art of that period to be viewed primarily as a reflection or expression of political forces.”⁶⁹

However, even while artists were forced to cooperate with the stringent narrative of communist ideology, I will trace how a number of traditionalist painters continued to find innovative paths to preserve the genre’s original philosophical connotation in its modern transformation and discuss how even in these *shanshui* paintings of forced compromise, Chinese artists still held their ground against the notion of externalization and domination of the world from Mao’s ideology.⁷⁰ Moreover, after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, Chinese artists began to engage with individualistic and phenomenological approaches that became accessible through the easing of tensions. They removed the propagandistic and nationalistic themes from their *shanshui*

⁶⁷ In this dissertation I consider the death of Mao Zedong as the end of Mao years. With a two-year gap, many historians consider 1978 as a new era of reform, which marks Deng Xiaoping’s consolidation of power and policy reversal at the Third Plenum of the 11th Party Congress. For example, in his article *Ideology and Policy in China in the Era of Reform, 1978-1986*, Stuart R. Schram considers 1978 as the year of reform for both economic and political system in China.

⁶⁸ Julia F. Andrews and Shen Kuiyi, *The Art of Modern China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2012), 139.

⁶⁹ Michael Sullivan, “Art in China since 1949,” *The China Quarterly* No. 159, Special Issue: The People’s Republic of China after 50 Years (Sep, 1999): 713

⁷⁰ A discussion of Mao’s ideology and its influence on Chinese art will follow in section 3.1, however, I do not have the space to go more deeply into a detailed discussion of this historical period as it is beyond the scope of the current analysis.

paintings and, using colour and abstraction as a form of artistic introspection that was very different from the previously imposed binary thinking, eventually, they stepped out from under the influence of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). In this history, *shanshui* offers Chinese artists opportunities to deconstruct notions of objectification and the purely scientific/technical perspectives on the world of the Mao era. Through my analysis of this transformation in modern China, I seek to reveal the tenacious vitality of *shanshui* as a unique modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging in the midst of great social changes.

The ideological system established by the Communist Party after 1949, set out to create a comprehensive culture of Chinese collectivism and materialism. Under the framework of a highly controlled Communist cultural policy, the former visual paradigm and language of traditional *shanshui* painting were deemed incompatible with the socialist perspective of the new China. As I will illustrate later in this chapter, this cultural policy was heavily influenced by the Soviet Union, which, during this time, favoured a painting style later referred to as socialist realism.⁷¹ As this style privileges Communist ideals and class struggle narratives, previous visual paradigms of traditional *shanshui* painting were identified as being outdated. However, I believe that although traditional *shanshui painting* was undervalued, even attacked in the framework of Mao's ideological theory of art, its flexible philosophical foundation continued to provide artists with various possibilities and space to spur its revitalization.

By tracing the visual transformation of *shanshui* painting in the Mao and Reform eras, I will show how certain Chinese artists transformed and adapted the aesthetic aspects of traditional

⁷¹ Coined by Soviet writer Ivan Gronsky (1894-1985), Socialist realism was firstly used in a British literary magazine the *Literary Gazette* (May 1932). Socialist realism envisions the world from the political perspective in the meaning of communism. The glorified depiction of the emancipation of the proletariat, political leaders and advanced exemplary characters makes up most of its content. Socialist realism includes artists such as Isaak Brodsky, Arkady Pastov and Evgenia Antipova. After being adopted as the official art style of Chinese communist political propaganda in the 1940s, Socialist realism was gradually transformed into a form of revolutionary romanticism, losing the naturalist characteristics of realism.

shanshui painting to the changing political environment, as a way to preserve the original philosophical intent of the genre. This is important because as a modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging, *shanshui* came to inform so many Chinese artists of younger generations in the decades that followed. Indeed, it has come to both inform and impact my own art practice as a contemporary Chinese artist, as well. In the formation of my art, the exploration of the distinct philosophical trajectory of *shanshui* in 20th and 21st century Chinese artists' work has helped me connect the dots between my artistic dialogue with my memory, my cultural identity, my mother and my home country of China. As I explore the evolution of *shanshui* as an art genre in this and the following chapters, I situate myself as a contemporary artist of my generation within the philosophical context of *shanshui*.

3.1 Ideology in Communist China: The Imposition of Mao's Narrative

On October 1st, 1949, Mao Zedong declared the establishment of the People's Republic of China, along with a new People's Government from atop of Tiananmen, a place emblematic of the rule of feudal dynasties and related imperial traditions. A year later, the National Art Academy in Beijing was renamed the Central Academy of Fine Arts by the new Government Administration Council. From this point on, artists and the production of art became problematized. As Julia Andrews states in her book *The Art of Modern China*: "Academy artists would now be subject to the direction of the Communist Party and, like all of China's artists, their lives would begin a dramatic and sometimes painful transformation."⁷² However, art historian Maria Galikowski argues that the ideological remolding of Chinese artists started much earlier, even before the

⁷² Julia F. Andrews and Shen Kuiyi, *The Art of Modern China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2012),139.

establishment of the new China. She notes: “From the 1930s, several leading figures in the Communist Party, such as Qu Qiubai and Mao Zedong, began to develop their ideas on the social function of art according to Marxist theories as interpreted by Russian and Soviet political and cultural theorists.”⁷³

As early as 1942, Mao emphasized the political role of art in the advancement of socialism and collectivism in his, “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art.”⁷⁴ This speech aimed to unify artistic expression by promoting socialist realism. After the establishment of the PRC, Zhou Yang (1908-1989) – a communist art theorist who later suffered severe criticism and imprisonment during the Cultural Revolution – made a statement regarding these new art policies in 1953. In his words: “We take socialist realist methods as the highest creative and critical standard for all our literature and arts.”⁷⁵ Consequently, because of its previous links with the literati, the classical genre of traditional *shanshui* painting was placed, now, in direct opposition to the style promoted communist ideology. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the new government had neither desire nor strategy to reframe *shanshui* painting to offset this newly mandated incompatibility: on one hand, they intended to remove all distractions generated by this conservative and elite art form in order to maintain clear and productive ideological control; and, on the other, they could not completely reject *shanshui* painting because it worked as a symbol of national identity and cultural essence. In this complicated and unclear situation, traditionalist painters embarked on an uncharted venture of *shanshui* adaptation and reform.

Art production was co-opted by Mao’s ideology as a means to project a united front

⁷³ Maria Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China 1949-1984* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1998), 3.

⁷⁴ Mao Zedong, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965-1975), 3:69-97.

⁷⁵ Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People’s Republic of China, 1949-1979* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1994), 119.

between the people and the Party. Now, confined to the domain of the proletariat, art was to be presented as an easily understood cultural product and fulfill the demand of the masses. Art was to be inspired by the life of ordinary people, only, people who had rarely been the subject or the audience of art. By clearly defining both the audience and the value of the country's official art, Mao made art production comply with Party ideology and thus used art as a definitive and authoritative tool to represent his political goals. Although the apparent aim of Mao's talk at the Yan'an Forum was the democratization of art, his actual intentions were to further Party control through fully decoded representations of art and impose restrictions on art production. With this aim, that art should serve the people, Mao directed the underlying assumptions of art to the class-oriented focus of Marxism-Leninism.

As the CCP carried out these Marxist-Leninist pedagogic movements throughout its governance, socialist realism – which emerged between 1932 - 1934 and became the dominant art style in the Soviet Union – gained recognition and popularity in China from the 1940s onward. With the growing influence of Marxism-Leninism, American and western European art was denounced for its moral degeneration. As a result, it has been noted that:

[...] imported Soviet magazine[s] became the only venue where art students could get a glimpse of Western art. In the 1950s both the artistic and the political climate was receptive to oil painting, and the public responded with enthusiasm to the realistic technique of the genre.⁷⁶

The influence of socialist realism was further enhanced through cultural exchange on a more personal level. For example, in 1955, the Soviet government sent painter Konstantin M. Maksimov (1913-1993) to China to serve as an art educator for the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing. According to historian Chang-tai Hung (1949-):

⁷⁶ Chang-tai Hung. *Mao's New World: Political Culture in the Early People's Republic* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 2011), 148

About twenty students were carefully selected nationwide to attend the Soviet master's class. It was the first time a noted Russian painter had appeared before Chinese students to offer professional instruction. [...] His class, commonly known in Chinese art circles as "Maxunban" (Maksimov Training Class), lasted for two years and trained a host of talented young painters, including Jin Shangyi, Hou Yimin (b. 1930), and Zhan Jianjun (b. 1931). Many of them went on to assume key positions in art circles.⁷⁷

Thus, we see, his teaching had an enormous influence on the development of socialist realism in China. Within the narrative of class struggle and related nationalistic ideology, socialist realism was quickly adopted and advocated by the Communist Party in the early days of the People's Republic, which, ironically, allowed this non-Chinese art form to play the most important role in the service of political ends.

There can be no doubt that this was a drastic change to the established philosophical framework of art-making within China, especially in terms of *shanshui* painting. The content of traditional *shanshui* painting was modified in order to promote national policies and political propaganda. However, during these years under Mao's rule, the use of terminology caused some conflicting notions in the art world. According to art historian Zhu Yanfei:

Although politicians and art critics disputed the measures of remolding ink painting, many consensually adopted the term 风景 [fengjing] to describe the transformed ink landscape. Many ink painters, however, preferred 山水 [shanshui] both in theory and practice. The changing terminology of ink landscape was on the one hand a response to the Soviet model and, on the other, rooted in China's neologism at the turn of the 20th century that introduced European concepts often through the mediation of modern Japanese language. More importantly, the equivocal juxtaposition of 山水 and 风景 was more than a phenomenon due to political pressure, and rather signified the altered cultural practice of landscape painting, especially the conversion from copying old masterpieces to drawing from nature and life.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Chang-tai Hung, "Oil Paintings and Politics: Weaving a Heroic Tale of the Chinese Communist Revolution," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Volume 49, Number 4, October 2007, 789.

⁷⁸ Yanfei Zhu, "Memorial Landscape Painting for the People: Ink Tradition and Socialist Aesthetics in Mao Zedong's China," in *Memorial Landscapes: World Images East and West*, ed. Uwe Fleckner, Yih-Fen Hua and Shai-Shu Tzeng (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 165.

From this we see that many traditionally trained artists continued to express their preference for the term *shanshui*. For example, Li Keran (1907-1989), an artist who is well known for adapting his painting style to avoid giving offence to Mao's art policy, still rejected the use of *fengjing* when referring to his work. His innovation is evident in his famous painting, *Ten Thousand Mountains Bathed in Red* (1964) [Figure 3]. In this painting Li uses the poetic lyrics of Mao Zedong as both his pictorial inspiration and as a political excuse for traditional *shanshui* painting. In his poem "Changsha: to the tune of Qing Yuan Chun" (1925), Mao Zedong portrays the beauty of late-fall scenery:

Alone I stand in the autumn cold
And watch the [Hsiang] river northward flowing
Past the Orange Island shore,
And I see a myriad hills all tinged with red,
Tier upon tier of crimsoned woods...⁷⁹

The overall red tone of the hills in Mao's poem inspired Li to commit to the bold use of the colour. I suggest that this innovative solution both indicates a clear political gesture through the symbolic meaning of red and, simultaneously, expands the paradigm of *shanshui* painting in a refreshing, alternative way. In this painting, nature and politics overlap through the signified meaning of red. In pre-Communist China, red is the colour representing celebration, vitality and fertility. In contrast, in the Mao era and especially during the Cultural Revolution, the colour becomes a unique political symbol in terms of its metaphorical usage and idiomatic expression. Li's colour experiment is an attempt to bridge the gap between traditional *shanshui* painting and the government's ideological needs by overlapping the actual red tonality of a specific scene with all the revolutionary fervor red came to imply. Li's approach successfully translates nature into a symbol of the greatness of the nation, while simultaneously redirecting the viewer's appreciation

⁷⁹ Mao Zedong, *Nineteen Poems*, trans. Andrew Boyd (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1958), 9. Refer to Appendix A for its full and original edition in Chinese.

of nature through a nationalistic lens. However, even with this degree of visual modification and transformation in his painting, Li Keran's ambivalence is clear for, as Yanfei Zhu notes: "[he] disliked using the term 风景 [fengjing] to describe his landscapes and changed it to the more traditional notion of 山水 [shanshui] in his 1959 edition of the *Collection of Li Keran's Ink Landscape Paintings catalogue*."⁸⁰

In addition, as demonstrated in Li Keran's work, style and medium were both changed accordingly to fit the new standards of art during the Mao years. Applying the symbolic meaning of nature as a sanctuary in *shanshui* painting, historically, literati artists placed themselves in a solitary position, presenting a retreating stance in the face of social-political conflicts. However, during the Mao years and in sharp contrast to previous literati art, disengagement was no longer a viable option for artists; everybody was to take a stand in this class-struggle-oriented new China. Indeed, in his 1957 essay, "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People," Mao issued a warning to those who would not submit to Marxist ideology. He writes:

What should our policy be towards non-Marxist ideas? As far as unmistakable counter-revolutionaries and saboteurs of the socialist cause are concerned, the matter is easy: we simply deprive them of their freedom of speech.⁸¹

In addition, Mao also outlined six criteria as a general acceptance standard for individual action with regard to socialist criticism. These are:

1. Words and deeds should help to unite, and not divide, the people of all our nationalities.
2. They should be beneficial, and not harmful, to socialist transformation and

⁸⁰ Yanfei Zhu, "Memorial Landscape Painting for the People: Ink Tradition and Socialist Aesthetics in Mao Zedong's China," in *Memorial Landscapes: World Images East and West*, ed. Uwe Fleckner, Yih-Fen Hua and Shai-Shu Tzeng (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 151.

⁸¹ Mao Zedong, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965-1975), 4:410. In this essay, Mao recognizes China as a "people's democratic dictatorship led by the working class and based on the worker-peasant alliance." Rather than being treated as enemy, Chinese national bourgeoisie was described by Mao as "it had both a revolutionary and a conciliationist side to its character." As long as it holds the will to accept socialist transformation, the bourgeoisie is educatable, and the contradiction is being considered as "among the people".

- socialist construction.
3. They should help to consolidate, and not undermine or weaken, the people's democratic dictatorship.
 4. They should help to consolidate, and not undermine or weaken, democratic centralism.
 5. They should help to strengthen, and not shake off or weaken, the leadership of the Communist Party.
 6. They should be beneficial, and not harmful, to international socialist unity and the unity of the peace-loving people of the world.⁸²

Accordingly, Chinese artists lost much of their autonomy as they were forced to declare their political positions and beliefs through their artworks. In addition, a new emphasis emerged which contrasted with earlier literati art, when concern for the working class became paramount. Consequently, the genre of *shanshui* painting – what it should represent – became contested, as it now had to embrace the ideology of Mao's six criteria. *Shanshui* painting, as a genre, had to find space and place in the altered landscape for the working class.

In support of this position that traditional Chinese painting be reformed to reflect China's new political climate, the poet Ai Qing (1910-1996), father of the contemporary artist Ai Weiwei (1957-), issued an essay. Published by *Wenyibao*⁸³ (Journal of Literature and Art) in 1953, Ai's attitude toward traditional landscape painting is clear. Within "Tan Zhongguohua (Speaking of Chinese Painting)" he states as follows:

In painting landscapes one must paint real mountains and rivers. You must paint what you have seen, not what people have already painted many times. Paint what no one has yet painted. To sum up in one sentence, you must paint your own paintings...to paint new paintings you must have new feelings, you must have feelings toward living, labouring, struggling people. Even if painting scenery, you have feelings toward nature, which has close relationships to people and society...to paint landscapes, you must go to the wilds to sketch from life.⁸⁴

⁸² Mao Zedong, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965-1975), 4:412.

⁸³ Published by the Xinhua Bookstore in Beijing, *Wenyibao* was first issued on 25 September 1949, which is the week before the founding of the People's Republic of China.

⁸⁴ Ai Qing, "Tan Zhongguohua" (On Chinese Painting), *Wenyibao (Journal of literature and Art)*, no.92: 7-9.

There is no doubt that Ai Qing vehemently rejected the visual pattern-copying tradition of *shanshui* painting that was so revered during the Ming-Qing dynasties by instead emphasizing the importance of the depiction of real objects and natural reality, as the implication from the term *fengjing*. Ai promoted a realistic approach for the future of *shanshui* painting while erasing its holistic philosophical foundation. Concurrently, he encouraged artists to create original paintings in tune with their own feelings toward nature.⁸⁵ However, in the context of communist ideological control, it was almost impossible to personally and phenomenological encounter nature and reflect it in art. Instead, artists could only encounter nature as part of a collective consciousness, which led to a pre-defined experience and artistic dialogue. Working within these constraints was complicated and many traditionalist artists – such as Qian Songyan, Shi Lu and Wu Hufan, whose work will be discussed later in this chapter – began to search for different strategies to create a feasible and meaningful way to maintain the integrity of the philosophical foundation of traditional *shanshui* painting.

A dominant discourse in Maoist China was that nature was an obstacle to be overcome and, thus, should be portrayed in a hostile way.⁸⁶ This oversimplification and radicalization of the binary opposition between subject and object, self and other, and friend and enemy was enhanced by the polarization of the human-nature relationship. This idea contrasts starkly with the values of traditional Chinese philosophy. Mao's slogan, "Battling with nature is boundless joy," coupled with his conception that nature was something to conquer or overcome, became deeply inscribed in the mind of millions of Chinese people during this period. Judith Shapiro (1953-), a scholar who

⁸⁵ As a corresponding policy, in the 1950s, renowned artists such as Li Keran, Zhang Ding, Pan Tianshou, Shi Lu and Fu Baoshi were funded by national cultural authorities to record the appearance of a new China when on field expeditions. Many sketches from these artists reflect the already altered and tamed nature in landscape.

⁸⁶ Mao sometimes spoke of the landscape/nature in other ways, as passive and submissive, resources, to be dominated by human beings. In his Speeches at the Second Session of the Eighth Party Congress in 1958, he stated: "When we ask the high mountain to bow its head, it has to do so! When we ask the river to yield the way, it must yield!"

researches environmental politics in China, declares her perspective on the extreme human interference in the natural world during this period. She writes:

Most environmental problems have roots in human relationships and are ultimately social, political, and cultural problems. [...] The Maoist adversarial stance toward the natural world is an extreme case of the modernist conception of human beings as fundamentally distinct and separate from nature.⁸⁷

That is to say, instead of seeing human beings as an inseparable part of nature – as Daoist philosophy had posited for several thousand years and as China’s early indigenous cultures had done before that – Mao chose to dominate and govern the human-nature relationship by placing the labouring masses in opposition to the environment.

Before the official establishment of the new China, Mao Zedong made a closing statement at the Seventh National Congress of the Communist Party of China, in 1945. In this speech, Mao cited and reinterpreted the well-known fable, “The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains,”⁸⁸ however, he removed the tale from its original context and thus changed its meaning. Mao’s revised version, then, presents new political connotations and illustrates the class struggle. The original story concerns an old man who dwells in an isolated area and is separated from others by both the Taihang and Wangwu Mountains. Bothered by this inconvenience, the old man decides that he and his family will tunnel through these two obstructions with hoes. A so-called clever man laughs at his endeavor, saying it is a silly thing to do since it is impossible to move the mountains. The old man replies that the mountains can’t grow higher but that through the generations, his offspring would eventually succeed. Eventually, the gods of heaven are greatly moved by his fortitude and they relocate the two mountains. In contrast, Mao states:

⁸⁷ Judith Shapiro, *Mao’s War against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1-3.

⁸⁸ This story is originally from the Chapter *The Questions of Tang*, in the collection *Liezi*, which is a Daoist text attributed to 5th century Chinese philosopher Lie Yukou.

Today, two big mountains lie like a dead weight on the Chinese people. One is imperialism, the other is feudalism. The Chinese Communist Party has long made up its mind to dig them up. We must persevere and work unceasingly, and we, too, will touch God's heart. Our God is none other than the masses of the Chinese people.⁸⁹

In its original context, this story is a criticism of the fixed mind of the so-called clever man who refuses to envision change when faced with difficulties. As a Daoist Classic, it is an elaboration on the notion that change is perennial in nature. The world is in constant flux. By removing this Daoist interpretation, Mao deliberately puts this story into a political context: these two mountains, Taihang and Wangwu, become the symbols of Imperialism and Feudalism; and, with the implication of a targeted political enemy, nature itself is transformed into the shape of an obstacle to overcome, an obstacle that according to Mao held back the development of the national economy and socialism.

As a characteristic manifestation of Mao's political ideology and the large-scale nationwide industrialization that followed, the idea of taming the forces of nature into obedient servants gradually gained dominance. As a direct consequence of this speech, the idea that the masses should labour against nature became mainstream and was incompatible with the Daoist proposition that there be balance between nature and human beings.⁹⁰ In this way, the meaning of "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains" shifted to reflect changes in society. This shift not only reflects the totally different attitude of Mao's ideology but also highlights the difficult, often awkward, position of traditionalist artists during the Maoist period. To fulfill this propaganda-fueled grand narrative, *shanshui* painting transformed from being nature-oriented to human-adjusted and frequently human-controlled. Unlike the small-scale land remodeling of Chinese garden art aesthetics that is rooted in a deep appreciation of nature, this adjustment focused

⁸⁹ Mao Zedong, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965-1975), 3:272.

on maximizing the productivity of the land. In Mao's narrative, treating nature as an enemy that could be eventually conquered by human power united Chinese people and gave them a common goal. To maximize the collective power, this imagined hostility needed to be expressed in the *shanshui* paintings created during this time. Although almost all traditionalist artists of this era were confined by strict ideological control in many areas during Mao's era, some endeavored to hold true to their understanding of the spirit of *shanshui* painting and attempted to revitalize it in different ways. While preserving the substance of the traditional spirit, these individuals, some of whom I will discuss next, strove to adapt the highly restrictive Communist cultural policy to ensure that *shanshui* painting would survive even in such a repressed space.

3.2 Preserving the Spirit of *Shanshui* in Visual Transformation

The transformation of the traditional visual language of *shanshui* painting that occurred because of these political, social and cultural influences described above also confirms the inherent flexibility, inclusiveness and openness of the genre. To reorient the meaning of *shanshui* painting according to Mao's reading, traditionalist artists were required to depict the altered natural state realistically, and to do so required them to abandon their traditional, spontaneous and introspective artistic approaches. Encouraged to go on fieldtrips, now artists were to observe and paint the appearance of the new nation accordingly. Therefore, the changed relationship between human beings and nature in the Mao era was markedly reflected in the visual transformation of *shanshui* painting. However, in the process of this visual transformation, the spirit of *shanshui* persists in the great efforts made by certain traditionalist theorists and artists. For example, during the Cultural Revolution, art critic Deng Wen (1932-) endeavored to justify the value of *shanshui* painting from the perspective of personification of nature. He writes:

Because it [*shanshui* painting] depicts mountains and rivers, some people think that such painting is a form of escape from the struggles of real life, but such a view is undoubtedly one-sided and therefore erroneous. All who have made any study of the history of Chinese art know that landscape painting has always held an important position in it. When men enjoy and extol natural beauty, they usually link it with their imagination and associations in life, considering certain features of natural scenery as the personification of the human spirit. Thus when people admire the sublimity of mountains, the breadth of the ocean, the enduring quality of the pine, the loftiness of the crane, they are admiring the spiritual qualities of man which coincide with these characteristics of nature. This is even more strongly apparent in our new landscapes, many of which embody the ideas and feelings of the laboring people.⁹¹

Deng Wen's argument reveals traditionalist painters' openness to the modification of traditional visual paradigms in *shanshui* painting. Under the significant pressure of the era, they were willing to dethrone *shanshui* as a symbol of the traditional literati-class prestige to reach a wider audience. However, they were unwilling to sacrifice the traditional integrative way of seeing and perceiving their art practice. In his text, "A Reflection on Landscape Painting," Chinese aesthetician and educator Wu Zuoren (1908-1997) defends the phenomenological aspect of *shanshui* painting:

Step by step man comes to appreciate natural beauty and love it; this makes him want to depict various aspects of nature – morning and evening, day and night, summer and winter, rain and sunshine – and from that he goes on to the attempt to integrate natural beauty with his own feelings. [...] The essence of painting and of poetry is hard to differentiate [...] In addition to painting what he actually sees, [the artist] wants to express the invisible world of feelings [...] A painter can transform an actual landscape into a landscape expressing his own mind and impart feeling to something insentient [...] Chinese artists and poets do not try to create natural beauty on the base of their feelings, but use natural beauty to give vent to their feelings.⁹²

As seen in the above statement, the notion of *shanshui*, as a reflection of the integrating and all-encompassing way of thinking, was again being emphasized even in the repressive political climate of the time. This adherence counteracts the influence of radical communist politics and

⁹¹ Deng Wen, "The Chinese Style in Art – A Review of the National Exhibition of Art," *Chinese Literature*, 1960, no.10:181.

⁹² Wu Zuoren, "A Reflection on Landscape Painting," *Chinese Literature*, 1962, no. 7:102-103.

seeks to ensure that artists will not stray too far from the essential spirit of their traditional art education.

In this demanding political environment and whilst facing the challenges from fanatical revolutionaries, traditional artists did not abandon the unique modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging inherited from traditional *shanshui* painting but concealed it within their artworks, instead. As examples, two of Qian Songyan's paintings – *Fields in Changshu* [Figure 4] and *Earthen Blast Furnaces* [Figure 5] – show the careful and tactful visual strategies he employed to maintain the spirit of traditional literatus. To placate Mao, in *Fields in Changshu*⁹³, Qian intentionally tilted the foreground plane in the lower half of the picture to emphasize the prosperity of a southern village that newly established agricultural policies had made possible. The traditional visual pattern of layer upon layer of mountains and knolls in the background has here been replaced by the depiction of infinitely extended green fields. This transformation in subject-matter requires not only the modification of traditional rendering techniques but also innovations in composition. Without the possibility of various texture strokes – which were generally used in the rendering of picturesque peaks and rocks in traditional *shanshui* paintings – Qian was confronted with the challenge of how to best represent the flat matter of grain fields while still using traditional ink-based painting techniques. In order to activate the overall composition and avoid an overly flat depiction of the farmland, Qian introduced a network of canals that he interspersed with small boats and this diagonal meandering line leads the viewer into the painting. This compositional device works hard, for it harkens to a visual strategy often found in traditional *shanshui* painting yet is an innovative solution for it balances the absence of the vertical, here. Finally, Qian intentionally applied a birds-eye view perspective to enhance the viewer's awareness of tamed

⁹³ The geographical region represented in the painting, Changshu, is a homophone to the wish “fields always ripe.”

nature. The image of the grain fields that extend as far as the eye can see speaks clearly to the transformational capacity of human beings. Mountains, along with other vertical visual elements in this painting, have been completely replaced by farmlands. All vision-blocking obstacles have been wiped out and the viewer's eye is led, instead, to the apparently limitless horizon that extends beyond the frame thereby symbolically indicating a bright future under the governance of Mao's new regime.

The commanding influence of this aerial viewpoint successfully converts this landscape into political propaganda. However, the entire composition of *Fields in Changshu* is intentionally tilted. As an expression of the vast and flat green fields and canals in background, this skillfully indicates the position of the artist near or at the summit of an unknown mountain, one that is located mostly outside of the frame. I argue that in this painting, Qian distances and defines himself as simply an outside observer looking on from atop of the mountain. From this isolated position in the foreground, the eye follows the man-made canal, and we become aware of the scope of Mao's infinite land reclamation project. The artist intentionally separates himself from Mao's human-centered ideology by portraying a fractured landscape, and he makes no attempt to create a bridging space in the composition. The artist recognized the irreconcilable contradiction between his classical worldview of *shanshui* and the popularized radical materialist outlook as presented by Mao and, so, Qian's ontological humility is separated, symbolically placed apart from the rest of the world. Moreover, this perspective of alienated artist testifies to his role as a recluse, which confirms his desire to emotionally distance himself from the communist ideology that he was being forced to accept. The mountain in this painting represents the last stand of human's great reverence for nature. It is preserved as a gesture to imply the artist's cultivation in *shanshui*, or otherwise it

would testify to the loss of his standing place as a traditional literatus in the turbulence of Mao's reform.

Likewise, Qian Songyan's *Earthen Blast Furnaces*, provides another example that corroborates my interpretation. As propaganda for the movement of the Great Leap Forward⁹⁴ this ink-based painting illustrates the construction and operation of the clay furnaces as they work at full capacity. Using a combination of Western and Chinese techniques, a modernist, more realistic style is juxtaposed with the Western linear perspective and rendering. Compositional primacy is given to the gate, which draws the viewer into the new world, the world that is sanctioned by the government and created with the help of nation-wide, collective steel production. Radical slogans are pasted on the gate [Figure 6]. On the left pillar of the gate, the couplet reads, "each drop of sweat can be converted into the production of steel," while on the right the slogan reads, "every moment counts in the creation of iron." Qian emphasizes the political message with the addition of yet another catchphrase, "Fight for steel!" Echoing the more traditional use of vertical and monumental-like shapes as a background, in contrast this painting replaces the mountains with socialist productive activity: huge furnaces overshadow the workers that tend these cloud-kissing industrial constructions. Visually and symbolically echoing the national flags, the raging flames that shoot from of the furnace chimneys fuel the hearts and minds of the collective; they provide patriotic incentive to the target audience. Replacing the visual paradigm of traditional *shanshui* painting, Qian intentionally introduces dynamic tension into this work in the service of propaganda.

However, in terms of preserving traditional *shanshui*, when Qian depicts the gate as a means to lead the viewer's vision into an industrialized new world, he makes sure to include details

⁹⁴ Great Leap Forward is, "the attempt, [during 1958-61] initiated by Mao Zedong, to resolve China's economic problems by rural industrialization." Jack Gray. "Great Leap Forward", in *A Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics and International Relations*, ed. Brown, Garrett W., Iain McLean, and Alistair McMillan. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

of the old world – the primordial and unobstructed natural world. Again, if we imagine ourselves inside the work, standing in the position of the artist, we realize that we – and Qian – are in nature, surrounded in lush green tones but positioned in opposition because we are outsiders viewing the foundry from the safety of the gate. Qian expresses a neutral and nonaligned attitude toward the Great Leap Forward. I suggest his ambivalent rendering of untouched nature in the same frame as furnace chimneys indicates that his support for this fanatical mass steel production is questionable. His strategy proved effective and opened a way for others to subvert and circumvent restrictions. Owing to the use of authentic aerial perspective found in *shanshui* painting, many traditionalist artists were able to convey a similar sense of distance with no special effort; content could correspond to the propagandistic needs of the Party and simultaneously allude to their own beliefs, allowing them to continue long-established approaches and to paint in a non-self-contained manner. While the subjects to be depicted may be against the will of the artist he was able to subtly and contextually distance himself by making use of visual devices, like aerial perspective, found in traditional *shanshui* painting. As a result, Qian's innovative yet reserved paintings/visual experiments were very well received by the Party. According to art historian Yan Zhou:

Qian Songyan became a master of new shanshui of the 1960s and 1970s with his perfect implementation of revolutionary romanticism and creative application of ink tradition, setting a paradigm for the new shanshui in this period. [...] this traditional subject was transformed into a type that served the ideological goal perfectly.⁹⁵

For most *shanshui* paintings created during Mao's era, no matter how different they are visually, the panoramic view was retained as an unquestionable, fundamental structure of representation. However, unlike the large-scale oil on canvas history paintings that were often used to promote patriotic and moral ideas in the West,⁹⁶ the medium that wove the narrative of a new

⁹⁵ Yan Zhou, *A History of Contemporary Chinese Art: 1949 to Present* (Singapore: Springer, 2020), 22.

⁹⁶ For example, the oil painting *Oath of the Horatii* (1784) created by Jacques-Louis David.

China – traditional ink and brush painting – lacked the ability to produce a single fixed political ideology. Its own referential language naturally portrays an overall tonality rather than a focused, concentrated visual message and almost irreconcilable contradictions arise when concrete and specific narratives are being told through the use of traditional ink and brush painting. In his painting *Fighting in Northern Shanxi* [Figure 7], artist Shi Lu (1919-1982) introduced both a new compositional idea and the use of recognizable figures to traditional *shanshui* painting. Here, the adoption of figurative elements in *shanshui* is influenced by the increased attention to the socialist realism of the 1950s. As American scholar Ellen Johnston Laing states in her book, *The Winking Owl*: “Figure painting, however, for the most part neglected by traditional-style painters in the twentieth century, had to be developed and revitalized.”⁹⁷ Shi Lu came up with a brilliant solution in his painting *Fighting in Northern Shanxi*. In 1959, Shi Lu was appointed by the Museum of Revolutionary History and charged to create an adulatory painting in celebration of the tenth anniversary of the People’s Republic. Staying true to his own style and thought, Shi developed an original way to memorialize Mao Zedong, at the moment Mao initiated a cunning strategy to rescue the Communist troops from their retreat in 1947. Not limited by the assigned topic of the military campaign, Shi sought to find a perfect solution to unite Mao, his military, the landscape and the nation together for this commission.

In the English title of the painting, an important word – “zhuan,” which literally means “turn” or “shift”, fighting from one place to another in the context of this historical event – is missing in the translation. This is important for two reasons: zhuan implicates the changing terrain of the Yellow Loess Plateau and it also describes the mobility of Mao’s guerilla warfare strategy. To bring out the theme of “turning,” Shi uses a zigzag composition. Depicted in profile, with his

⁹⁷ Ellen J. Laing, *The Winking Owl: Art in the People's Republic of China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 21.

fellow soldiers and horse to the rear – which signifies a large number of mounted and foot soldiers hidden in the mountains – Mao stands in silhouette at the edge of the escarpment, his gaze sweeps the horizon of the plateau. This gaze is all important, for it elevates the figure of Mao to a key position – Mao is the focal point of the entire painting because the direction of his gaze provides the only connection between the detailed foreground and the distant background. The application of bright colour in the background, in contrast to the heavy ink of the foreground, establishes a vast space that opens before the viewer’s eyes.

More interestingly, unlike traditional *shanshui* painting, Shi did not depict Mao as a featureless figure. In the article, “Summoning Confucius: Inside Shi Lu’s Imagination,” art historian Shelley Drake Hawks draws on reminiscences of the sculptor Ma Gaihu from 1985, noting:

Shi Lu postponed painting Mao until he had completed everything else. Throughout the drafting stage, he scrutinized and copied several existing sculptural versions of Mao, but none completely satisfied him. Finally, he asked his friend Ma to make a sculpture of Mao’s full body with two hands clasped in back. Shi Lu copied the resulting work numerous times until he had internalized it to such a degree that he could execute it spontaneously without any visual aid.⁹⁸

Interestingly, instead of directly painting from a model, or painting in “plein air,” Shi Lu’s method is one used by earlier literati painters, namely the traditional method of internalization through practice. Hawks’ article reveals how much effort Shi put into his visual research of Mao in order to create a convincing and somewhat realistic figure in the form of ink and brushstrokes. However, instead of depicting Mao as an insignificant man trudging at the foot of the mountain, he presents a confident figure standing on top of the plateau. Shi’s innovative composition confirms the dominant position of human beings under the leadership of Chairman Mao. Moreover, by bringing

⁹⁸ Shelley Drake Hawks, “Summoning Confucius: Inside Shi Lu’s Imagination,” in *Art in Turmoil*, ed. Richard King (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009), 66.

Mao — this real, historical figure — into his *shanshui* painting, I suggest Shi did not intend to paint a traditional *shanshui* painting. Instead, for this task, he re-invented the genre and blurs the boundaries between *shanshui*, portrait and historical painting. According to Hong Kong curator Chang Tsong-zung (1951-):

In the West, the visual presence of power primarily is proclaimed through the art of portraiture, both in the medium of painting and sculpture. Statues of famous figures in European public squares and portraits of the sovereign hung in government offices, post offices and civic halls are prime examples. [...] Thus, the increasing appearance of portraiture in China since the early twentieth century can be read as an early cultural import signifying China's decision to be modernized or, indeed, Westernized.⁹⁹

However, in Shi Lu's painting *Fighting in Northern Shanxi*, even with Mao placed as the focal point of the whole composition, Mao is still depicted as an organic part of the natural surroundings. From this grand panoramic view, it is clear that his warfare strategy would not succeed without the advantage of the terrain and the local natural environment. The philosophy underpinning traditional *shanshui* painting subverts and contradicts the glorification of an individual. This underlying philosophy is vastly different from that of political portraiture in the Mao era. To better explain this difference, I will compare Shi Lu's painting *Fighting in Northern Shanxi* and Zheng Shengtian's (1938-) painting, *Chairman Mao Inspects the Situation of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in Northern, South Central, and Eastern China* [Figure 8]. In this watercolour painting, artist Zheng Shengtian adopted a more mainstream strategy to praise the leadership of Mao Zedong. Here, the close-up, low angled view automatically presents the indisputable authority of the leader. Mao's face is smooth, detailed and modeled in a very warm tone although obvious

⁹⁹Chang Tsong-zung, "Mesmerized by Power," in *Burden or Legacy: From the Chinese Cultural Revolution to Contemporary Art*, ed. Jiang Jiehong (Hong Kong London: Hong Kong University Press Eurospan distributor, 2007), 59.

displays of virtuoso brushwork were avoided, overall. During an interview, Zheng Shengtian recalled:

I put Mao standing above the clouds, where he could [see all of China from the sky]. And the ground was covered with red flags. On the ground, you can recognize cities; I made Hangzhou the largest [laughter]. Shanghai is there, and you can also see Jinggang mountain (井冈山), and Shaoshan (韶山) in Hunan where Mao was born.¹⁰⁰

In Zheng's painting, Mao is atop a mountain, in the clouds, overlooking the kingdom in a heavenly position. Compared with this example of Mao's deification, in Shi Lu's *Fighting in Northern Shanxi*, the aerial perspective implies that the artist's spirit surpasses that of Mao. As a result, the supposed magnification of Mao's aura of authority is severely diluted, instead, the heroic leader is portrayed as an intelligent yet ordinary person who needs to work with nature to tip the balance of the war. Due to the radical change in political climate in 1964 and because Shi Lu refused to make changes to the commissioned work, *Fighting in Northern Shanxi*, this innovative masterpiece resulted in his downfall. The painting was soon reinterpreted as a criticism of Mao since he is depicted as an isolated figure standing at the end of the road on the edge of a cliff. After Shi refused to make any revisions and as a punishment for this non-cooperation, the work was removed from the Museum of Revolutionary History. The artist was then imprisoned for four years (1967-1971) and subsequently suffered from schizophrenia.¹⁰¹

Shi Lu was not alone in his struggle. During the 1960s, artistic autonomy declined rapidly. For instance, traditionalist artist Wu Hufan¹⁰² (1894-1968) – who painted the ground-breaking and

¹⁰⁰ Zheng Shengtian and Jane DeBevoise, "China – The Red Sons: A Screening and Conversation with Zheng Shengtian," Asian Art Archive, accessed March 22, 2017, <http://www.aaa-a.org/programs/china-the-red-sons-a-screening-and-conversation-with-zheng-shengtian/>.

¹⁰¹ Shelley Drake Hawks, "Summoning Confucius: Inside Shi Lu's Imagination," in *Art in Turmoil*, ed. Richard King (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009), 58-59.

¹⁰² During the Cultural Revolution, Wu's property and his art collection were confiscated. Eventually in 1968, he committed suicide whilst in hospital. Chen Chuanxi, *The History of Landscape Painting* (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin meishu chubanshe, 2001), 633.

daring work, *Celebrate the Success of Our Atomic Bomb Explosion of 1965* [Figure 9] – suffered a similar fate. Rather than depicting the human-nature relationship in harmony, this painting turns *shanshui* into political iconography. The visual representation of the bomb exploding, along with the political codification of landscape painting, helps claim the national power of the country. As a political text, however, it is very much a double-edged sword that exaggerates the power of human beings and science as a convincing force over nature. In this painting, Wu beautifully demonstrates his profound understanding and delicate control of classical brushstrokes. The seemingly spontaneous strokes and subtly varied ink tones, vividly convey the destructive power of the bomb. This painting represents a shift from his earlier work, which were of traditional *shanshui* painting.¹⁰³ Here, instead, Wu challenges himself to deal with a more dynamic, ephemeral and artificial theme. Despite the artist’s own creative intention, the subject matter of this painting – contrary to the representation of *shanshui* as the epitome of a harmonious universe – thoroughly transforms into a statement of human beings’ confident superiority over nature.

Born into a wealthy and cultured aristocratic family from Suzhou, Wu Hufan trained to be a traditionalist painter and connoisseur from an early age. Other than the “Atomic” painting, which is commonly held as an exception in his oeuvre because it directly contradicts his literati education and philosophical principles, the remainder of his work is considered to be traditional and free from any influence of communist aesthetics. However, despite the subject matter of man’s perceived ascendancy over nature, it is possible to interpret *Celebrate the Success of Our Atomic Bomb Explosion of 1965* in Daoist terms as a response to *shanshui*’s unique modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging. I argue that this painting perfectly fits the spirit of *shanshui* as Wu showed the release of pure energy from the human intervention of nature, which is bigger than,

¹⁰³ For example, a typical work of Wu Hufan’s early paintings titled *Picturesque Peak Above Clouds (Yunbiao Qifeng)* (1936). Accessed August 25, 2021. <http://www.chinashj.com/sh-jxdsh-ss/786.html>.

and ultimately may erase, the human species. I believe it can be read as a declaration and celebration of his traditional education; Wu re-interprets the destructive explosion as an ineluctable part of the circulation of the Daoist nature. The fluidity of the water and ink on paper that he uses to depict this fiery explosion creates tension through oppositions. Similarly, it testifies to the artist's traditional world view and dialectics, which posits that the flow of energy begets ten thousand things. The depiction of fire by water is one way of showing how particular energies flow from one natural element to another. Within the world view of *shanshui*, natural elements, such as fire and water, are mutually generating and can overcome each other to achieve a cosmological harmony.

Under the gradually increasing political pressure and tight implementation of Mao's cultural policies, it became obligatory for artists to produce paintings that would fulfill propagandistic purposes. Consequently, as attested to by the fate of both Shi Lu and Wu Hufan,¹⁰⁴ all traditionalist artists faced the danger of being accused as class enemies since traditionalist artworks were often framed in terms of elitism and escapism and thus in opposition during the Cultural Revolution. However, through the examples of these traditionalist artists discussed above, we see how much effort and thought they put in their artworks to preserve the core spirit of *shanshui* as a unique modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging while simultaneously addressing the Marxist-scientific rationalism embedded in Mao's ideology.

¹⁰⁴ Wu Hufan (1894-1968), was a native of Suzhou, Jiangsu province. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, he served as the preparatory committee member and painter of the Shanghai Chinese Painting Academy, an associate professor at the School of Fine Arts of Shanghai University, a vice chairman of the Shanghai Branch of the Chinese Artists Association, a member of the Shanghai Cultural History Museum and a member of the Shanghai Cultural Relics Preservation Committee. He suffered at the hands of the Red Guards during Cultural Revolution. In 1968, he committed suicide after a stroke. Translated from the book *The History of Landscape Painting*. Chen Chuanxi, *The History of Landscape Painting* (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin meishu chubanshe, 2001), 633.

3.3 Relocating *Shanshui* to Colour and Abstraction

The Cultural Revolution came to an end with the death of Mao in 1976. In the months following the downfall of the political faction known as the Gang of Four, who held the major power within the Communist Party of China during the Cultural Revolution, the imposition of the communist ideology on Chinese art lessened significantly. As a result, artists in Mainland China who were previously under the sway of Mao's dictates began to look elsewhere for inspiration and sought ways to revitalize and rehabilitate their art practice. Initiated by artist Wu Guanzhong¹⁰⁵ (1919-2010), the use of colour and abstraction were adopted as an artistic strategy to offset the influence of the collective fanaticism caused by the Cultural Revolution. This newfound appreciation of colour and abstraction led to an immersive and phenomenological way of individual experience, which eliminated the influence of Mao's narrative and the hostile attitude posed on the ontological ground of *shanshui* painting. Visual references rooted in Western modernism started appearing as Chinese artists¹⁰⁶ experimented with modernist notions of colour and abstraction in their newly created modern *shanshui* paintings. However, it is important to note that this artistic current had been foreshadowed by Chinese artists studying overseas as early as the 1910s-1920s – such as Lin Fengmian, Wu Dayu (1903-1988) and Liu Haisu (1896-1994).¹⁰⁷ The fact that both in the early 20th century and in the post-Mao era Chinese artists followed a

¹⁰⁵ Arguing for the legitimacy of Western abstraction in Chinese art, from 1970s to the 1990s, Wu Guanzhong published a series of articles in the magazine *Meishu (Fine Art)* including: “On the Beauty of Form in Painting”, “My Thoughts and Hope”, “On Abstract Beauty”, “Does Content Determine Form?” and “Abstraction and Form”.

¹⁰⁶ Chinese artists who combined abstraction and colour with their *shanshui* paintings include, but are not limited to: Wu Guanzhong, Jia Youfu, Qiu Desheng, Qiu Shihua, Yang Yanping, Ya Ming, Chen Dehong, Xu Jianguo and Ma Desheng.

¹⁰⁷ Fully cognisant of their rich artistic traditions, these early overseas Chinese artists left their homeland, came into contact with different sources of information on Western modernism in their host countries, then absorbed and adapted them. Influenced by the explosion of Western modernism in the early 20th century, they quickly adopted the spirit of breaking away from the conventional visual formulas of traditional Chinese art. Overseas Chinese artists experimented with different Western-modernist-inspired art approaches and innovatively responded to China's traditional cultural legacy. As the earliest artists who brought the aesthetics of modernism into the discussion of Chinese art, they inspired many mainland artists after the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976.

similar pattern and eventually arrived at a hybrid style is telling; it proves that the convergence of Western and Chinese philosophies and aesthetics was not new,¹⁰⁸ the ramifications of which can be seen in the modern visual transformation of the *shanshui* paintings. Therefore, to explain why I identify these paintings as modern *shanshui*, I will begin this section by framing a mutually inclusive philosophical foundation for this inter-cultural dialogue and transformation. To this end, I argue that on a philosophical level, as far back as late 19th century romanticism, when Western landscape painting diverged from its realistic predecessors and came to be theoretically guided by the philosophy of phenomenology, it began to overlap with principles of traditional Chinese *shanshui* painting.

Phenomenology was first introduced in China, in 1929, by Chinese historian Yang Rengeng (1903-1973) whose paper “Introduction to Phenomenology” appeared in the journal *The People’s Tocsin* (Minduo Zazhi).¹⁰⁹ Phenomenology was very well received in China due to a perceived overlap with Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism and, since the 1980’s, this philosophy has become increasingly important gaining acceptance in multiple disciplines in the world of Chinese academia.¹¹⁰ As one of the significant theories in twentieth century philosophy, Phenomenology was first connected with artistic perception through the work of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). As scholar of continental philosophy Rudolf Bernet (1946-) notes:

It was Husserl himself who, in a now famous letter to the Austrian poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal (Husserl 1994: 133–6), first compared the attitude of the phenomenologist to the attitude of an artist. [...] phenomenologists and artists have both lost and gained something at the same time. What they have lost is their familiarity with the surrounding world, their spontaneous understanding of the meanings of things, and their capacity to immediately see what needs to be done in all circumstances of practical life. What they have gained is a perception

¹⁰⁸ Seeking or receiving influences from abroad is not new in Chinese art history, for example, the influence of Buddhism on early Chinese art, which can be traced back to Han dynasty (202BC -220AD).

¹⁰⁹ Julia Jansen and Weijing Cai, “Husserlian Phenomenology: Current Chinese Perspectives,” in *Comparative and Continental Philosophy*, Volume 10, Number 1 (2018): 2-6.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

of the world freed from the need of orientation, a non-instrumental relation to things, and a consideration of worldly events and situations for their own sake. Phenomenological and artistic perceivers have thus exchanged their own know-how about things and their knowledge of the world for the discovery of the coming forth or ‘birth’ of both things and the world out of a manifold of ever changing appearances.¹¹¹

Husserl’s idea was adapted and extended by many other philosophers, in particular Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961).¹¹² In one of Heidegger’s earliest and most-noted works, *Being and Time*, he uses the term “dasein” to reveal the primal nature of “being,” which means being present amongst other things. Heidegger uses the term “being in the world”, to replace terms such as subject, object, consciousness and world. For him, the issue of dualism – including subject/object, mind/body, culture/nature and any others we find in the Western tradition and in our language – must be overcome. From this perspective, the intention of phenomenology is to re-establish a more intuitive and original engagement between self and nature. This is important because it both echoes the Daoist concept that perceives the natural and human world as one and explains why this philosophy found resonance among Chinese artists and intellectuals. Moreover, phenomenology regards the division of subject/object, and human/nature as secondary constructs, and seeks to find an intertwined, interactive and dynamic relationship with the world. As Merleau-Ponty explains: “The phenomenological world is not the bringing to explicit expression of a pre-existing being, but the laying down of being. Philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being.”¹¹³

David Chai, editor of the book *Daoist Encounters with Phenomenology* (2020) adds:

Daoism seeks to liberate human knowing and thinking by discarding the subjective self, dogmatic norms, and non-inclusionary theories of reality. In this

¹¹¹ Rudolf Bernet, “The Phenomenological and Pictorial Epoché of Visual Perception,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology*, ed. Dan Zahavi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 568.

¹¹² Hanne Jacobs, “Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty on The World of Experience,” in *Oxford Handbook of the History of Phenomenology*, ed. Dan Zahavi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 650-675.

¹¹³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (Psychology Press, 1962), 19.

way, Daoist phenomenology contributes to the Western notion of the term by shifting the plane of truth from the human sphere to the onto-cosmological realm of Dao qua ultimate reality. Daoist phenomenology is thus simultaneously mundane and transcendental, this-worldly and non-worldly, appreciative of things as they naturally are while also being sensitive to what said things were and may become.¹¹⁴

In the early phases of Western modernism, some Western artists brought the philosophy of phenomenology into their art practice, they began to explore the idea of the subjective in relation to perception and presence.¹¹⁵ Correspondingly, Daoist philosophy encourages a naturally non-willful action to feel the flow of the world. Both Daoism and phenomenology perceive things in and of themselves and in motion. They both reject the view of world/nature as static, fixed and unchanging. Because of these similarities between phenomenology and Daoism, we can posit, by extension, that there is a degree of equivalency between certain Western modernist painting styles and traditional Chinese art expression. Consider the prominent use of white wash and swift brushstrokes by J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851), Vincent van Gogh's (1853-1890) use of intensely swirling patterns and, also, the use of spontaneous expressions by Claude Monet (1840-1926); all of these innovations reveal the inward and individual experiences each artist has with nature.

At first, this privileging of the individual perception and sensation appears contradictory to traditional Chinese artists' intention in *shanshui* painting, which is ego-less. The intention, as explained by American art historian and curator Jeffrey Wechsler was, however, "not derived from [a traditional Chinese artist's] desire for self-expression but instead from the overarching

¹¹⁴ David Chai, ed., *Daoist Encounters with Phenomenology: Thinking Interculturally about Human Existence* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 3.

¹¹⁵ For example, a key figure in this confrontation during the early 19th century was the English Romantic landscape painter J.M.W. Turner. In his landscape paintings, Turner risked being unintelligible when he removed much of the narrative and the sense of linear perspective by using a more abstract approach. This new attitude destabilized the ideal of landscape painting being in service to the real; it was no longer necessary to faithfully record the surface qualities of nature, only. Turner's approach to representing landscapes was to see nature not as fixed and stable but as an ever-changing organism, as constant energetic flow. Like many avant-garde movements, this phenomenological approach was met with contempt but eventually Turner, as well as later Impressionist painters, gained their justified place in art history's canon.

philosophies of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism that call upon the self to be de-emphasized, removed from centre stage, held at a distance.”¹¹⁶ From this perspective, the Chinese tradition of the elimination of self appears to be somehow at odds with Western modernist landscape artists. Nonetheless, as argued above, through the lens of phenomenology, common ground can be established between these seemingly conflicting orientations, since they both emphasize the bond of human and nature while rejecting the binary opposition of the two. When European artists moved away from the previously established, rationalized realistic painting style of representation in the late 19th and early 20th century, Western modernist landscape artists daringly exposed themselves to the external environment and reflected the resulting embodied interaction between human beings and nature in their work. New visual paradigms, which favoured formal beauty and abstraction, appeared. According to Canadian art historian, Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov (1940-) many of these experiments, “directly or indirectly, inspired many of the new century’s theories of abstract art.”¹¹⁷

After the death of Mao Zedong, a new era of lenient cultural policy was ushered in and an atmosphere without fanaticism, collectivism and polarizing political thinking began to prevail. Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997), who became the next paramount leader of China, led the nation through experiments with market-oriented economic reforms. The resulting collateral cultural benefit of Deng’s Open Door Policy, announced in December 1978, not only gave permission but encouraged international trade and the formation of foreign businesses. As a result, those Chinese artists who had previously followed Mao’s agenda regained a degree of artistic autonomy to

¹¹⁶ Jeffrey Wechsler, *Asian Traditions/Modern Expressions: Asian American Artists and Abstraction, 1945-1970* (New York: H.N. Abrams in association with the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, 1997), 21.

¹¹⁷ Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov, ““Let Us Become Mystic of Art” Van Gogh, Gauguin and the Nabis,” in *Mystical Landscapes: from Vincent van Gogh to Emily Carr*, ed. Katharine Lochnan, Roald Nasgaard, and Bogomila Ovcharov. (Munich: DelMonico Books Prestel, 2017), 105.

reconnect with the international art world. As Paul Gladston notes: “the period immediately following the death of Mao saw significant changes in official thinking regarding the making and showing of art in the [People’s Republic of China].”¹¹⁸ Gradually disappearing from the official documents issued by the state, the absolute and pervasive ideological dominance of the CCP was replaced with a more tolerant political principle.

Deng Xiaoping, a leading member of the CCP since the 1930s and the paramount national leader from 1978, put forward the new slogan to capture this more tolerant political climate: “Liberate Your Thinking and Search for the Truth in the Facts,” which came to symbolize the liberalization of critical thinking and redefinition of modern Chinese culture. In 1979, Deng Xiaoping delivered a welcoming speech at the Fourth Congress of Chinese Writers and Artists. As a basic guiding principle, Deng declared that writers and artists should, “criticize the ideology of the exploiting classes and the conservative, narrow-minded mentality characteristic of small producers, criticize anarchism and ultra-individualism, and overcome bureaucracy.”¹¹⁹ In other words, this spirit of liberation was not fully reflected in the field of literature and art. The CCP remained firm in its stance and, on the side of political Marxism, refused to grant artists freedom in case they challenged the Party’s governance through their art practices. Despite this, the spirit of Deng’s intention was to set up a relatively harmonious political environment and to create a freer atmosphere for art exploration, for he concluded his speech with the following:

In the production of literature and art, which involves complex mental labour, it is essential that writers and artists follow their own creative spirit. What subjects they should choose for their creative work and how they should deal with those subjects are questions that writers and artists themselves must examine and gradually resolve through practice. There should be no arbitrary meddling in this process.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Paul Gladston, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A Critical History* (London, UK: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2014), 87.

¹¹⁹ Deng Xiaoping, *Speeches and Writings* (Oxford Oxfordshire New York: Pergamon, 1984), 87

¹²⁰ Ibid.

Thus, in a less-politically repressed cultural environment, long-suppressed artistic discussions and experiments resumed. Freeing themselves from the extreme ideological control and constraints to relate their work to politics, artists began to shift their focus toward a discussion of formal beauty and individual creativity. As cultural exchanges between East and West increased and artists living in mainland China were exposed to modernism, they were eager to explore the possibility of the above-mentioned philosophical convergence. After the death of Mao, especially in the early years after the Cultural Revolution, a more self-referential and self-expressive approach to art-making was strongly needed to awaken both artists' and viewers' sensibility. Therefore, the new, modernist conventions were smoothly absorbed by mainland Chinese artists and resulted in further adaptations of *shanshui* painting¹²¹.

For instance, in 1979, Wu Guanzhong, a well-known contemporary painter who had studied painting in Paris for three years during the 1940s, initiated a debate over formalism and abstraction. As a supporting theoretical framework for his own semi-abstract modernist ink painting style, Wu published an article, "On the Beauty of Form in Painting" in the magazine *Meishu (Fine Art)*. According to him:

Formal beauty should become the main content of art education. The ability to draw objects realistically is just one of many painting approaches. It is always a means to assist in capturing the beauty of objects, and it should be placed in a secondary position. Instead, one of the most important parts of art education should be: recognizing and understanding the beauty of the object, and analyzing and mastering the elements of beauty in form.¹²²

¹²¹ Abstraction in traditional *shanshui* painting can be seen as the expressive reshaping of nature distilled from the realistic scenery in a spiritual approach. Nature is still recognizable as abstract imitation. However, modern Chinese artists took inspirations from non-representational abstraction and began to focus on elements of form, colour, line, composition and texture, instead.

¹²² Translated by Yang Liu from the original: 形式美是美术教学的主要内容，描画对象的能力只是绘画手法之一，它始终是辅助捕捉对象美感的手段，居于从属地位。而如何认识、理解对象的美感，分析并掌握构成其美感的形式因素，应是美术教学的一个重要环节。Wu Guanzhong, "On the Beauty of Form in Painting," in *Meishu (Fine Art)*, Volume 5 (1979). Accessed August 25, 2021, <https://baike.baidu.com/article/c879ed0e4f2363147f340980.htm>.

By way of explanation, Wu's perspective on art creation is an obvious withdrawal from Mao's ideology and its related art policy. Instead, Wu was intrigued by the colour sense and formal qualities of modernist Western landscape paintings.

As a painter who travelled to Paris to study at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts in the 1940s, Wu Guanzhong developed a great interest in post-impressionist artists such as van Gogh, Gauguin and Cézanne. After this personal contact with western modernist styles, he felt the need to combine this new-found knowledge with his understanding of *shanshui* painting in China. In "Abstraction and Form," again published in *Meishu (Fine Art)* in 1992, Wu wrote:

The fundamental elements of formal beauty comprise form, colour, and rhythm. I used eastern rhythms in the absorption of Western form and colour, like a snake swallowing an elephant. Sometimes I felt I couldn't gulp it all down and I switched to using [Chinese] ink. This is why in the mid-1970s I began creating a large number of ink paintings. As of today, in my explorations I still shift between oil and ink. Oil paint and ink are two blades of the same pair of scissors used to cut the pattern for a whole new suit. To nationalize oil painting and to modernize Chinese painting: in my view these are two sides of the same face.¹²³

However, Wu Guanzhong's efforts to expand Chinese comprehension of Western artistic approaches ran into two main roadblocks. According to art historian Joan Lebold Cohen (1932-):

Traditionally, foreign ideas were deemed worthless and dangerous. This antiforeignism has been reinforced by Communist ideology (despite its foreign origin), which specifies what is correct and disallows all other views. [...] The party line condemns abstraction as decadent and something that the masses cannot understand. Yet, Wu Guanzhong notes that for thousands of years the Chinese have delighted in the abstract marble patterns used to decorate palaces and mansions. Moreover, Chinese use of garden stones, calligraphy, and the splashed-ink technique are all traditional abstract elements. He argues for broader possibilities for artistic expression.¹²⁴

¹²³ Wu Guanzhong, *Revolutionary Ink: The Paintings of Wu Guanzhong*, trans. Valerie C. Doran (New York, NY: Asia Society, 2012).

¹²⁴ Joan Lebold Cohen, *The New Chinese Painting 1949-1986* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1987), 122.

In other words, Chinese artists were already familiar with the so-called “advanced” or “innovative” abstract techniques in Western painting. Also, as American curator Jeffrey Wechsler states:

Within Abstract Expressionism, the works of artists such as Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, and Adolph Gottlieb have been considered both advanced and innovative, even “breakthroughs,” in technical, compositional, and formal terms. This is an ironic situation for many who are familiar with traditional Asian Art and recognize various formal and technical properties of traditional Eastern art that appear to be predecessors, or at least parallels, to visual elements of modern painterly modes of art.¹²⁵

In general, since they were already familiar with calligraphic images, gestural brushstrokes and improvisational modes of making, modern and contemporary Chinese artists who had been exposed to traditionalist education would have been open to the West’s enthusiasm for abstraction. Furthermore, traditional Chinese *shanshui* painting is already “abstract” from a contemporary perspective. For example, as early as the Song dynasty in the 12th century, the artist Ma Yuan (1160-1225) created his famous work, *Water: Twelve Views – Dong Ting Feng Xi* [Figure 10] using what we would now refer to as a “minimalist” and “expressive abstract” style.¹²⁶ Based on his observation of the movement of water in different geographical locations in China, Ma Yuan applies the methods of calligraphy to capture the ever-changing rhythm and energy of true living water within a recognized Chinese tradition. This stylistic transformation – in lines and form demonstrating the visual flexibility of traditional landscape painting – illustrates the prior existence of “abstraction” in Chinese art.

Wu Guanzhong’s argument found agreement with many artists and theorists in the 1980s.

For example, art critic Qian Jinfan (1928-) asserted that, “there is no way to fully express feelings

¹²⁵ Jeffrey Wechsler, *Asian Traditions/Modern Expressions: Asian American Artists and Abstraction, 1945-1970* (New York: H.N. Abrams in association with the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, 1997), 11.

¹²⁶ In my discussion of Ma Yuan’s work, I use terms such as “minimalism”, “expressionism” and “abstraction” a-historically as these concepts were unnamed in the history of traditional Chinese art at the time. I use these western originated terms as a means to explain the conceptual/cultural transcendence of traditional Chinese landscape painting based on the timelines of Western art history.

in art without the method of abstraction.”¹²⁷ Also, artist Jiang Wenzhan (1940-) explained the abstract qualities in the expressive brushstrokes of traditional Chinese painting, stating: “[the use of] brush and ink is subjective and expressive, it is self-referential rather than pure mimesis.”¹²⁸ As a supporter of the amalgamation of Eastern and Western artistic practices, Wu creates a unique style that is fundamentally different from traditional Chinese conventions. His hybrid *shanshui* paintings – which experiment with bold abstract shapes, highly refined lines and freewheeling brushstrokes – revived and re-invented the literati ideal and traditional cultural values which were repressed during the Mao years. For example, in the brush and ink painting, *Reminiscence of Jiangnan* [Figure 11], with his play of ink and application of abstract approach, Wu abstractly depicts a southern Chinese riverside town from close-up.

I assert that this shift is important; by not making use of the more traditional bird’s eye view, Wu shifts his and our focus to a scene from everyday life. His simplified lines and shapes combine a minimalist approach to composition with a sense of Chinese calligraphy. In the pursuit of “dan” (blandness) – one of the highest aesthetic ideals and standard characteristic of traditional Chinese art – Wu intentionally presents a rhythmic and relaxed composition with a lot of negative spaces. Explained by François Jullien, as an important aesthetic criterion, “the limpid plenitude of blandness lets us communicate with the "ontological" neutrality of the world.”¹²⁹ In addition, “it is the very dynamism of all reality that is at work in the most efficacious fashion: the silent process of the cosmos, the activity of the sage, and the effects of art.”¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Qian Jinfan, “Delivering Feelings and Abstraction—Two Basic Principles of Chinese Painting,” *Meishu (Fine Art)*, no. 11 (1981): 54. Translated by Yang Liu from the original: 没有抽象的造型手段，移情不可能有充分表现的形式。

¹²⁸ Jiang Wenzhan, “A Brief Discussion on the Abstract Beauty of Ink Brush Stroke,” *Meishu (Fine Art)*, no. 7 (1982): 8. Translated by Yang Liu from the original: 所以笔墨是主观的，是表现的，是有我的，而不是模仿的。

¹²⁹ François Jullien and Graham Parkes, “The Chinese Notion of "Blandness" as a Virtue: A Preliminary Outline” in *Philosophy East and West*, Volume. 43, Number. 1 (Jan., 1993): 111.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

In Wu's painting, these negative spaces, which represent the sky, water and human residence respectively, are loosely defined by the casual-in-appearance brush strokes that are visually integrated with each other. The most obvious visual references are limited to an abstract image of two swallows in the upper right corner and the ripple, which is comprised of a swirl-like brushstroke. By unifying and opening up the pictorial space in this work, Wu presents the viewer with a very simple and elegant way to internalize nature. The harmony and subtlety he achieves with this abstract painting approach encourages viewers to create meaning for themselves, and thus effectively leads us to reflect upon the Daoist ideal of establishing our own harmonic relationship with nature. Wu Guanzhong's ability to combine East and West – to make works using the very sparing ink-wash brushstrokes with Western forms – illustrates and supports my argument that it is possible for hybridized art to flourish in the context of *shanshui* painting.

Wu Guanzhong was not alone in his efforts to broaden the genre. Other Chinese artists gained inspiration from Western modernist painting styles, found their own paths and thus helped to transform *shanshui* representation in the modern era. For example, Jia Youfu (1942-)¹³¹ has combined the formal beauty of Western modernism, chiaroscuro shading, and the spirit of Native Soil art in his artwork. “Native Soil art,” in Chinese “Xiang Tu Yi Shu,” is a term that has its origin in the Cultural Revolution – when the government sought to construct their notion of truth through propaganda by creating its own utopian version of communist China. This included posters, photographic and painted images of happy, healthy peasants, soldiers, and workers collaborating for the revolutionary cause. After the Cultural Revolution, artists believed that by choosing the right subject matter and style, they could reveal and convey their own truths and feelings that had been suppressed. In the 1980s, an artistic current began to focus on the depiction of the countryside

¹³¹ Jia Youfu, a student of Li Keran, has specialized in landscape painting since 1976.

and down-to-earth life, and thus the Native Soil art movement emerged. It swiftly gained popularity and won the hearts of the people. Within this context, Jia Youfu – a son born to a peasant family – has dedicated most of his professional life to the honest depiction of the life of herdsmen within the mountainous terrain in northern China. By blending the humanistic tendency of the Native Soil movement into his artistic practice, Jia Youfu has created a body of work based on personal reflections of the Taihang mountains.

As an art student in the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, Jia first visited the Taihang mountains in 1964, to find inspiration for his graduation project. Deeply attracted to the sublime nature of the mountain landscape, Jia has returned to this location more than twenty times during his long-term artistic creation of the *Taihang Mountains* series. In this series of paintings [Figure 12], Jia adopts the chiaroscuro shading and the use of distinctive warm and earthy colours that his mentor, Li Keran, preferred to use to emphasize the tension and atmospheric glow of the natural grandeur. The sense of awe and veneration he has for nature is made apparent by his use of straightforward heavy ink strokes. In this way, I believe, Jia's work embodies the traditional Daoist regard toward nature. However, Jia's painting also expresses something new, something other than the classical Daoist regard toward nature, for a distinguishing feature of Jia's oeuvre is his repeated use of the theme of "herding". Represented as silhouettes against the background of the magnificent natural wonder, peasant and herd combine to symbolize the artist's desire for a return to the tranquility of rural life and psychological harmony with nature after the turbulence of the Cultural Revolution. As evidence of the gradual recovery of humanity and individuality after Mao's death, Jia's paintings reveal a new path in the exploration of *shanshui* painting. In his writing, "Returning to Art Itself" from 1988, Jia states: "In the past few decades, our approach to art has been controlled by a functional mentality, always using art as a practical tool, and not

treating it as a symbol of humanity's unceasing evolution in the spiritual realm."¹³² With his appreciation of the honesty and sincerity of ordinary life, Jia combines the holistic view of *shanshui* with his pursuit of naivety and unsophisticated beauty. Previously, during the Cultural Revolution, the Taihang mountains were considered as symbols of imperialism and feudalism, however, after the death of Mao, Jia's paintings re-establish the connection between human beings and nature; after the ten years' catastrophe, nature again becomes a spiritual ideal for mending humanity and dignity.

Another artist, Qiu Deshu (1948-) – an admirer of Western artist Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) — experimented with his *shanshui* painting through abstract expressionism. In the 1980s, it was observed that Qiu Deshu, “showed a number of works in Chinese ink and colour on paper that were Expressionistic and semiabstract. [...gradually] he shifted even more toward integration of Western influences with ancient Chinese forms.”¹³³ In his painting *Nature of Substance* [Figure 13], the discernable forms of mountains, trees and plants found in traditional *shanshui* paintings were replaced by abstract geometric shapes and bold brushstrokes. As implied in the title of this painting, the artist intended to offer a more internalized space, transforming the depiction of the physical to that of the spiritual/philosophical. The recognizable forms of natural elements are reduced to pure abstraction and express the artist's feeling toward an all-encompassing universe of continuous change and expansion that reside in traditional *shanshui* painting. According to the artist: “[the unfettered souls of the ancients] could more clearly create images of universal truth. [...They] were not trammled by the restrictions of society or by technical knowledge, nor were they enticed by fame and wealth.”¹³⁴ In other words, to the artist, the adoption of a Western abstract

¹³² Wu Hung and Peggy Wang, eds., *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents* (New York Durham, N.C: Museum of Modern Art Distributed by Duke University Press, 2010), 101.

¹³³ Joan Lebold Cohen, *The New Chinese Painting 1949-1986* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1987), 67.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* 68.

approach is not a departure from traditional *shanshui* painting, on the contrary, it is an approach to re-embrace and reactive *shanshui* after the Cultural Revolution.

In the 1990s, artist Qiu Shihua (1940-) took his visual experiments further still when he started to adopt Western oil paints and canvas with a minimalist *shanshui* approach. After working as a political propaganda poster painter during the Cultural Revolution, Qiu Shihua travelled to France in the 1980s to study Impressionist paintings and in the 1990s, with the help of abstraction and knowledge gained when abroad, Qiu developed a strong personal style with his significant use of white paints. In most of his untitled *shanshui* paintings, such as in the example I include, *Untitled* (1995) [Figure 14], the scenery is not representative. Instead, these works show the audience a forming substance with no direct depiction of subjects. According to art historian and curator Martina Koeppel-Yang, Qiu Shihua's paintings "capture that [...] point of momentary concentration before it assumes a form."¹³⁵ By reducing the recognizable world to the absolute minimum and using only white paints, Qiu rediscovers the phenomenological aspect of *shanshui*. In Qiu's painting, *shanshui*, which is reflected as a rhythm of energy, needs concentration and contemplation from the viewer's consciousness. Qiu explains:

For me north, south, east, or west count for nothing, nor do red, yellow, or blue, and certainly not past, present, or future. With endless emptiness in the heart there is neither coming nor going; they are one and the same. So are my works too: simple and pale, calm and empty. All being and non-being is hidden in them, completely self-contained. In the zero condition the original countenance of the soul reveals itself.¹³⁶

To the artist, the use of western painting media is not negation of *shanshui*. In contrast, it provides an alternative path by which to reach the desired goal, the traditional philosophical core that is

¹³⁵ Martina Koeppel-Yang, "Qiu Shi-hua - A Taste for the Bland" in catalogue of Qiu's exhibition at the Kunsthalle in Basel (Basel: Schwabe Kunsthalle Basel, 1999).

¹³⁶ Qiu Shihua, from a text supplied to the author in January 2005, quoted in "Qiu Shihua: "Empty / Not Empty"", Randian-online, accessed July 8, 2021, https://www.randian-online.com/np_announcement/qiu-shihua-empty-not-empty/.

reflected in *shanshui* – the all-encompassing and holistic experience of the world.

Clearly, through the examples of these artists discussed above, we see the influence of phenomenological tendencies in Chinese *shanshui* paintings from the late 1970s to 1990s. With the intention of removing the negative influences of the totalitarian collectivism of past decades, these artists found a way to re-enter the genre's traditional spirit by removing the sense of distance between the viewer and subject matter. They adopted an individualistic approach to combine Western modernist visual forms, colour and abstraction in unique ways. They re-declared the value of human beings as individual and, as a result, the previously alienated and even utilitarian relationship between human beings and nature that emerged during the Cultural Revolution was replaced by a convergence of the two. The all-encompassing and integrating way of perceiving and engaging proposed by traditional *shanshui* is once again returned to the notion of Chinese artists. When interpreting these abstracted artworks, the viewer is required to return to him/herself phenomenologically. As Chinese artists began to put the focus on the awareness of the formal qualities in their artistic experiments with *shanshui*, the message they sent was clear: instead of reading nature as realistic and objective, in accordance with Communist Party principles, now the audiences must rely on themselves and reflect inwardly, through their magnified sensory perceptions as free and subjective beings.

In conclusion, the drastic changes witnessed in modern Chinese society during this period were reflected in the visual transformations that emerged in modern *shanshui* paintings. When Mao held power, the incompatibility of traditional Chinese philosophy with communism stimulated the drastic transformation of traditional *shanshui* painting. As a result, political ideology began to dominate the depiction of the natural world in the work of many traditionalist artists. However, even in the most rigorous political environment, some artists still found ways to

respond to the spirit of *shanshui* in their art practice. In the Reform era – in the light of the convergence of phenomenology and traditional Chinese philosophy and following the early steps of overseas Chinese artists in the early 20th century – artists embarked on an adventure to merge the new with the old, to combine Western modernist artistic approaches with the notion of traditional world views as reflected by *shanshui*. In this complicated process, I argue that *shanshui* painting demonstrated enormous vitality due to its openness and fluidity. I seek to demonstrate in the next chapter how although contemporary *shanshui*'s appearance may be described as unrecognizable from its original form, its philosophical core – which is the unique all-encompassing modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging – has never completely faded.

Chapter Four: Hybrid in Form, Traditional in Spirit

Following in the wake of the Open Door policy¹³⁷ – that resulted from the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee of the CCP in December 1978 – more and more artists moved away from making art that would maintain the status quo, and thus consolidate the notion of communist political ideology, and began to pursue individual reflection, critical thinking and authentic feeling in their work, instead. In terms of *shanshui* painting and as discussed above, neither the traditional landscape visual paradigm of the ancient literati/gentry class nor the socialist realistic approach – with its narrative of Communism – were satisfactory models for the younger generation of artists born between the 1960s and the early 1970s. The goal of this newer generation of Chinese artists was to reclaim their own aesthetic sensibilities by interfacing with western ideas of conceptual art while also intentionally magnifying their subjective perceptions of the formal qualities of colour and abstraction.

The rediscovery of *shanshui* in contemporary China, both as an art genre and as a philosophical concept, did not limit itself to the interest in colour and abstraction in the direction of two dimensional visuality. Indeed, contemporary Chinese artists and curators are expanding the manifestation, implication and application of *shanshui*. By extending their discussions to include the contemporary, immersive, and holistic aspects of *shanshui* that have come to the fore since the beginning of the twenty-first century, and actively engaging in the deconstruction of *shanshui* as a meaning-saturated visual and cultural symbol, this younger generation of contemporary Chinese artists and curators refocus on *shanshui* as a unique modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging. According to the Swiss collector Uli Sigg (1946-): “so many of today’s artists [are] concerning

¹³⁷ The Open Door Policy in China is an economic policy initiated by Deng Xiaoping in December 1978. It meant to welcome foreign trade and investment, in order to modernize China’s industry and boost its economy. However, along with business communication, the cultural encounter with Western thinking strongly influenced the development of Chinese art.

themselves with the shanshui tradition [... for some of them] revisiting the shanshui tradition was the first step in a journey taking them to completely new, and in some cases very old, destinations.”¹³⁸

As part of the liberalization of art and culture in the Reform era, (1978-late 20th century), and as discussed above, Chinese artists were exposed to a different set of ideas that expanded how they thought about and created art. It was an exciting time. According to US-based art historians Wu Hung and Peggy Wang, Chinese artists living in mainland China experienced what they describe as: “an information explosion: all manner of ‘decadent’ Western art forbidden during the Cultural Revolution was introduced to China through reproductions and exhibitions; hundreds of theoretical works were translated and published in a short span of time.”¹³⁹ Contemporary artists were strongly influenced by a westernized neoliberal/democratic context and the art they made began to reflect these new ideas as a consequence. Paul Gladston agrees and argues that these new works were, “characterized by an often conspicuous combining of images, attitudes and techniques appropriated from Western(ized) modernist and international postmodernist art with aspects of indigenous Chinese cultural thought and practice.”¹⁴⁰ Thus, in this chapter, I will explore how the meaning of postmodernist artistic approaches and traditional Chinese philosophy stimulates new ideas and sparks new understandings of *shanshui* in contemporary art practice.

It is within this cultural context that I began my own art journey. As an elementary school student, I, like millions of other Chinese pupils, was indoctrinated daily with the value of collectivism. Our textbooks, which were the only learning resources available, were filled with

¹³⁸ Uli Sigg, “Poetry without Sound?” in *Shanshui: Landscape in Chinese Contemporary Art*, Peter Fischer et al., (Ostfildern, Germany Lucerne, Switzerland: Hatje Cantz Verlag Kunstmuseum Luzern, 2011), 12.

¹³⁹ Wu Hung and Peggy Wang, eds., *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents* (New York Durham, N.C: Museum of Modern Art Distributed by Duke University Press, 2010), 35.

¹⁴⁰ Paul Gladston, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A Critical History* (London, UK: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2014), 11.

excerpts from Mao's work and emphasized the invincible power of human beings as a collective. These values dominated my early education but, at age seven and with my parents blessing, I began to receive traditional Chinese art tutoring in my spare time. Here, I was introduced to different types of classical Chinese literature, including classical poetry and prose, which formed my first impressions of harmony between human and nature. With hindsight, I am struck by how much these parallel yet contradictory forms of early education echo the philosophical tensions that the art of *shanshui* embodied at this time.

In the Contemporary Era, China quickly transformed, for it was now powered by capitalism. Following the rapid urbanization and industrialization, the immersive, natural way of living I used to experience as a child no longer existed. Instead, fast-paced urbanization soon set the tone for my daily life. Within this continuous, mechanical and materialistic process, I had a feeling of living in a culture where everything was routine or scheduled, and this replaced my natural inner state of fluidity and humility with anxiety and a sense of alienation. However, the long journey of this dissertation has brought me a solution: *shanshui* as a modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging has brought me to a deeper understanding of the ideas of primordial inclusiveness. In my practice of contemporary art, which started in earnest in 2011, I began to ponder my experience of and relationship with the world as a means to eliminate boundaries of self in order to delve deep into the world of *shanshui*. In this chapter and through analyzing works by artists who have been selected because of their innovative rediscovery of and engagement with *shanshui*, I will examine the development of contemporary *shanshui* – from the deconstruction of its iconography to the expanded awareness of its philosophical implication – and which will culminate with the discussion of my own artistic explorations in Chapter five.

4.1 Postmodernism and Contemporary Chinese Art Meet in *Shanshui*

Along with the arrival of postmodernist thinking in China and its influence on the development of contemporary Chinese art, this section explains how postmodernism and the indigenous Daoist philosophy share deep and intricate common ground by embracing decentralization and challenging fixed structures, and as concerns intercultural communication. This provides the foundation for my exploration of *shanshui* in contemporary art. In addition, I delineate a brief sketch of major *shanshui*-based / -themed exhibitions in China and around the world over the last decade, which demonstrates an increasingly deeper and broader understanding of *shanshui* in both the practice of contemporary artists and in curatorial vision.

To discuss the development of postmodernism in the history of Chinese art, it is important to return to the period of the '85 New Wave as it has come to symbolize the birth of contemporary Chinese art. (and, coincidentally, the year I was born). Chinese art historian and curator Gao Minglu (1949-) coined the term '85 New Wave in a lecture given at the National Oil Painting Conference in 1986. It refers to both various avant-garde artist groups throughout the nation and to a series of conceptual art exhibitions held from 1985 to 1989. Art of the '85 New Wave used experimental approaches and was a form of unofficial art that challenged the existing fixed structure and ideology of the established, mainstream art system. More than eighty self-organized avant-garde art groups experimented with new visual languages from 1985 to early 1987 and shared their concerns with how to express and maintain a sense of individualism in the context of political China.

As an explosive answer and a counterreaction to the assigned ideological role of artists in the controlled Communist institutional context, these avant-garde artists used Western postmodern theories as their artistic framework to rediscover, repackage and reclaim their Chinese cultural

heritage on their own terms. Adopting postmodern thinking allowed them to embrace the inner continuity of change in the application of contemporary hermeneutics. Although relatively new, postmodern thinking has interesting parallels with elements of Chinese philosophy – which are not modern, and that do not contain or contend with modern presuppositions – and as such, I argue, that traditional Chinese philosophy prefigures postmodern ways of thinking by more than two thousand years. During the mid-1980s, a number of contemporary artists started to explore the philosophical overlapping of postmodernism and Daoist/Chan Buddhist thinking in their early installations. Two such artworks are Huang Yongping’s, *A History of Chinese Painting and A Concise History of Modern Painting in a Washing Machine for Two Minutes*¹⁴¹ (1987) and Xu Bing’s, *A Book from the Sky*¹⁴² (1988). According to Gao Minglu: “For Huang, both Zen (Chan) and postmodernism are distinguished in their insight, simplicity, and extremely skeptical attitude.”¹⁴³ Echoing these early artistic experiments of philological convergences in the 1980s, from what I consider as a position of philosophical commonality, I believe that postmodern thinking has encouraged and facilitated a return to more traditional ways of looking at *shanshui* and its representation for many contemporary Chinese artists.

Developed as a set of ideas, which originally took root outside the arts in the 1960s and 1970s, postmodernism takes a flexible stance toward philosophical issues such as its fundamental premise in denying definite terms, fixed boundaries, and absolute totalizing truths. French Philosopher Jean Baudrillard, (1929-2007) writes:

¹⁴¹ In this work Huang Yong Ping placed a classical Chinese art history book and a Western art history book into a washing machine and washed them for two minutes. These two long-standing histories were transformed into a pile of unreadable pulp within that time, then displayed on a wooden box.

¹⁴² In this work Xu Bing investigates the Chinese language through a very traditional wood block printing method. He created 4,000 unique logogram symbols, which are composed of recognizable Chinese character elements. However, they are not legible in Chinese language, which means the characters themselves have no actual meaning.

¹⁴³ Gao Minglu, *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art = Qiang: Zhongguo dang dai yi shu de li shi yu bian jie* (Buffalo, N.Y. Beijing: Albright Knox Art Gallery University at Buffalo Art Galleries Millennium Art Museum, 2005), 128.

Postmodernity is said to be a culture of fragmentary sensations, eclectic nostalgia, disposable simulacra, and promiscuous superficiality, in which the traditionally valued qualities of depth, coherence, meaning, originality, and authenticity are evacuated or dissolved amid the random swirl of empty signals.¹⁴⁴

This subversively new theoretical framework sprouted in France during the late 1960s and then spread to England, Germany and the United States, during the 1970s. Scholars of postmodernism began their work by critically analyzing the implications of modernism: Roland Barthes investigated semiotics, structuralism and its limitation in *Mythologies* (1957); Jacques Derrida developed the approach of deconstruction in the context of phenomenology in *Of Grammatology* (1967); Michel Foucault addressed the relationship between power and knowledge as a form of social control in *The Order of Things* (1966); and, Jean-Francois Lyotard proposed his theory of the grand-narrative based on his analysis of the impact of postmodernity on the human condition in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979).

In 1985, the American theorist Fredric Jameson (1934-) visited China and taught postmodern philosophy at Beijing University and Shenzhen University. The effect was profound and after his visit, “[a] Chinese translation of the transcribed lectures was subsequently published under the title *Houxiandai zhuyi yu wenhua lilun* (Postmodernism and cultural theory) in 1986 and available in Taiwan by 1989. To this day, these lectures are influential and are the “most widely read and quoted work in Chinese discussions of postmodernism.”¹⁴⁵ Other Western postmodernist scholars — such as Douwe Fokkema (1931-2011), Hans Bertens (1945-), and Terry Eagleton (1943-) — lectured or gave keynote speeches at conferences in China throughout the late 1980s and 1990s. Following these engagements, the philosophy of postmodernism gained remarkable popularity in intellectual and artistic circles in China.

¹⁴⁴ Chris Baldick, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 266.

¹⁴⁵ Arif Dirlik and Zhang Xudong. “Introduction: Postmodernism and China,” *Boundary 2* 24, no. 3 (1997): 1.

With the introduction of postmodernism in China, from the 1980s onwards, Chinese artists began to absorb and make use of visual languages characteristic of Western postmodernism as a way of engaging with specific issues of contemporary world. While painting lost its dominant position in the world of contemporary Chinese art, other art forms – such as installation, photography and performance art – offered new possibilities for open-ended discussions in relation to all art but for some artists the time-honored tradition of *shanshui* painting became the vehicle to express these ideas in this new chapter of Chinese art. Moreover, following the introduction of postmodernism and its related cultural and artistic theories, the contemporary reclamation of *shanshui* broke free from the restrictions imposed by its traditional, literati expression.¹⁴⁶

As a philosophical framework that advocates the questioning of authenticity and originality and individual freedom in thinking and art making, postmodernism finds itself in a comfortable position to challenge fixed structures. Thus, this framework is useful for contemporary Chinese artists, for it seeks to both expand the spectrum and blurs the boundaries between the various art forms and their definitions. It invites the appropriation of resources from antiquity or any historical periods, as well as from other cultures, and selected elements are given new meaning when juxtaposed and reintroduced into different contexts and media. These elements might include readymade objects, advertisements, performances, video, digital technology, pop culture and fiction novels amongst others.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, this approach demonstrates that in postmodern art, everything can become relevant and may be combined in an open and ever-extending context. In the wake of this dis / re-assembly, this theory of deconstruction,¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Selected artworks will be discussed in the next section.

¹⁴⁷ I see the inclusion of non-traditional media and the use of multimedia as a characteristic of postmodern art, which is foreshadowed by the ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968).

¹⁴⁸ French philosopher Jacques Derrida first introduced the framework and related ideas of deconstruction in 1967. As a critical vision concerned with the legitimacy of logocentrism in western philosophy, deconstruction aims to dissolve metaphysical constructs and binary oppositions.

postmodern artists reject the idea that a work of art has only one ultimate, inherent meaning; in other words, they contest the existence and authority of a single narrative, such as that which China experienced in the Mao era. Instead, these artists were now free and inspired to develop an affinity for ambiguity and multi-layered meanings, as well as for allowing individual interpretations from the viewer. Thus, since the 1990s, Chinese postmodernist artists have been working to breach the historical boundary of both traditional *shanshui* painting and the Maoist legacy by various means and through their individual artistic reflection of contemporary China.

Earlier in this dissertation, I proposed that postmodernism and the Daoist aspect of *shanshui* share deep and intricate common ground as a means of understanding the world and cosmos on a philosophical level. Now, I will elaborate. For example, with the emergence of postmodernism, the opposition between subject consciousness and object consciousness began to disappear. Postmodernism's focus on intuition and immediate awareness in the process of forming knowledge is reasonably comparable Eastern philosophy generally and, more specifically, to the thought of deep introspection when one follows the path of Dao. Analogously, the skeptical postmodernist attitude toward the slippery nature of language and the questioning of "naming the Dao" – i.e. that the true Dao cannot be named and as stated in the Daoist classic text *Daodejing* – express a similar stance. I argue that, echoing the theory of deconstructionism – which was first outlined by Jacques Derrida in his *Of Grammatology* (1967) where he critiques the relationship between texts and the Western idea of metaphysical essence – the "naming of the Dao" itself holds a similar deconstructive tendency. According to the American Chinese literary scholar Gu Mingdong (1955-):

Beyond the opening section of the *Daodejing* and in the larger context of Chinese tradition, the Dao has a number of equivalent signifieds, which in their turn are but signifiers: Da/Tai (the Great), Yi (the One), Wu (Nothingness or Nonbeing), You (Some-thing or Being), the Yi (Changes), Taiji (the Great Ultimate), Taiyi

(the Great Oneness), Taishi (the Great Beginning), and Wuji (the Nonultimate). In these various equivalent signifiers, we can also note a deconstructive tendency. Nonbeing is pitted against and unified with Being; the Nonultimate is equivalent to the Great Ultimate. The deconstructive tendency in the naming of the Dao shows an intuitive awareness of the slippery nature of designation, representation, and expression in using language.¹⁴⁹

Paul Gladston agrees and notes the convergence of these two different philosophical concepts in his book, *Deconstructing Contemporary Chinese Art: Selected Critical Writings and Conversations, 2007-2014*. He states:

International art theory continues to be informed strongly by the theory and practice of deconstruction—that is to say, a performative critique of the authority of legitimising discourses and associated truth claims. The pervasive scepticism/criticality of deconstructivism sits alongside the persistence of metaphysical rationalist thought underlying all discursive representation. [...] This envisioning of difference and deferral immanent to linguistic signification is broadly similar in conceptual terms to the interconnectedness of opposites signified by the Daoist concept of yin-yang. [...] There is therefore a strand of traditional Chinese thought that can be understood to accord to some degree with internationally dominant deconstructivist theoretical perspectives insofar as it questions the authority of linguistic representations of opposition and hierarchy.¹⁵⁰

Now, to apply this argument to our case: even though the inner logic of pre-modern, modern and post-modern does not strictly apply to the historical consideration of Chinese art – nor to 20th and 21st century art most places outside of the western world – the thinking about networks and decentralization in postmodernism does communicate the spirit of *shanshui* to some extent. As mentioned in the introduction, historically, traditional *shanshui* painting does not use the fixed perspective that was applied in Western representational landscape art but, instead, reveals a sense of openness with multiple-viewpoint perspectives. I suggest that the popular hand scroll format in many traditional *shanshui* paintings deployed artists' preference to “move the perspective” along

¹⁴⁹ Gu Ming Dong, “The Universal "One": Toward a Common Conceptual Basis for Chinese and Western Studies,” *Diacritics*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (2002): 94.

¹⁵⁰ Paul Gladston, *Deconstructing Contemporary Chinese Art: Selected Critical Writings and Conversations, 2007-2014* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2016), 15.

the extension of the line of sight and thus “liquifies” the experience of knowing and viewing. In this sense, it can be seen to constitute a forerunner to animation in terms of its aesthetic and modality.¹⁵¹ This liquification in turn corresponds to the preferred uncertainty of meaning, interpretation and structure in postmodernism. In addition, the postmodernist idea that it is impossible to fully comprehend anything, and that one instead only and always has an incomplete picture, truly resonates with usage of the white unpainted space in traditional *shanshui* painting. This empty space captures the idea that nothing is fixed, neither does it follow in a linear progression; all is seen to be in a flux of forming and reforming, never settled.

Moreover, in postmodern thought, the construct of a coherent self is also called into question. The self and its identity are not stationary but continually in process since there are no clear boundaries between the self and others. We are all negotiating with multiple selves in and out of different relations, contexts and cultures. Similarly, because the philosophical concept of *shanshui* offers an opportunity to form a dynamic interactive unity between nature and spectator, which then dissolves the shell of self, it results in the elimination of human centralism, also. As explained by Chinese aesthetician and philosopher Zong Baihua (1897-1986):

What is the deepest soul expressed in Chinese painting? The answer is that it is neither worshipping and imitating the world as a finite and complete reality, nor is it an endless pursuit of an endless world with feelings of boredom, distress, and anxiety. The spirit it expresses is a kind of mental state which is melting deeply and silently with this infinite nature and infinite space, and then merging.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ In recent years, there are some Chinese artists who directly connect historical *shanshui* scrolls to the media of animation. For example, Hongkong based artist Howie Tsui showed his animation video *Retainers of Anarchy* (2017) 25-metre scroll-like 5-channel projection in the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2017, which features visual paradigms of *shanshui* painting.

¹⁵² Zong Baihua, *Aesthetic Walk (Mei Xue San Bu)* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chuban she, 1981), 123. Translated by Yang Liu from the original: 中國繪畫裏所表現的最深心靈究竟是什麼？答曰，它既不是以世界為有限的圓滿的現實而崇拜模仿，也不是向一無盡的世界作無盡的追求，煩悶苦惱，彷徨不安。它所表現的精神是一種深沉靜默地與這無限的自然，無限的太空渾然融化，體合為一。

Owing to these similarities, I maintain that it is not only possible but in fact fitting for Chinese artists to integrate the two philosophies and create an unprecedented visual language for a cross-cultural representation to reactivate the spirit of *shanshui*. Postmodernism provides the theoretical framework that allows contemporary Chinese artists to break the logical chain between the philosophical concept of *shanshui* and corresponding literati iconography. It allows contemporary Chinese artists to deconstruct established pictorial representations of traditional *shanshui* painting and to actively seek its philosophical dimensions to express the richness of the Chinese humanistic cosmic view in new visual forms. To clarify, postmodernism offers contemporary Chinese artists the chance to illuminate and thus articulate the difference between *shanshui* as an art genre and *shanshui* as a modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging. I suggest that, as a continuation from the Mao Years, this contemporary exploration in *shanshui* offers a different way to break out of the original context of the literati and proves a basis for the coexistence of different philosophical theories and cultural transcendence.

In the past decade, more and more contemporary Chinese artists have concerned themselves and their art practices with the philosophical concept of *shanshui*, which has resulted in a number of *shanshui*-themed exhibitions both in China and around the world. For example, in 2011, at Kunstmuseum, Lucerne in Switzerland, Peter Fischer (1956-) curated *Shanshui — Poetry without Sound? Landscape in Chinese Contemporary Art*. I see this as one of the early attempts at bringing the notion of *shanshui* in contemporary Chinese art to international audiences. Along with a small selection of traditional *shanshui* paintings, this exhibition focuses on the rediscovery and continuation of *shanshui* in the contemporary world. According to Fischer, the aim of this exhibition was to: “initiate a pluralistic discourse in which neither Western fascination with supposedly “exotic” Chinese art nor Chinese self-advertisement would be allowed to dominate the

perspective.”¹⁵³ Starting from the question, “how should the updating of the *shanshui* concept be tackled,”¹⁵⁴ this exhibition endeavors to untie the philosophical concept of *shanshui* from the expectation of the literati visual tradition. In the words of Uli Sigg, the main contributor of this exhibition:

Shanshui hardliners accept only brush-drawn lines in ink and mineral-based colours on rice paper or silk. [...] Works executed in different media may be good art, but according to the hardliners cannot be art in the shanshui tradition. [...] But would there not be sufficient other aspects of the shanshui tradition, among them its own system of values, its ethos, rhythm, spirituality — especially its spiritual affinity with the masters it repeatedly invokes — which today could indeed be created with a camera, a computer, or by painting in oil on canvas [...]?¹⁵⁵

Then, taking a step further, in 2016, several *shanshui*-themed art events in China endeavored to detach the discussion of *shanshui* from its topographical features and relevance, to instead, focus on *shanshui* as a unique modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging. Despite the various and discursive curatorial directions, these exhibitions/events share a general tendency in their discussion of *shanshui*, which is very close to the core of my argument in this dissertation. Events held included: *Shan Shui Jian (Shan Shui Within)* at the Museum of Contemporary Art Shanghai; *Humanistic Nature and Society (Shan-shui, 山水) - An Insight into the Future* at the Shanghai Himalayas Museum; and, an academic conference *Shanshui Society: General Theory and Related Topics* at Beijing University that was supported by the Shanghai Himalayas Museum. Curated by Sun Wenqian, the exhibition *Shan Shui Jian (Shan Shui Within)* explored *shanshui* as a worldview and as a metaphysical method to communicate with the world. According to Sun Wenqian, the title of this exhibition is from the classical literature *Zui Weng Ting Ji (The Old*

¹⁵³ P Uli Sigg, “Poetry without Sound?” in *Shanshui: Landscape in Chinese Contemporary Art*, Peter Fischer et al., (Ostfildern, Germany Lucerne, Switzerland: Hatje Cantz Verlag Kunstmuseum Luzern, 2011), 7.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.12.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.12-13.

Drunkard's Arbour) and written by Song literatus, Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072). In this text, “Old Drunkard’s heart is not set on the wine, but lies somewhere betwixt the mountain and the water. The joy of mountain and water comes from the heart, and is derived from wine.”¹⁵⁶ *Shanshui* in everyone's mind is different, and the joy of *shanshui* is different for everyone, therefore, there is no need to stick with the traditional visual form of *shanshui* as a traditional art genre. One participant of this exhibition, Chinese artist Qiu Zhijie (1969-) echoes this idea in an interview:

[The director and curator] show in-depth thinking about this issue. Their vision is not just from the perspective of *shanshui* in the sense of traditional literati Chinese painting. They focus on not talking just about mountains and rivers, but talk about things, games, and children's perspectives on the world. I think these practices are very different from past discussion of *shanshui*. For example, in this exhibition, my bamboo compilation *Colonial History Plants*, on the surface, has nothing to do with *shanshui*. There are neither mountains nor water to be found in my artwork. Although bamboo is related to mountains and waters, the context it is put in is an ethnographic one of exchange occurring after Columbus's great geographical discovery. It is about migration and exchange between species throughout human history. It's a bit like the perspective of writing a brief history of humankind in the history of the world. Such works generally do not appear in an exhibition called *shanshui*.¹⁵⁷

The second exhibition mentioned above, *Humanistic Nature and Society (Shan-shui, 山水) - An Insight into the Future*, was held in Shanghai and curated by Wang Chunjie. It expanded the notion of *shanshui* by bringing the term to the discussion of a humanistic society in the future. Lee Yongwoo, director of the Himalaya Art Museum, mentioned in the opening speech that: “*Shanshui* is

¹⁵⁶ Translated by Yang Liu from the original: 醉翁之意不在酒，在乎山水之间也。山水之乐，得之心而寓之酒也。

¹⁵⁷ Art-Ba-Ba, accessed July 8, 2021, <http://art-ba-ba.com/main/main.art?threadId=92473&forumId=8>. Translated by Yang Liu from the original: 龚馆长、文倩他们对于这个问题有长期的思考，视野不是仅仅从国画意义上的山水出发，能够把视野放在不就山水谈山水，而是谈物、谈游戏、看小孩子看世界的眼光。这些做法我都觉得是跟过去的山水论述都是有很大区别的。比如这次展览中我的竹编《殖民史植物考》，表面上看跟山水没有关系，既没有山也没有水。虽然竹子与山水有关，但它放入的语境是哥伦布的地理大发现后的交换。是整个人类史的物种之间的迁移和交换。有点像写世界史的人类简史这种视野来谈问题。这种作品一般不会出现在一个叫山水的展览里。

not only an artistic genre or form, but also a utopia that includes the pursuit of the future, and a narrative about aesthetics and humanism.”¹⁵⁸ Echoing the issues brought up by urbanization and industrialization, in this exhibition, *shanshui* was examined as a solution for the spiritual crisis of a contemporary society and the exhibition was followed by a joint panel discussion event held in Beijing, entitled, *Shanshui Society: General Theory and Related Topics*. Many presenters put the notion of *shanshui* as a traditional painting genre aside. Instead, they started to discursively examine this term in a broader sense by relating it to an authentic Chinese worldview and the contemporary society. When discussing the concept of *shanshui* society during this panel discussion, Chinese curator Wang Nanming (1962-) stated:

When the “*shanshui* society” enters the museum, the works are presented in the form of “images”. In this context all different kinds of artistic approaches can be applied, but (as a topic) “*shanshui* society” always revolves around the relationship between society, urban and rural areas and traditions. In this way “mountain” and “water” are symbols to imply the state of human existence. Therefore, the contemporary interpretation of such a traditional term becomes infinitely open. It has triggered a cross-disciplinary discussion.¹⁵⁹

From 2017 to 2019, another ambitious exhibition, *Streams and Mountains without End: Landscape Traditions of China* took place at The Metropolitan Museum in New York. With the goal of offering a comprehensive understanding of the *shanshui* tradition, this exhibition showcased more than 120 Chinese *shanshui*-themed artworks in four rotations that included traditional literati

¹⁵⁸ KKnews, accessed July 8, 2021, <https://kknews.cc/zh-sg/culture/36bnea.html>. Translated by Yang Liu from the original: 山水不单单是一种艺术体裁或形式，更是一处结合了未来主义追求的乌托邦，亦是一场美学及人文主义的叙述与辩论。”

¹⁵⁹ “Shanshui Society: General Theory and Related Topics,” Sohu, accessed July 8, 2021, <https://m.sohu.com/n/498804462/>. Translated by Yang Liu from the original: 当“山水社会”进入到美术馆，作品以“图像”的方式呈现，在这里一切的艺术手法都可以使用，但它始终是围绕着社会、城乡与传统之间关系，然后以“山”“水”暗示人的生存状态，由此，这样的一个传统词语在当下的解释通道中变得无限开放，它引发了一个跨学科的讨论。

paintings, textiles and ceramics.¹⁶⁰ The curator, Joseph Scheier-Dolberg, chose to showcase examples of traditional *shanshui* alongside more contemporary works that were presented in a small room labelled, “Landscape of Abstraction”. Work by contemporary Chinese artists, such as Hao Liang and Yang Yongliang were included and thus demonstrate that *shanshui* is an up-to-date, innovative approach. Moreover, this small selection of modern and contemporary works shows that curators are aware of the recent developments and support the continuation of *shanshui* in different forms.

In addition to the major exhibitions mentioned above, there have been other *shanshui*-based exhibitions in the past decade that are also noteworthy, these include: *Mountain Sites: Views of Laoshan* at Sifang Art Museum (2016); *Folding Mountains II: Scanning Landscapes* at Hanshan Art Museum in Suzhou (2018); *Chinese Landscape Rethought* at Lyman Allyn Art Museum in Connecticut (2019); and, *Longing for Nature: Reading Landscapes in Chinese Art* at Museum Rietbeg, Germany (2020-2021). Beyond showing awareness of the significance of *shanshui* painting, these exhibitions made efforts to expand the notion and understanding of *shanshui* as a continuing philosophical concept in particular ways, thereby, inviting both art professionals and audiences, myself included, to ponder the possibilities of *shanshui* both within and beyond the context of Chinese contemporary art. In this light, I embrace *shanshui* as a modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging in the following analysis of artists’ work, and apply *shanshui* as a way of reflective and experiential learning in the creation and discussion of my own artwork.

4.2 Playing with Iconography: Recontextualizing Traditional *Shanshui*

¹⁶⁰ Streams and Mountains without End: Landscape Traditions of China, metmuseum, accessed July 8, 2021, <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2017/streams-and-mountains>. The four rotations of this exhibition are held at different times as follows: Rotation 1: August 25, 2017–January 6, 2018. Rotation 2: January 19–August 12, 2018. Rotation 3: August 25, 2018–January 6, 2019. Rotation 4: January 26, 2019–August 4, 2019.

In their conversations with postmodernism, the art experiments of contemporary Chinese artists contribute to a constructive process of embracing the idea of recontextualization in relation to trans-cultural experience and integration. Their art production is strongly influenced by the process of adapting to postmodernist thought, which in turn leads to a cultural hybridity of *shanshui* and blurs the boundaries between these different philosophies.

The recontextualization of *shanshui* can be briefly investigated by considering another work of art created by the contemporary Chinese artist, Xu Bing. In 2013, Xu Bing presented a series of paintings titled *Landscape Landscript* [Figure 15] at the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology in the UK. By following the Chinese literati tradition of copying from early masters, Xu Bing created monochromatic *shanshui* paintings with a traditional appearance, similar in look to the highly developed works from the Song dynasty (960 – 1279). However, instead of using classical brushstrokes like those found in these ancient models, he used Chinese characters that he had creatively transformed to visually describe the rocks, trees, and architecture in different written words clusters.

The first impression, when viewed from a distance, is simply that of a traditional *shanshui* painting. This expectation, however, is completely overturned when one walks closer and notices what this visual-linguistic simulation camouflages. Based on the appropriation of a traditional *shanshui* painting, Xu Bing traces and re-frames the pre-existing conceptual visual connection between Chinese writing, as represented in calligraphy, and painting and thus acknowledges their shared historical origin. The artist asks, “In the Chinese language is there such a blurred relationship between symbols and nature?”¹⁶¹ Within this work, the written characters themselves become the visual signifier of natural elements. In this series, Xu Bing applies a deconstructive

¹⁶¹ Xu Bing. “An Artist’s View,” in *Persistence / Transformation: Text as Image in the Art of Xu Bing*, ed. Jerome Silbergeld and Dora C. Y. Ching (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 111.

approach to the visual paradigm of *shanshui*; the accepted and expected appearance of a traditional painting genre has been deconstructed and recomposed using transformed Chinese characters as camouflage. Historically, the inclusion of calligraphy – usually in the form of a poem – is a long-standing cultural tradition of the literati class, which presents the consubstantiality of calligraphy and painting in the context of Chinese art. Correspondingly, as both a deconstruction and continuation of this cultural tradition, Xu Bing applies an appropriative approach to transform readable Chinese characters into basic brush painting strokes and pattern units. Curator and cultural critic Maya Kóvskaya states:

Throughout Chinese history, emulation of normative forms has been the dominant model for learning and acquiring culture. In this context, the citation of classics—visually, verbally, or otherwise—can be read as another form of speech act with profoundly meaning-saturated illocutionary force that functioned as a vector of cultural power and a signal of belonging to a certain privileged elite. [...Xu Bing] offers us unprecedented access and new paths of approach to art that once served to bolster the hierarchical exceptionalism of a tiny group of elite literati.¹⁶²

As one of the pioneering artists bringing the idea of blurring the boundaries of signifier and signified into *shanshui*, Xu Bing pays homage to *shanshui* painting in a new postmodern way. As a piece of postmodern art questioning the seemingly fixed and reliable relationship between language systems and the world, it is full of speculative enquiries regarding the dynamic and transformative spirit of *shanshui*.

The deconstruction of *shanshui* as an iconography of the elite literati culture can be found in the sculpture work of Chinese artist Zhan Wang (1962-), also. Zhan Wang is well known for his series of artificial rock sculptures that he began making in the 1990s [Figure 16]. Historically, in Chinese literati culture, the inclusion of scholar rocks in Chinese garden art were strongly

¹⁶² Maya Kóvskaya, “A Lexicon for Seeing the World: Xu Bing, Language, and Nature,” *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol.17 No.6 (2018): 20-27.

associated with *shanshui* painting because it simultaneously stimulated and simulated the sensations of wandering through mountainous nature. The Chinese literati class appreciated scholar's rocks as part of their connoisseurship for the same reason that they admired *shanshui* painting: open and fluid visual form as natural resonance of the world's energetic flow. Zhan Wang plays with this literati cultural tradition by reproducing a scholar's rock in an industrial material. Starting with the moulding of stainless-steel sheets around the surface of a traditional Chinese scholar's rock, Zhan then removes and hammers these sheets together to form a seamless replica of the original. The original form of a scholar's rock is replicated but the materiality of this new rock is different and thus the historical exceptionalism of the literati class is deconstructed.

According to art historian Wu Hung (1945-):

The artist's strategy is to work with an existing type of Chinese object, duplicating its form but substituting another material. One cannot therefore analyze the work within the interpretative framework of mimesis, or the relationship between reality and representation, because it forges a new reality by "translating" an existing artifact into an analogous one.¹⁶³

In this way, Zhan Wang can free the spirit of *shanshui* from its burdened iconography in the context of the literati connoisseurship. Chinese art scholar Chang Tan explains further:

The traditional scholar's rocks are by no means 'natural' – if the word indicates pristine, unaltered existence. Not only were they selected, framed and, in some cases, cultivated or modified to better suit the literati taste, but they were also so infused with layers of meanings that their material reality became secondary. In other words, the nature they represent is fundamentally artificial.¹⁶⁴

The decision to make a hollow, stainless-steel version of the scholar's rock is the artist's strategy to exaggerate the notion of this artificial quality of literati's narrative. It is a means to distill the unique Chinese aesthetic sensibility from the "layers of meanings" that are inherent in this elite art

¹⁶³ Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History* (Thames & Hudson, 2014),340.

¹⁶⁴ Chang Tan, "Landscape without Nature: Ecological Reflections in Contemporary Chinese Art," *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol.3 No.3 (2016): 232.

tradition. In words of the artist:

[My works] look like a modification to the concept of ‘natural-born.’ In fact, what has been modified is only the surface; the space inside is still the shape of natural rocks. Therefore, although the stainless steel is ‘false’ on its surface, its inside is still natural. It’s the ‘real’ in disguise, because the real nature has already become a void, while the false surface has regained visual reality in modernized cities, just like the status of natural stones in traditional gardens.¹⁶⁵

From my perspective, *shanshui* as a modality of thinking views human beings within the spiritual world, within a metaphysical realm consisting of heaven, earth, beings and the flux of energy, rather than in a human-language-defined, meaning-saturated world that is comprised of hierarchical entities. Through the lens of Zhan Wang’s deconstructive approach, we can rediscover the incalculable value of *shanshui*. According to the artist, his choice of rocks, “represented what I [the artist] believe is the fundamental question: what is it that the world lacks?”¹⁶⁶ Then, in answer, he continues: “What it lacks is a true understanding of Nature; it lacks an attitude of dealing with Nature with the same profundity with which it treats humanity.”¹⁶⁷

In addition to the discussion of its iconography, I suggest that the appropriation, deconstruction and reconstruction of *shanshui* can also be seen as an erasure of the East and West dichotomy in contemporary Chinese art practice that seeks a return to the dynamic and boundary-less world of traditional Chinese philosophy embedded in the spirit of *shanshui*. Speaking of the possibility of cultural hybridity in a positive light, art historian Frank Vigneron (1965-) explores the idea and states:

When cultures present themselves without their hardened shell of nationalism/patriotism, they are more likely to experience cross-fertilization. In that process of exchanges, the very ideas of national and infra-national cultures

¹⁶⁵ Zhan Wang, *New Suyuan Shipu* (Beijing: Sanlian Chubanshe), 2008, quoted in Chang Tan, “Landscape without Nature: Ecological Reflections in Contemporary Chinese art,” *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol.3 No.3 (2016): 232.

¹⁶⁶ Zhan Wang, “My Personal Universe,” UCCA, Zhan Wang’s official website, accessed July 9, 2021, <http://www.zhanwangart.com/en/feeds/27>.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

become chaotic and altogether not automatically pleasant, but it always produces unexpected results that are productive of other forms and dispositions.¹⁶⁸

For example, consider He Xi (1960-) whose early career was dedicated to traditional Chinese ink painting. After more than twenty years, he switched from using his conventional training to embrace a more experimental practice. He Xi abandoned his prior rigid, more traditional visual style and began appropriating traditional *shanshui* painting into miniature scenes. In an untitled artwork dated 2014, [Figure 17], by portraying the segmented Chinese *shanshui* within the enclosed glass showcase, He Xi questions the fixed visual paradigm of *shanshui* painting from the perspective of a traditionalist hardliner. Moreover, I suggest that this representation of a transparent cover is a visualization of Frank Vigneron's concept of the "hardened shell," which is a metaphor for national/cultural protectionism and included in his discussion of art in Hong Kong, in the book, *I like Hong Kong: Art and Deterritorialization* (2010).

Here, in He Xi's "*Untitled*," the artist creates a sense of absurdity to reveal the paradoxical contradictions between the fixed visuals of traditional *shanshui* painting and the truly free and flowing Daoist thinking it proposes to represent. Placing *shanshui* in a museum display case questions the conventional thought that the quintessence of Chinese art can only be considered as a static cultural relic that belongs to the past rather than as a dynamic and flowing aesthetic intension. With this reading, the message this work delivers now becomes clear: the fixed visual paradigm of *shanshui* is the hardened shell, which causes the creative force to atrophy. The possibility of *shanshui* is then sacrificed in the name of perpetuation of the ideal. He Xi incorporates the museum case in this *shanshui* work to visually deconstruct *shanshui*'s traditional iconography and reveal his concerns about the fixed notion of "Chineseness"; the glass seemingly blocks the travel of the Daoist spirit and thus, He Xi symbolically locks the energy inside the rigid

¹⁶⁸ Frank Vigneron, *I like Hong Kong: Art and Deterritorialization* (The Chinese University Press, 2010), 53.

reserved tradition. The intentional inclusion of the case is impactful because it helps the viewer deconstruct any rigid presuppositions they may have about *shanshui* being a traditional painting genre only. His painting is born out of the form and skills of traditional art, yet it simultaneously defies adherence to its conventions. It is rebellious but respectful and it encourages us to look at things differently. In this painting, He Xi suggests an alternative way of thinking that replaces the cultural isolationism based on this imagined hostile relationship between Chinese tradition and Western postmodernism.

Corresponding to the concept of hybridity in the deconstruction/reconstruction of *shanshui*, Chinese artist Zhang Hongtu (1943-) offers a different visual strategy in an ongoing art-historical landscape painting series that he first began in 1998. In this series, Zhang Hongtu explores the possibility of mixing the composition of traditional *shanshui* painting with Western Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painting styles/techniques. For example, in one painting titled, *Fan Kuan – Cézanne* (1998) [Figure 18], Zhang offers his audience a playful collaboration between Song scholar artist Fan Kuan (960-1030) and French artist Paul Cézanne (1839-1906).

According to Wu Hung:

[...] instead of modernizing an indigenous art tradition to extend its longevity, these artists merge traditional forms, ideas, and technologies into the broader realm of global contemporary art. On the surface such enmeshing does not seem new: a Sino-European style already existed in eighteenth century Qing court art, and quite a few early twentieth-century Qing court art, and quite a few early twentieth-century artists tried to infuse Chinese elements into their oil paintings and photographs. But these earlier efforts were mainly concerned with stylistic fusion based on a dichotomy between East and West. A new goal in contemporary Chinese art, [like that made by Zhang Hongtu] however, is to erase this dichotomy altogether.¹⁶⁹

Different from the pioneering artistic experiments of Western modernist visual styles in the early 20th century in China, Zhang Hongtu doesn't apply the Western Impressionist style to create an

¹⁶⁹ Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History* (Thames & Hudson, 2014), 331.

authentic *shanshui* painting of his own. Instead, rather than playing the role of an artist, Zhang is more like a creative art historian challenging the boundaries and narratives of both Chinese and Western art history in this conceptual work. The artist explains his painting process in an interview:

Facing an empty canvas, usually I have lots of Chinese traditional paintings on one side, and impressionism paintings on the other side. I paint the shape of Chinese traditional landscape painting first. Then I imagine myself as van Gogh, Cezanne, or Monet, like an actor, to apply their personalized colour and brush stroke. [...] When I paint in Cezanne's style, I want to use his techniques. I try to see Chinese landscape painting from Cezanne's perspective. During the whole process I am actually hiding from myself. Thus, I name my work "conceptual paintings." In traditional painting, we have to express our feelings, use very personal brush strokes and colours. Here "honest to myself" becomes "honest to my concept". I learned both Chinese art history and Western art history. I painted Chinese paintings and also Western paintings. Now, I am living in-between cultures. Thus this kind of mixture is very objective. At this point, I am honest to myself. My painting process becomes a process to complete my concept.¹⁷⁰

Interestingly, the notion of copying and interpreting from ancient masters is a long-held literati tradition in the context of *shanshui* painting in history. However, more than copying from the works of well-known historical Chinese scholar artists, Zhang also takes references from visual styles of Western modernist "masters" like Cézanne, Van Gogh and Monet, which echoes the idea that western landscape painting as a history has moments that are compatible with *shanshui*. In addition to deconstructing the visual paradigm of traditional *shanshui*, Zhang questions the East-West dichotomy in both art history and philosophy in order to deconstruct a fixed cultural identity. As a visual strategy to challenge the orthodox reading of his artworks, Zhang's playful images also incorporate traditional Chinese calligraphic elements, often with humorous content, to dispel the sense of authority of the traditional Chinese elite culture. American art historian Jerome Silbergeld (1944-) translates one paragraph of these texts in his writing, "Zhang Hongtu: The Art of

¹⁷⁰ Cui Fei, "An Interview with Zhang Hongtu," Cui Fei, accessed July 11, 2021, http://www.cuifei.net/press/zhang_hongtu_by_cui_fei.htm.

Straddling Boundaries:”

Thank you for coming so close in order to read this calligraphy. You must be able to understand Chinese, right? However, have you noticed something truly unfortunate has happened? When you come close enough to be able to read these words, which is to say just at this moment, you lose the possibility of enjoying the painting as a whole. So ... please step back five or six steps (but be careful not to bump into anyone or anything behind you!). Find what you feel to be an appropriate distance and angle, and shift your attention from these words to the painting. Thank you for your attention.¹⁷¹

Zhang Hongtu’s facetious but also deeply serious metanarrative asks the viewer to not give priority to the authority of written languages – and by extension all form of narrative – in the viewing process. Instead, the artist encourages the viewer to adopt the holistic and immersive way of viewing which is inherent in traditional *shanshui* painting. In this way, Zhang responds to the notion of *shanshui* as a unique modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging in his hybrid artwork.

Moreover, a series of installation artworks by artist Xu Bing, titled *Background Story*, which was begun in 2004 and is still ongoing, also blurs the philosophical boundaries of the East-West dichotomy by echoing postmodern notions of semiotics in the visual paradigm of *shanshui* painting [Figure 19&20]. In this installation series, Xu reconstructs literati *shanshui* paintings with natural and sometimes mundane materials such as twigs, leaves, cotton wool, sticky tapes, stones and clay. These materials are thoughtfully placed behind a piece of frosted glass and illuminated from behind. A view from the front shows the mimesis of a large-scale *shanshui* painting. However, the raw materials are revealed to the viewer when walking around to the back of the installation. The artist’s decision to show both sides of the installation is a method to challenge the regular process of perception through script and pictorial signs. In words of art historian Robert E. Harrist, Jr (1951-):

Xu Bing invites viewers to inspect the area behind the cases. What they discover

¹⁷¹ Jerome Silbergeld, “Zhang Hongtu: The Art of Straddling Boundaries,” in *Zhang Hongtu: The Art of Straddling Boundaries* (Taipei: Lin and Keng Gallery, 2007), 56-59.

there is a strangely heterodox combination of materials: items that might have been salvaged from a dustbin or discovered on the street [. . .] The relative clarity with which the materials can be seen on the opposite recto side depends on how closely they are placed on the pane of glass and on how they are lighted from above and behind.¹⁷²

By viewing the visual transformation on both sides of the installation, “a material substance becomes the vehicle of an immaterial concept transcending the immediate physical presence of the object presented to the viewer.”¹⁷³ The viewing experience is incomplete from either side of the installation. Neither the pictorial sign of the illuminated *shanshui* painting on the surface nor the ephemeral materials at the back represents the whole story of the artwork. The frosted glass is crucial to how we resolve this visual dilemma. It is the vehicle for the “in-betweenness” that unifies the experience from both the recto and the verso. Interestingly, a deciphering of symbolic meanings is not needed in the appreciation of this work. Instead, the relationship between the simulacrum and the material is indexical. According to Australian art historian John Clark:

While Xu does not profess a deep understanding of Derrida’s philosophies, it is clear their thoughts run parallel in some fundamental ways: the mind is an obstacle to direct perception of the world, which we only glimpse indistinctly in gaps between our sensory perceptions and their symbolic re-construction or illusory mediation in script sign-systems. [...] Xu seems to advance a view of symbolic representationality for which the only linkage to the world is direct. That is, represented images are directly connected to corollary objects in nature. In ordinary language, this kind of representational system might be called “traditional.” In the end, this is a kind of indexicality, where the actual items used in art are a direct material cipher for the objects in that world.¹⁷⁴

Xu Bing discusses the connection between his artistic methodology and traditional *shanshui* painting. He states:

Eastern painting and Western painting are fundamentally different in their approaches to the world and the following methods of artistic transformation of

¹⁷² Robert E. Harrist, Jr., “Background Stories: Xu Bing’s Art of Transformation,” In Reiko Tomii et al., *Xu Bing*, (London: Albion, 2011), 33-43.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ John Clark, “Behind the Painting: Xu Bing’s Hybrid Landscapes,” in *Xu Bing: Beyond the Book from the Sky*, ed. Sarah E. Fraser and Yu-Chieh Li (Singapore: Springer, 2020), 109.

the world. Perhaps it is not only the difference between imagery and realism, but also the difference in cognitive attitudes towards the "individual" and "universal" nature of things. Western realistic paintings generally depict a particular mountain or a particular tree, while in shanshui painting, a stone can represent a mountain, and this mountain represents all mountains. A branch can represent a tree, and this tree represents a kind of tree.¹⁷⁵

Which is to say, with the help of postmodern deconstruction, Xu Bing echoes the unique philosophy behind *shanshui*. The direct, intuitive and fluid understanding of a world not limited by strict assignation of meaning becomes the fundamental framework of Xu Bing's installation. The questioning of the rigid referential quality of symbols, from the perspective of semantics, is a returning to the spirit of *shanshui*, and this questioning reveals that the artist's intention is to explore a new way to, "touch the very core of traditional Chinese culture."¹⁷⁶

Through the analysis of the artworks mentioned above, I suggest that the openness and shapelessness as implied in Daoist ways of thinking help contemporary Chinese artists rediscover the spirit of *shanshui* through diverse and hybrid visual languages. Instead of seeing *shanshui* as a rigid and hegemonic entity, contemporary artists can now choose from a large array of artistic approaches, employing more distinct aesthetics and methodologies than ever before, in order to echo the spirit of *shanshui* with aesthetic hybridity in the era of contemporaneity.

4.3 Out of the White Box: The Non-Institutional Experience of *Shanshui*

¹⁷⁵ Xu Bing, Background Story, official website of Xu Bing, accessed July 11, 2021, <http://www.xubing.com/cn/database/writing/479>. Translated by Yang Liu from the original: 东方绘画与西方绘画在与世界的对位和进行艺术转化的方法上, 有根本上的不同。也许并不仅是意象与写实的区别, 还引申到对事物的“个别”与“普遍”性质认知态度的区别。西方写实绘画中, 一般是描绘某某处的一座山或某某处的一棵树, 而中国山水画中, 一块石可以代表一座山, 这山意指所有的山。一个树枝可以代表一棵树, 这树意指这一类树。

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

As illustrated above, in the past two decades, Chinese artists, scholars and curators have endeavored to broaden and even blur the boundaries of *shanshui*. In this process, the preservation of the visual paradigm of *shanshui* as a traditional art genre is being challenged. Instead, the reactivation and rediscovery of the *shanshui* spirit becomes the primary topic. However, it is not an effort being made within the context of the institutionalized contemporary art system alone. Many alternative and creative approaches have been and continue to be adopted and these new strategies have led to increased awareness and impetus to the non-institutional experience of *shanshui*. I suggest that this non-institutional experience is a way to deconstruct the authoritative power of institution/system and thus it correlates with *shanshui* as a unique modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging. The adoption of “nonexhibition spaces” and “nonexhibition forms” is meant to depart from the established institutional system to rejoin the complex interaction of the myriad cosmic processes in the continuity of being in traditional Chinese philosophy.

One approach to gain the non-institutional experience of *shanshui* is through a phenomenological, intuitive and embodied perception of the world. A reflection of this approach occurred in 1995, when ten artists from Beijing’s East Village art community gathered for what was to become an iconic moment in the contemporary Chinese art world. Atop a hill on the outskirts of Beijing, they met, enacted and documented a performance piece that is known as, *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* [Figure 2]. First, they weighed themselves then, with the heaviest person at the bottom, they lay down together in vertical layers, stacking their naked bodies so as to increase the height of this hilltop by one meter. Using bodily metaphors within nature to discuss issues of individual identity and self-awareness, this artwork was also a veiled protest against the clear political boundaries that lay at the very core of socialist China.

As result of the crackdown of a student-led demonstration for democracy held in Beijing’s

Tiananmen Square in 1989, the avant-garde art movement of the '85 New Wave ended abruptly. In this context, I suggest that this performance piece can be read as a commentary on the imposed sacrifice of self-identity, self-recognition and freedom ostensibly in the name of political and social harmony. The height of the mountain, which refers to the “national power,” was built on this repressive collective behaviour. However, I suggest we must be cautious not to interpret this collaborative performance art as a gesture meaning only the interpretation suggested above. Nor must we see it as a unilateral call to pursue individualism, freedom and Western democracy. When situated within its particular historical context of Chinese culture and art – and following my reading of this artwork – I believe we should not only appreciate it as a politically charged performance but also recognize it as belonging to a somatic experiment of *shanshui*.

To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain is not just a subtle political protest, but also a bodily gesture that speaks to the importance of getting back to nature and one's spirituality. In addition to its political implications, I contend that from the *shanshui* perspective, *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* more adequately represents an interest in one's spiritual relationship and authentic communication with nature and the world. In this artwork, *shanshui* is experienced as the perceptible dynamic forces of change, the myriad things of all nature and the beyond-ego inner spirituality that emerges through the dedicated conceptual and intellectual artistic process. Seeking the unification of nature and human beings, this contemporary performance piece truly speaks to the spirit of *shanshui* through its direct interaction with nature and the human body. It presents the mountain as the place of origin, it is both home and friend to the artists. Moreover, because they do not hold a dominant role or position in this work, the artists, the anonymous mountain and the nameless trees and grass can all be read as equal, and all equally abandoned and marginalized in the story of the Chinese economic miracle. The mountain is

unknown and, so too, are the identities of these artists; you don't know who is who, where one person ends and another begins. Symbolically, they have let go of their individual human egos to be part of nature, they are anonymous, naked, primal and exposed in the wild. The concept of the voluntary shedding of identity and subjectivity – despite the social-political implications and the appearance of performance art – is fundamentally connected with the philosophical Daoist way of thinking. In a most natural and sincere attitude, these ten artists can be interpreted as conveying one of the most basic concepts of Chinese philosophical cosmology, namely that of: harmony between human and nature; the benevolent unity of heaven and earth; and, the fact that people should treat all things equally rather than hold them in opposition.

To discuss *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* as a somatic approach of *shanshui* is not to deny the influence of Western performance art in the 1960s and even the earlier precedents of the Dadaists. Compared with Western performance artists – such as Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), Joan Jonas (1936-) and Marina Abramović (1946-) – the aim of these ten Chinese artists is very similar, for their goal was to rebel against and eliminate the limitations of art institutions. However, it is one-sided to just consider this performance piece as a mere copy of its Western predecessors that follow the logic and timeline of Western art history. Many participating artists of *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* address the notion of traditional Chinese philosophy in an interview commemorating the 20th anniversary of this artwork in 2015. For example, Zhang Huan (1966-) says the original intention of this work was, “the integration and inherent relationship between heaven, earth, and human beings; that human is just part of nature, not the conqueror of nature.”¹⁷⁷ Ma Zongren comments from the perspective of deconstruction of

¹⁷⁷ “An Interview to Commemorate the 20th Anniversary of “Adding One Meter to the Anonymous Mountain”,” Art-Ba-Ba, accessed July 12, 2021, <http://www.art-ba-ba.com/main/main.art?threadId=84718&forumId=8>. Translated by

meaning assignation, saying that, “the most important part of this performance art is the conception of anonymity, to me it is decisive.”¹⁷⁸ Ma Liuming (1969-) interprets it as a method of eliminating individual boundaries and embracing the collective, spiritual connection. He states, “In this work, I think that different bodies are stacked together, [in a way] I see them as one body.”¹⁷⁹

As traditional Chinese philosophy believes that, “humans and the other things are all the carriers of Dao and Qi from their inception,”¹⁸⁰ the concrete and detailed representation of the human body in Chinese art is extremely rare. As suggested by Chinese scholars Liu Chengji and Lei Yongqiang:

The relationship between art and the human body can be broadly seen into two aspects. One takes the human body as a direct, expressive object of art. The other holds that artworks structurally embody the characteristics of the human body. The depiction of figures is not the dominant [Chinese art] tradition: the usual subjects of depiction are nature's mountains and rivers, flowers and birds, and scenery in the countryside. In this aspect, it is quite different from the art tradition focusing on the human body established in ancient Greece.¹⁸¹

However, as a cross-cultural hybrid, *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* echoes the Daoist philosophy particularly in relation to the first approach put forth by Liu Chengji and Lei Yongqiang, which is the direct and active use of a human body as a site of Dao and Qi. A relevant Western philosophical concept that brings a more nuanced understanding of the subjective, bodily experience is “somaesthetics” – as proposed by the American pragmatist philosopher Richard Shusterman (1949-), in 1996 – for it also marks its endorsement of immersive art installations and

Yang Liu from the original: 《为无名山增高一米》跟“天人合一”的和谐观念有关，即人是自然的一部分，而不是征服自然。

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. I rephrase it from the original: 我后来觉得“无名山”这个概念很重要，因为当时做的时候，这个概念还没有出现，是后来把它命名为“无名山”的，所以对我来说，我觉得它很重要，是决定性的。

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. I rephrase it from its original texts: 在作品里，我想的是不同身体叠放在一起、摞在一起，就把它当成一个身体了。

¹⁸⁰ Liu Chengji and Lei Yongqiang, “The Body and Its Image in Classical Chinese Aesthetics,” in *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*, Volume. 3, Number. 4 (Dec., 2008): 584.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 589.

expands on phenomenology's idea of our bodily experience of the world. In Shusterman's writing, somaesthetics implies: "a project of appreciating and cultivating the body not only as an object that externally displays beauty, sublimity, grace, and other aesthetic qualities, but also as a subjectivity that perceives these qualities and that experiences attendant aesthetic pleasures somatically."¹⁸² As a philosophy that embraces the idea of body within the world and the world within the body, somaesthetics offers a philosophical model to overcome the boundary between the body and the natural world and creates a blended engagement of the two. According to Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson (1967-): "somaesthetics implies that you are not only capable of shaping but that you are also being shaped. The body learns from different layers of experience, both constituting and being constituted, as we know from phenomenology."¹⁸³ Due to the concept of being within the natural landscape – as explored in the Daoist ideas of "body thoroughly pervading and being pervaded by the world"¹⁸⁴ – this long accepted embodied approach to the appreciation of *shanshui* correlates to phenomenology and somaesthetics. Thus, it is not hard to find Chinese cultural temperaments in *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain*, as it questions the fixed role of public institutions, blurs the boundary between culture and nature, and encourages the viewer to create non-verbalized self-reflection through nature.

This somatic experience of *shanshui* can be also identified in the performance artworks from Chinese artist and curator Song Dong (1966-). In 1996, Song created *Stamping the Water* [Figure 21] in the Lhasa River in Tibet. For an hour he stamped the water, ceaselessly, in the river

¹⁸² Richard Shusterman, "Encyclopedia of Human-Computer Interaction, 2nd Ed.," Interaction Design Foundation, 2006, accessed September 24, 2017, <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/book/the-encyclopedia-of-human-computer-interaction-2nd-ed/somaesthetics>.

¹⁸³ Olafur Eliasson, "Interdisciplinary Approaches and Their Interplay with His Art – In Dialogue with Else Marie Bukdahl," *The Journal of Somaesthetics*, No.1 (2015): 13.

¹⁸⁴ James Miller, "Ecology, Aesthetics and Daoist Body Cultivation," 2012, accessed September 24, 2017, <https://qspace.library.queensu.ca/bitstream/handle/1974/7246/ecology,%20aesthetics%20and%20daoist%20body%20cultivation.pdf;jsessionid=004BD289273027E2B7E35FB17BEF7AE4?sequence=1>.

with a large wood seal that was carved with the Chinese character *shui* – meaning water in English. As a cultural gesture, stamping with a seal is testament to the importance of specific texts or artwork. However, when the seal that Song Dong uses here leaves no traces on the water, the symbolic power of language started to lose its meaning. What is left as meaningful to the artist is the realization of the evanescence and impermanence of existence through his somatic experience of the water. In an interview in 2002, Song Dong discussed his understanding of this performance piece in detail. He states:

Existence and non-existence are the same to me. What you can't see may exist and what you see may not exist. That is how I came up with this work. [...] for me water exists in three states: it can exist as a solid, a liquid or a gas; and also, it is transient in nature in that it changes all the time; and it's shapeless. About time, I think time is always there with us. It has a seamless relationship with us but we don't see it in a seamless way. When we caught time, we documented it as a fragmented moment.¹⁸⁵

In another interview, Song Dong reflects on the concept of water:

[...] when you use the material of water, it seems we have a close relationship with it, but actually what this material produces is the idea of water, rather than the material itself, so what I want to use is the concept of water or rather its spirit or meaning, use its free form, to create. So when you go beyond the material itself to redefine this material, then it will produce even more allure and attraction. This is what leads me forward. So I think, whether it's water, mirrors, or all the world's objects, I think they're all flowing and changing. They are not constrained by any particular material, rather, on the basis of material, they disperse a line of thinking.¹⁸⁶

Following Song Dong's insight, without the obstruction of the institution, the somatic approach of water fits perfectly to explore the transitory nature of languages, systems, and even our existence. This work seems absurd and points to the sense of meaninglessness and emptiness in the artist's reflection of substance. However, an almost Chan-like enlightenment is embedded within its

¹⁸⁵ "APT4 / Song Dong discusses His Art Practice and 'Stamping the Water'," Sep 23, 2018, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CdqlBTv7F0w&ab_channel=QAGOMA.

¹⁸⁶ Song Dong, the Allure of Matter, accessed July 13, 2021, <https://theallureofmatter.org/artists/song-dong/>. This quote is from the video transcript of his interview co-presented at the Smart Museum of Art and Wrightwood 659.

somatic nature when this work amplifies the instantaneous experience of the world in the Lhasa River. This process of stamping echoes the primal, intuitive and flowing qualities of *shanshui* and in turn, it deconstructs and destabilizes the presupposed and human-made structure within the institutionalized system of art.

Song Dong takes a similar approach to internalizing his experience of *shanshui* in another work, *Writing Diary with Water* (1995) [Figure 22]. Situated outside of the institution, again, in this ongoing performance piece we see Song writing a daily log of his actions, provisional ideas and discursive reflections. Rather than use ink on paper, here he uses water on a dark grey stone. The stone is porous and the ephemeral brushstrokes of written characters and figures vanish before the artist can complete his log entry. According to the artist, this idea was initiated much earlier.

He states:

[in 1994] when I was in a river, I used my finger to write about how I felt about the river and how I felt about the weather, and everything around me. Then I thought wouldn't it be a good idea to write my diary with water. In that way it's there and no one could see it. To me that stone is not a work. It's a very important part of my life. It has recorded my seven years of experience. It is much heavier than any other stone.¹⁸⁷

In 1996, Song Dong made a detailed will about this stone, saying:

This stone (given by a friend back then) was not mine. It was found by my colleague. It was accidental. I felt that the moment my body disappeared, I should return this stone to nature, so the final destination for this stone is the Longqing Gorge.¹⁸⁸

What Song Dong is following, both within and behind this work, is the unique modality of thinking,

¹⁸⁷ "APT4 / Song Dong Discusses His Art Practice and 'Stamping the Water,'" Sep 23, 2018, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CdqlBTv7F0w&ab_channel=QAGOMA.

¹⁸⁸ "Song Dong 1995-2005 Behind Creation: Art is a Very Important Part of My Life," Artron, accessed July 13, 2021, https://news.artron.net/20160411/n829054_.html. Translated by Yang Liu from the original: 这块石头(朋友当年送的)不是我的,是大自然的,无意之中被我的同事找到的,都是偶然的因素,我觉得我肉体消失的那一刻,我应该把这块石头还给大自然,所以这块石头他最后的归宿在龙庆峡。

perceiving and engaging in the spirit of *shanshui*. He inwardly privatizes and mystifies his experience of the world, with a focus on the fleeting existence of minds.

In addition, in this work, Song Dong applied the somatic approach and his non-institutional experience to blur the boundaries between making art and everyday life. It is both a conceptual performance piece and a long-term spiritual and meditative way of living. Beyond the context of art, this work transforms the artist's body from a physical body to a lived and sentient body, so the artist can jump out of and reflect on the limitation of human-centred conditions, purposes and narratives to embrace a holistic perspective. According to Richard Shusterman: "there is an aspect of philosophy as life practice that my version of pragmatism emphasizes more than most Western philosophies — cultivation of the sentient body as a central tool of self-perfection, a key to better perception, action, virtue, and happiness."¹⁸⁹ In this way, Song Dong's work, *Writing Diary with Water* can be interpreted from the perspective of its pragmatic function, which guides the artist to be conscious of the world in an intuitive and integrating way.

By applying a similar somatic approach to blurring the arbitrary boundary between art-making and everyday life, Chinese artist Yang Qian (1959-), presented a performance piece, *Walking Shanshui* (2016) [Figure 23] in a group exhibition held in Shanghai and called, *Humanistic Nature and Society (Shan-shui, 山水) - An Insight into the Future*. With the help of his mobile device and its built-in GPS navigation, Yang paints with his movements. He uses a popular sports app to record his daily exercise and walking routes to paint the visual paradigm of *shanshui* through his footsteps. Interestingly, in an urban environment, Yang Qian cannot walk freely to create the *shanshui* pattern that he originally planned. The city roads, parks and buildings form

¹⁸⁹ Richard Shusterman, "Pragmatism and East-Asian Thought," in *Metaphilosophy*, Vol. 35 No. 1/2 (January 2004): 13-43.

artificial shapes that are too geometrical to meet the needs of his creation. According to Chinese art critic Wang Duanyan (1961-):

[The artist] often walks detours through trees, garbage dumps, vegetable markets and even butcher's shop to complete an image. Therefore, the artist usually has to make extra effort to execute his ideas. It is worth mentioning that the area where Yang Qian walks is not only a geographical space, but also a social space. In the process of walking, he can not only see trees, hear birds, smell the fragrance of flowers, but also interact with the activities of urban residents, the harsh environment, hear singing, and experience the strong atmosphere of city life. He will also turn on the video cam on his mobile phone to record the moments of everyday life in the city. In this way, to Yang Qian walking has become a life experience with multiple meanings.¹⁹⁰

In this sense, the making of the visual paradigm of the traditional *shanshui* painting becomes a secondary by-product. I suggest the key concept of this artwork has shifted from the making of a particular symbolic visual pattern to that of the actual experience of walking. Only in walking, taking detours or not, can one attain those somatic experiences being quoted above. The final product, the visual symbol of *shanshui* displayed on the screen, is a reminder of the integrating and intuitive way of perceiving and engaging. This work reveals that *shanshui* not only resides in the white box behind the glass, illuminated by artificial spotlights, but outside the institution, too: it is a pragmatic method open to all that anybody can practice in their daily lives if they so choose.

Although not embracing the somatic approach, another work of contemporary *shanshui* that concerns the non-institutional experience is that of the previously mentioned artist, Zhan Wang. On May 2, 2000, he created an artwork titled, *Beyond 12 Nautical Miles: Floating Rock Drifts on*

¹⁹⁰ Wang Duanyan, "The Poetics of Walking: Interpreting Yang Qian's Walking Art," ppfocus, accessed July 13, 2021, <https://ppfocus.com/0/cuec83194.html>. Translated by Yang Liu from the original: 他經常要穿過樹叢、垃圾堆、蔬菜市場甚至殺豬場來完成一個圖形。因此他常常要費盡心力才能實現自己的構思。值得一提的是，楊千行走的地域不僅是一個地理的空間，也是一個社會的空間。在行走的過程中，他不僅能看到樹木、聽到鳥語、聞到花香，也能看到城市居民的活動、環境的惡劣、聽到歌聲、體會到濃厚的市井生活氣息。他還會打開手機錄像機，記錄下行走路上豐富多彩的市井生活場面和人文景象。就這樣，行走在楊千那裡變成了一種具有多重意義的生活體驗。

the Open Sea [Figure 24]. In this performance piece – which I see as another example of the confluence of postmodernism and Daoism, as it relates to the spirit of *shanshui* – he floated a stainless-steel rock out into the ocean near Shandong Province, China. Rather than placing the metallic replica of a scholar’s rock within a classical literati garden to mimic the sense of naturalness, Zhan Wang sent this sculptural representation out into the ocean on a dynamic and symbolic journey. In the documentary video of this performance piece, he records the fishing boat carrying the rock across 12 nautical miles, then shows both its release and eventual disappearance into the high seas. Duplicating and transforming the idea of an ancient Chinese garden rock, this artificial rock, which rose and fell with the tide and floated beyond the boundary line of territorial waters, can be read in at least two ways: as a symbol of traditional cultural significance; and, as a justification for the importance of free flow of culture and tradition. Zhan Wang’s rock was hollow so as to make sure this stainless-steel replica would float endlessly with no possibility of sinking to the bottom of the sea. As a playful discussion on the symbol of traditional Chinese culture, this hollowed-out approach suggests that the continuation and transformation of cultural tradition should not be hindered by its own historical burdens – the traditional visual paradigm of *shanshui* in our case. In this contemporary, conceptual performance piece, this artificial rock – which simultaneously carries the internal implication of the literati aesthetic pursuits yet is externally detached from this specific, traditional cultural context – was metaphorically returned to nature by the artist to achieve cultural transcendence. As defined by the *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*,¹⁹¹ the territorial sea is the area of coastal waters that covers the breadth up to a limit not exceeding 12 nautical miles, measured from baselines of the state. According to the interpretation of art historian Wu Hung:

¹⁹¹ United Nations, “United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea,” accessed September 21, 2017, https://www.un.org/Depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/part2.htm.

Boundaries and borders can be regarded as the demarcation lines and intermediate zones of political, philosophical, and cultural fields. As the result, the act of crossing boundaries, either as a physical act or as something ideological or cultural, is regarded as subversive and adventurous, because in crossing borders there is often a change of identity at the border, marking the acknowledgement of politics, thought, and culture from the other side of the boundary or border.¹⁹²

Allowing the rock to float in un-charted waters, illustrates the supposed freedom of the traditional Chinese spirit when liberated from any fixed and specific context; though nurtured by literati aesthetics, the ultimate goal of Chinese *shanshui* is to momentarily catch the untrammled flow of nature. The mirror-like finish of the rock reveals the shapeless nature of Daoist thinking since it is not self-contained but reflects the surroundings. This idea is reinforced by the artist as he inscribed a message on the artificial rock before releasing it into the ocean. Using five languages – Chinese, Japanese, Korean, English and Spanish – Zhan Wang states: “This is a work of art created specifically to be exhibited on the high seas. If by any chance you retrieve it, please place it back in the ocean. The artist thanks you from his remote location!” By this action, the artist confirms that the nature of traditional Chinese philosophy is never fixed in any detail, definition and destination. It should never be possessed and, like the form of this hollow rock, it truly belongs to no one.

Another fulfilling example of the non-institutional exploration of *shanshui*, is the installation piece, *Sky Ladder* (2015) [Figure 25]. In this case, Chinese artist, Cai Guo-Qiang (1957-), expresses his filial piety and honours his grandmother’s 100th birthday. Cai’s lifelong dream came true when he created this ephemeral yet contemplative spectacle in his hometown of Quanzhou. In the dawn sky, a 1650-foot-tall, explosive laden ladder was held aloft by a giant balloon and successfully ignited. As a gift for the artist’s elderly grandmother, Cai created this fiery

¹⁹² Wu Hung, “Zhan Wang’s Artistic Experiment: The Floating Breakthrough,” *Art World*, no.3 (2000): 148.

path that connects earth to heaven, life to death, and the physical to the spiritual. As an artwork symbolizing life that shines and ascends in a fleeting moment then disappears into the void, Cai transformed the entire skyline of his hometown into his canvas and was able to initiate a dialogue with the great unseen power of the universe.

In this installation, Cai Guo-Qiang reflects on the ancient Confucian view of cosmic order and peace, which is the central theme that runs throughout his work. In his early career, Cai explored the properties of gunpowder as a drawing material, an inquiry that eventually led to his massive-scale firework art performances such as that described above. Moreover, Cai's hometown Quanzhou, which is by the sea, is not only the starting point of the Silk Road in China but is famous for producing firecrackers, also. The word for gunpowder in Chinese literally translates as "fire medicine" and alludes to the eighth-century Chinese alchemists who accidentally invented it while searching for the elixir of eternity. In addition, Cai's hometown Quanzhou is also known for its strong involvement with traditional local culture and folk customs, which includes ancestral worship, the belief of invisible forces and geomancy. Interestingly, in the accompanying documentary film, *Sky Ladder: The Art of Cai Guo-Qiang* (2016), we see Cai and his team following the rules of a traditional Chinese ground-breaking ceremony, offering incense sticks for a successful event.¹⁹³ By interweaving historical, mythical, ritual, traditional and personal elements into this human-made spectacle, Cai's *Sky Ladder* initiates a conversation with the universe and symbolically connects the human world with the cosmos. In contrast to the sense of withdrawal and detachment in traditional *shanshui* painting, Cai takes the perspective of human beings as a collective and thus expands upon the spirit of *shanshui* by suggesting universal harmony through a species' metaphysical interaction with the cosmos.

¹⁹³ "Sky Ladder: The Art of Cai Guo-Qiang," Netflix, accessed July 13, 2021, <https://www.netflix.com/ca/title/80097472>.

With both the somatic and non-institutional approaches, the appearance of *shanshui* transforms into a variety of faces. In words of Xu Bing:

[...] the real progress of contemporary art cannot gain nourishment and new blood in the field of art itself or the art system itself. Only outside the contemporary art system can it be possible to obtain new resources and bring new life to contemporary art. Now making contemporary art is often that you are following the clues within the context of contemporary art. In fact, although you have made weird art, your way of thinking is actually the same as other contemporary artists, so there is essentially no progress. When you forget the art itself, it is possible for you to gain new nutrition and inspiration in the real process of society and culture in a field that is more creative, more active, and more futuristic than the art world itself.¹⁹⁴

Following this light, contemporary Chinese artists did not limit themselves to the institutionalized art system to represent the unique nature-human world outlook of Chinese civilization. Instead, through performances and ephemeral installations in non-institutional environments, contemporary Chinese artists – such as Zhang Huan, Song Dong, Yang Qian, Zhan Wang and Cai Guo-Qiang – have been exploring diverse approaches to express their individual reflections on traditional Chinese philosophy and related perspective of cosmology, which is precisely the spirit of *shanshui*.

In conclusion and as shown through the examples above, we see that *shanshui* is experiencing an on-going transformation because now, in China, artists are freer to be in open dialogue with historical, postmodern and contemporary theories. When Chinese artists first became aware of postmodernism during the early 1980s, it offered a new set of tactics and visual

¹⁹⁴ Xu Bing, “Xu Bing: Hope that Art Will Play a Role in Fields Other than Art,” forest project, accessed July 13, 2021, <http://forestproject.org/report-view.php?id=5&s=0>. Translated by Yang Liu from the original: 事實上真正的當代藝術的進展在藝術領域本身、藝術系統本身不能獲得營養和新的血液的，只有在藝術系統之外和不同藝術之間才有可能獲得新的資源而為現代藝術帶來新的血液。藝術往往是你都擠在了藝術線索本身，實際上雖然是製做了奇奇怪怪的藝術，但是你的思維線索、你的思維方式其實都是一樣的，所以在本質上是沒有進展的。當你忘掉了藝術本身，你才有可能在社會的、文化的真正的進程中獲得比藝術界本身更具有創造力、更具有鮮活性、更具有未來性的領域去獲取新的營養和靈感。

languages for artists' independent and individual reflection on their cultural heritage. Artists began their bold experiments and delivered unique Chinese philosophical, cosmological and related cultural ideals through their own understanding, experiences and interpretations. In these valuable inter-cultural experiments, postmodernism and traditional Chinese philosophy converge at times in the name of *shanshui*. In the context of contemporary art, when Chinese artists' pursuit of the *shanshui* spirit was coupled with various deconstructive approaches it successfully broke the visual constraints of traditional *shanshui* painting. Moreover, these pursuits also prove that Chinese aesthetics and the *shanshui* spirit can be freely explored as a form of pragmatic aesthetics beyond the limitation of institutionalized art systems. The contemporary practice of *shanshui* reflects the spiritual introspection of artists who are interested in expanding the meaning of *shanshui* in everyday life in contemporary China.

Chapter Five: Developing a Personal Relationship with *Shanshui*

Shanshui – as a unique modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging – is difficult to articulate in academic language although, as demonstrated in the preceding pages, the attempts of many brilliant scholars and writers have met with success. The very core of *shanshui* is a norm-less, non-assertive and non-theoretically formulated theory of the world and it is aesthetically ordered. It is the unprincipled knowing by nature and the ideas presented in *shanshui*, which are poetic and non-referential and difficult to translate into the logic of any language. While I was writing the previous chapters, it became increasingly evident that the arguments I presented were those of an onlooker: I write as a scholar-artist born and raised in China but as one who is studying within a Western academic context. Not only does this perspective distance me, and the reader, from the flowing nature of *shanshui* – as illustrated in my exploration of the Daoist theoretical framework – but the mode in which I am communicating, academic language, further complicates the process and hinders our deeper understanding and direct experience of *shanshui*. For this reason, I felt compelled to apply an art-based research as a methodology and – as I developed my understanding of art created by other contemporary Chinese artists – to explore the phenomenological aspect of *shanshui* in this chapter, which focuses on non-verbal and personal, experiential dimensions through my practice of art-making and self-reflexivity. Deriving knowledge directly from feelings and senses, as a form of experiential learning, the art-based research element and /or the creative process of this dissertation, then, reflects the spirit of *shanshui*.

As a contemporary Chinese artist who lived in China until my early 20s and who continues to make art as a member of the Chinese diaspora in Canada, I feel compelled to play this more lively, complicated, and open-ended role in this ongoing exploration and expansion of *shanshui* – not only as art historian and interpreter but also as creator and participant. In order to

engage with a more nuanced understanding of *shanshui*, my aim was to render the ideas discussed in this dissertation into artistic visual or multi-media language. I created several works during this interdisciplinary research project, which I discuss below. However, the cornerstone of my art-based research is the core painting series created as part of this dissertation process along with the corresponding exhibition titled, *For a Moment, Silence* and exhibited at the University of Victoria in 2016 [Figures 26, 27, 28]. It constitutes my approach to *shanshui* and is inspired by my mother's experience of sand and her encounter with an impossible-to-demonstrate vitality of nature in the sandstorm. Analyzing my art-based research in this chapter will allow me to approach the topic of my dissertation from related but different angles. Through the lenses of self-reflection, experiential learning, personal stories, individual/collective memories and creativity, my artworks present an additional way to speak to the issues presented earlier.

In an academic context, following the timeline of Chinese history, my earlier discussion of *shanshui* falls within the thematic narrative of traditional historiography. It is based on the continuity and authority of the past. However, from my position as a person living in the postmodern era, I intend to embrace the fragmented and unstable aspect of history and make space for personal, self-reflection. Thus, through my artistic exploration, I add another layer to the overall sense of historicity in this discussion of *shanshui* as an art genre. Inspired by the spirit of *shanshui*, I see art-making as a means to complement academic thought and language to combine both analytical and experiential ways of learning. Thanks to the interdisciplinary nature of this dissertation, I have this opportunity to incorporate traditional academic discourse with art-making and, in this way, I am able to supplement what could not be conveyed in previous chapters.

5.1 The Story of Que and Hua Mountains

The year 2016, marks the beginning of my dialogue with the academic research for this dissertation. Using a postmodern deconstructive approach, I created a photo collage, titled *Hometown* [Figure 29]. *Hometown* portrays a phantasmal presence of the modernized urban-scape of my hometown Jinan yet its composition echoes a much older and much venerated traditional *shanshui* painting, dating from 1295, *Autumn Colours on the Que and Hua Mountains*, [Figure 30]. In 2011, I had been delighted to discover this earlier masterpiece by Yuan scholar Zhao Mengfu¹⁹⁵ (1254-1322) who painted it upon his return to the south after serving in the Jinan. It was made as a present for his friend Zhou Mi, courtesy name Gongjin.¹⁹⁶ At the top of the handscroll an inscription written by Zhao Mengfu explains the story:

The father of Gongjin [1232-1298] was a native of Qizhou.¹⁹⁷ After retiring from office in Qizhou and on my way home, I visited the scenery of the area to describe it for Gongjin. Mt. Hua-bu-zhu is known as the most famous mountain in the area, having been known from antiquity and unique for its sharp peak. Therefore, I did this painting of it. To the east is Mt. Que, so I gave this work the title ‘Autumn Colours on the Que and Hua Mountains.’ Done by Zhao Mengfu of Wuxing in the twelfth lunar month of the first year of the Yuanzhen era [i.e. January or February of 1295].¹⁹⁸

Rather than portraying the actual scenery around my hometown, this work is a visual expression painted from the artist’s recollection and as such this hand scroll is a personal response presenting a literati ideal.

Due to the distinct social context of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), *shanshui* painting became a channel through which artists’ individual feelings and cultural identity could be

¹⁹⁵ Zhao Mengfu was a famous Chinese literati painter, scholar and calligrapher during the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368).

¹⁹⁶ I knew of this painting when I was in primary school. However, my awareness of its relationship to my hometown is firstly gained in 2011, when I had an opportunity to see the actual painting in person.

¹⁹⁷ Qizhou or Qi Prefecture is a Chinese historical place name in imperial China, which indicates the area centering on modern Jinan, Shandong, China.

¹⁹⁸ I translate this short paragraph of Classical Chinese into an English version based on my own understanding. Refer to Appendix B for its full and original edition in Chinese.

expressed without penalty. Many native Chinese literati painters – who steadfastly refused to serve the Mongolian conquerors – chose instead to return to their own cultural heritage; nature became synonymous with sanctuary and they expressed their detachment symbolically through their *shanshui* paintings. In *Autumn Colours on the Que and Hua Mountains*, the wistful longing for the life of a recluse in the picturesque scenery of Jinan can be clearly sensed. Zhao Mengfu expresses his yearning for and pursuit of this idealised place to be, where home and activities can be peacefully immersed in an energetic natural world. It is a place where the spirit may settle, for Zhao Mengfu captures an undertone of profound serenity amid the political chaos of his time.

Today, in the post-Mao era, the rapid, nationwide urbanization and industrialization in China has caused a shift in how people relate to their environment. The traditional, reclusive and humble attitude toward nature has been reversed and now, it is framed by materialism, which is the tendency to positively value material possessions and physical forms over the spiritual. No longer considered as a source of spiritual sustenance, nature is seen primarily as a space, a space that can be effectively co-opted in the name of progress and the resulting economic benefits. As such nature has become a backdrop for tourism and consumerism. When, however, we consider this increasing urbanization in relation to the cultural significance of *shanshui*, we are given a different framework for understanding this shift. For example, Wu Hung says that contemporary Chinese artists are: “no longer interested in providing images of natural beauty in unproblematic ways, or in producing visual pleasure through the contemplation of harmonious, readily acceptable forms.”¹⁹⁹ In response to materialistic visions of the modern city, then, many contemporary artists are embracing the spiritual qualities of *shanshui* and are intentionally re-evoking this traditional

¹⁹⁹ Wu Hung, “Neither Heaven nor Home: Representing Landscape and Interior Space in Contemporary East Asian Art,” in *Making History: Wu Hung on Contemporary Art*, eds. Angie Baecker et al. (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2008), 235.

cultural ideal of human/nature to bring viewers' attention to the great differences between our current life and that of our early ancestors.

I suggest that these re-interpretations of *shanshui* in contemporary art practise express our dissatisfaction and are a reflection of our urban, industrialised modern world that is based on empirical science with an objectification and technical posture of the world. The appropriation of the traditional visual paradigm of *shanshui* painting allows us to merge contemporary perspectives with traditional sensibilities and thus help us to re-engage with nature. The use of urbanized visual elements in the appropriation of traditional *shanshui* painting is meant for the *shanshui*-lization of this alienated modern world of our everyday experience. More specifically, in analysis of contemporary Chinese artists' work and in the discussion of my own art-making, this process will be achieved through an examination of various other appropriations of Zhao Mengfu's painting, *Autumn Colours on the Que and Hua Mountains*. Over the course of my research, it was fascinating to discover that other contemporary artists had also focused on and created work in dialogue with this 13th century painting, well before I thought to do so.

In 2003, Chinese artist Hong Lei (1960-) created a digital work titled, *After Zhao Mengfu's The Autumn Colours on the Que and Hua Mountains* [Figure 31]. According to Wu Hung: “[this work] initiated a trend of digital photographs by younger artists, who have in various ways combined traditional landscape painting with contemporary industrial and urban scenes.”²⁰⁰ Hong Lei preserves the general composition of the original painting by Zhao Mengfu but the iconic image of Mount Hua, the woods and the water are all replaced by a panoramic view of the Pangzhuang coal mine at the resource-based city of Xuzhou. Unlike Jinan, the development of Xuzhou has long relied on the exploitation of resources, such as the construction of coal mines.

²⁰⁰ Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History* (Thames & Hudson, 2014), 348.

The large-scale mineral mining has not only promoted the rapid development of the local economy in Xuzhou but has caused many negative consequences, also. Progress came at a price. For example, continuous coal mining for more than 100 years has caused serious environmental problems in the city.²⁰¹ To reflect on the issues that arise in the mechanized urban world, Hong Lei's playful, digitally manipulated appropriation of Zhao Mengfu's painting is mediated by machine. This artificial reassembling of a traditional *shanshui* painting offers the viewer a chance to consider how the modernization of China has changed the human-nature relationship drastically, as well as allowing them to reflect on the living and working conditions of contemporary Chinese who are dedicating their life to the development of the Chinese economy. I was intrigued by Hong Lei's successful deconstruction of Zhao Mengfu's painting and started to explore other contemporary artists' work in relation to the visual paradigm of Mount Que and Hua.

Driven by my curiosity, I found a group of photographs by artist Zeng Han (1974-), which offers me the most up-to-date images of the local community in Zhao Mengfu's painting. To reawaken our notion of *shanshui* in the context of urbanized contemporary China, Zeng Han has engaged with this ongoing photographic series since 2017, titled, *Real Shanshui-The Study of the Autumn Colours on the Que and Hua Mountains* [Figure 32]. Unlike the grafted image created by Hong Lei, Zeng chose the genre of documentary photography to continuously reveal the actual large-scale reconstruction process of Jinan in the Mount Hua area throughout the seasons and years. Of particular interest are a portion of photographs that document what happened during the construction of the Mount Hua Historical and Cultural Park. In 2013, the local government of Jian launched this large-scale, urban project that was to include the creation of an artificial lake to be known as Mount Hua Lake. As the excavation of several thousand acres of land began the existing

²⁰¹ "The Zhangxiaolou Coal Mine in Pangzhuang Coal Mine," Sohu, accessed July 14, 2021, https://www.sohu.com/a/351741328_100239185.

landscape change dramatically. Nineteen villages at the foot of the mountain were demolished one after another. The villagers bid farewell to their ties to the land, their farms, their old ways of life and have entered resettlement high-rise buildings that have been built by the local government. According to the artist his artwork is deeply rooted in the tradition of Chinese art. Zeng Han writes:

Through the medium of photography, I am able to revise the lineage of mountains-and-waters paintings established by the ancient masters, and conduct my own research and expeditions to the actual sites appeared in their paintings. By copying and imitating the views depicted by them, I attempt to deconstruct the master works while reconstructing my own versions out of the work of deconstruction.[...] I try to address how the waters and mountains and their related memories represented by ancient painters are distorted by powers and capitals and have been turned into the images of the consumption society and its desires.²⁰²

Echoing Zeng Han's *Real Shanshui-The Study of the Autumn Colours on the Que and Hua Mountains*, another photographer, Lyu Yanchuan (1971-) shot a series of black and white images between the years 2015-2019. I was fascinated by this series because it bemoans the lapse of the spirit of *shanshui* in the contemporary world in such a melancholic way. The photographs capture the newly developed social context of rapid urbanization yet at the same time, Lyu reveals the struggle of the Chinese cultural ideal rather poetically. One of the most eye-catching photographs from this series, *The Mount Hua*, was taken in 2017, on the day of Lichun – which marks the beginning of spring in the traditional East Asian Calendar [Figure 33]. Lyu captures the image of a construction site and the silhouette of Mount Hua in the background contrasts starkly with the huge billboard in the foreground. Ironically, the image pasted on the billboard is Zhao Mengfu's, *Autumn Colours on the Que and Hua Mountains* and an urban planning diagram showing the future of this area. Lyu expresses his feelings toward Mount Hua in an interview:

Throughout the ages, Mount Hua has always been there, witnessing the vicissitudes of life and the changes of the world. They are all in its eyes. For

²⁰² Zeng Han, "Real Shanshui," official website of Zeng Han, accessed July 14, 2021, <http://www.zeng-han.com/index.php?/new-project/-real-shanshui/>.

Mount Hua, we are all just passing travelers; but the mountain is the eternal witness. The mountain remains the same, but the world by the foot of the mountain is changing.²⁰³

In this photo, symbolically, the past, present and future of Mount Hua are juxtaposed; their shared space showing the change of the world. By documenting the contradictions in the process of China's urbanization, Lyu emphasizes the crisis of the spiritual value of *shanshui* in relation to today's urbanization.

Zhao Mengfu's painting continues to engage artists and even more recently, in 2020, Xu Bing also brought *Autumn Colours on the Que and Hua Mountains* to his well-known installation series, *Background Story*, which was exhibited at the First Jinan International Biennale [Figures 34&35]. I was surprised to see the continuation of Xu Bing's *Background Story* in the visual transformation of the same topic. By offering viewers the opportunity to review the most iconic image of Jinan in history, Xu Bing again puts traditional *shanshui* in open dialogue with contemporary art. In this installation, postmodernism and traditional Chinese philosophy converge in the name of *shanshui*. According to the artist:

The excellent part of Chinese tradition is the philosophy about harmony between the cosmos and human beings or the reverence of nature. Such thoughts would have been considered out of date or caused a revolt around 200 years ago, because at that time our civilization was experiencing an Industrial Revolution, reforming nature to meet the challenges in order to survive. [...] Now harmony between the cosmos and human beings is at the forefront of contemporary and future-oriented ways of thinking. This idea is very old, but it can fortify and adjust the drawbacks and blindspots of human civilization.²⁰⁴

Dialing the clock back four years before this work by Xu Bing, I began my own dialogue

²⁰³ "Shooting the Story of a Mountain," Sohu, accessed July 14, 2021, https://www.sohu.com/a/309603013_120046886. Translated by Yang Liu from the original: 古往今来, 这座山一直在那里, 沧海桑田、世事变迁, 都在它的眼里。对华不注山来说, 我们都只是过客, 它才是永远的见证者。山不变, 山下的事物却在变。

²⁰⁴ Xu Bing, "Reactivating Tradition," in *Xu Bing: Beyond the Book from the Sky*, ed. Sarah E. Fraser and Yu-Chieh Li (Singapore: Springer, 2020), 9.

with Zhao's painting. As a Jinan native, to respond to some of the contemporary artworks mentioned above and to express my complicated feelings toward the urbanization of my hometown, I created the photo collage, *Hometown* [Figure 29]. Doing so helped me deliberate on the deep-set, conflicted interrelations between myself and the ongoing process of urbanization. Through the exploration of traditional Chinese cultural ideal/philosophy in my contemporary artwork, I seek to discover the *shanshui* spirit of a state of naturalness that will enable me to stay balanced within the materialized world that surrounds us.

From the very first time I saw Zhao's 13th century painting in person in the National Palace Museum in Taipei in 2011, I was pleased that my hometown had been featured in such a famous historical landscape painting. However, seven hundred years later, Jinan is not scenic anymore. Instead, it has been transformed into a large city with countless high-rise buildings and modern commercial centres. As a document of the past, Zhao's painting shows a strikingly different face of my hometown. Working as visual anchors for the painting, the Que and Hua mountains are what first caught my attention. It surprised me that I had lived among the high-rises in the city of Jinan for more than eighteen years without even noticing the existence of these two mountains, particularly Mount Hua because, when I looked closely, I realized that it is not even that far from my old neighborhood. As a matter of fact, in disbelief I saw that although Mount Hua had always been there on the fringe of the city, paradoxically, it had been "beingless" in my cognition. As important as the mountain is in defining the outline of Jinan in Zhao Mengfu's painting, it had never existed in my consciousness.

This experience is hardly a pleasant one, but it shows that an in-depth personal communication with nature has now become difficult to initiate in Jinan. All the natural wonders are excluded and even banished from the city landscape. Does this mean we don't need this kind

of space to commune with idyllic nature anymore? With these thoughts, I created the photo collage, *Hometown*. It follows the visual composition of *Autumn Colours on the Que and Hua Mountains*, but now it reflects and expresses my contemporary existence. I represent the modified *shanshui* with sharp lines, solid blocks and industrial-looking edges. To reinforce and draw attention to the damage done by the urbanization of Jinan, I used the horizontal and vertical lines intentionally to imply self-replication, rather the way one might observe a glitch in the digital age. In this concrete black and white world, we don't see individuals; instead, we see the artificial miracle created by the cold implementation of the collective striving toward urbanization. The only natural element you will find, is the silhouette of Mount Hua in the top right of the landscape. As a distant literati dream of the past, this image of Mount Hua is disjointed from the main body of the city. The other mountain in the original work, Mount Que, has been replaced here by an abstract artificial structure, and other than the concrete structures, I have depicted blank space.

In Zhao Mengfu's painting, the sky, mist and water are merged and are elegantly and simply represented by the negative space. Associating all other visual elements of *shanshui* painting in an integral whole, here this blank space offers the viewer a chance to interact with presence and absence, emptiness and fullness. As Francois Jullien suggested in his book *The Great Image Has No Form, or On the Nonobject through Painting*:

[T]he emptiness of clouds and mists is not only the indistinct beyond into which forms vanish at the horizon; it also permeates the interiority of form, opens them, aerates them, liberates them, and makes them evasive. [...] That act of emptying out purifies as well the innermost part of things, releasing their capacity for aspiration.²⁰⁵

In light of this, I suggest that the negative space in *Hometown* actually represents the naturalness and spontaneity of the Dao and the invisible connections of the myriad things in the appearance of

²⁰⁵ Francois Jullien, *The Great Image Has No Form, or On the Nonobject through Painting* (Chicago, III; London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 78.

unification. It carries the metaphysical connotation of energetic flow in a vast cosmological depth in traditional *shanshui* painting. Moreover, it shows the humble attitude and non-human-centric intention of a traditional literatus toward nature. To contrast with this particular philosophical notion, I intentionally made the negative space in my photo collage appear like a vacuum so as to suggest the alienated mindset of contemporary urban life. In my conceptual deconstruction of the traditional *shanshui* painting, the perfect right angle and straight lines enclose and form an artificial space that seems to reject the life, the aliveness of the outside. I create an objectified clean-cut world in a discrete manner to imply that naturalness and fluidity of life are impossible. The negative space in my artwork no longer symbolizes the generative possibility of presence and energetic flow; instead, it declares a meaningless stagnation and non-communicating inner separation in our industrialized modern world. The unambiguous empty space in *Hometown*, which is intentionally left in between different building blocks, only allows for the possibility of the replication of more artificial structures. In like manner, it tells the story of the indifferent, closed minds of contemporary urban residents due to the materialization of our daily lives. This, then, is a deconstruction of a traditional *shanshui* painting of my hometown in which I point to the loss of the Daoist way of living.

5.2 In Virtue of the Hermit Eye

The questions that arose for me during this research were not ones I had seriously entertained before. At the core of a Daoist lifestyle is the peaceful flow and integration with one's surroundings. The world has changed dramatically since the inception of Daoist philosophy and *shanshui*. Now I wonder: How do we regain our inner breath and the spontaneous quality in urban life? If we are trying to find a solution in the wisdom of traditional *shanshui* painting, the answer

must be eremitism. Throughout Chinese history, being a recluse has been an indispensable part of the elite Chinese cultural tradition. It is both a way of life and a means of social disengagement. As an idea originating from Daoism and Confucianism, in ancient China eremitism was and is a way of inner self-purification because it offers the possibility of spending our lives in nature and safely separates us from our mundane existence. For example, consider the ancient Tang poem by Li Bai, “Why in the Mountains: In Reply to Secular Questions” (729 or 730), which expresses this deep desire to dwell within nature. In answer to the rhetorical question, “why [be a recluse] in the mountain?” Li Bai continues:

You ask me why in the green mountains I reside.
I smile without replying, and my heart sedate.
Peach petals gently ride along the stream.
I have a non-secular world apart that is not among men.²⁰⁶

We can find many writings in classical Chinese literature that share the same sentiment: staying away from the turbulent social-political relations of the time, justifying nothing unnaturally, and authentically feeling a belonging to nature in solitude. However, even though the way of life as described by these classical texts is tied directly to the spirit of *shanshui*, it is important to understand that the physical removal from secular society is just an approach, it is not a purpose. The goal of eremitism is to achieve “ziran,” the “self-so” or “as-it-isness,” which is also the Chinese term for nature. In other words, rather than formally choosing a particular lifestyle, it is more important to reach the state of innate fundamental naturalness. As an approach to being close to the state of the “self-so,” the literati favoured becoming separate from secular interference and to live a life in a sense of homeliness. Yet, when we explore further examples of eremitism in Chinese literature, we find other examples to the contrary. For example, a Jin Dynasty proverb

²⁰⁶ I translate this poem in a word-to-word approach in order to deliver the detailed narrative other than its artistic appeal. Refer to Appendix C for its full and original edition in Chinese.

says: “The mountain forest is but a temporal retreat, the madding crowd is the real place to be a hermit,”²⁰⁷ which is to say, the greatest hermit will retreat into the noisiest fair. Chinese-American art historian, Wen C. Fong (1930-2018) further explains: “Continuing to uphold eremitism as a pure way of life, the Chinese argued that it was possible to be a “hermit at court” or even a “hermit at the marketplace.””²⁰⁸

Thus, being grounded in the belief that you do not really have to go to the wilderness to explore your inner spontaneity, this argument suggests a loftier but perhaps more difficult path — a path that may prove to be more instructive to today’s urban life. It shows that what mattered ultimately was a pure state of mind. From this perspective, dwelling within the real natural environment is just one path toward the spirit of *shanshui*. As a matter of fact, if you intend to achieve the “self-so,” or “inner spontaneity,” you should not be concerned with the possible boundaries between yourself and the external world. The pursuit of “self-so” is a spiritual practice, therefore, it is unnecessary to adopt a solitary life in true nature. Following this light, I began to ponder the relationship between *shanshui* and everyday life in contemporary China, which led me to explore the realization/internalization of *shanshui* in the context of secularity through art-making.

In the exhibition *Shanshui — Poetry without Sound? Landscape in Chinese Contemporary Art* in 2011, which took place at the Kunstmuseum Luzern in Lucerne, Chinese artist Duan Jianyu (1970-) presented her oil painting titled, *A Basket of Eggs No. 3* (2010) [Figure 36]. In this artwork, the viewers’ expectation of a traditional *shanshui* painting is challenged by Duan’s depiction of the farm woman, her baby, the dog and a basket of eggs in the foreground.

²⁰⁷ This proverb is originally from a poem titled *Against Summoning the Recluse* by Western Jin (265-316) literati Wang Kangju (fourth-fifth century). Translated by Yang Liu from the original: 小隐隐陵薮，大隐隐朝市。

²⁰⁸ Wen C. Fong, *Summer Mountains: The Timeless landscape* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1975).

With her breasts exposed, dwelling within *shanshui*, the woman is happily feeding her child in the painting. Seemingly irrelevant concepts — the triviality and secularity of our mundane life and the spirit of *shanshui* — converge in Duan’s painting. In the words of Chinese artist Zhang Wei (1951-), “when we look more closely [at Duan’s painting], we become aware of a quiet beauty that transcends this ordinary scene. This is an aesthetic that nourishes our humanity, as does the spirit of traditional Chinese painting.”²⁰⁹ The world of *shanshui*, in this painting, is composed by the smile of the woman feeding her baby, the bark of the pet dog, the continuation of life and the abundance of our daily food. By deconstructing the conventional and the elite notion of *shanshui*, Duan Jianyu suggests that the enlightenment embedded in traditional *shanshui* painting can be achieved in the ordinariness of everyday life. As she says:

The subtle beauty of Suzhou’s Garden: plum blossoms, orchids, bamboo, chrysanthemums, peonies, pine trees, fog, mountains – these will always be the objects of my gaze. It is in just this way that I view my other beloveds: cabbage, watermelons, turnips, eggplant...²¹⁰

Interestingly, in 2020, artist Xu Bing discussed a similar idea in his casual writing, “The Art History of the Trees in My Yard (Xiao Yuan Shu Mu De Yi Shu Shi)”. Here, Xu records his observation of and interaction with trees, flowers and vegetables in his backyard during his self-isolation in the background of the Covid-19 pandemic in a very detailed manner. In the conclusion, he states:

This text is about plants, but it always (digresses from the subject and) get to the topic of art; in fact, the original meaning from the pictograph of the word "yi (art)" is: a person stretches out his hands to grow a plant in the soil. [...] It turns out that the core proposition of "art" is what people should do in nature. In the days when I forgot about art, I did what art was supposed to do.²¹¹

²⁰⁹ Peter Fischer et al., *Shanshui: Landscape in Chinese Contemporary Art* (Ostfildern, Germany Lucerne, Switzerland: Hatje Cantz Verlag Kunstmuseum Luzern, 2011), 83.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Xu Bing, “The Art History of the Trees in My Yard (Xiao Yuan Shu Mu De Yi Shu Shi),” official website of Xu Bing, accessed July 15, 2021, <http://www.xubing.com/cn/database/essay>. Translated by Yang Liu from the original:

From the experience of his daily life in the backyard, Xu Bing points out the intricate and imitate relationship between art-making and planting, which was an indispensable daily activity in feudal China. In this way, the daily cultivation — of both the physical plants and the artist’s mind — becomes the ultimate answer for art-making. This modality of thinking shows everyday life as the destination to perceive and engage with the spirit of *shanshui*. As mentioned in previous chapters, the Daoist universe is one and nameless, it moves towards a primordial inclusiveness and co-beingness with no divide of the metaphysical and the mundane. Thus, I redirect my mindset to the awareness of *shanshui*.

In 2016, inspired by the interesting contrast that the true hermit inhabits the mundane world, I made the series of photo/painting artworks called, *Hermit* [Figure 37]. Firstly, I took photographs of different walls in my Beijing neighborhood. It is a dated, rather small hamlet near the edge of the 4th Ring Road in South Beijing, its community is relatively poor and underprivileged in general. Numerous buildings within the district are labeled “illegal” because many families are “nail households”, a term that is used to refer to people who refuse to move due to unsatisfactory relocation compensation. Realizing that it is just a matter of time before full eviction of the community occurs, many residents here have begun to violate bylaws by pasting advertisements on public walls. Most of the posters are about the treatment of sexually transmitted diseases, abortion, temporary accommodation rentals, manual labour recruitment, lost bicycles, and sex services. These posters have been attached and detached continually and I was struck by how this process has transformed the walls into abstract collages overtime.

这篇文章写植物，却总扯到艺术上；其实，“艺”字的本意是：一个人伸出双手把一棵植物戳在地里。[……]原来，“艺”的核心命题是人在自然中应该做什么。我在淡忘“艺术”的这段日子里，倒是做了艺术本来该做的事情。

In addition, the walls that surround my neighborhood bear a symbolic meaning. It separates communities of different social classes and, in the context of Chinese art history, the walls reminded me of Wu Hung's discussion of the concept "screen". According to him:

A screen has a 'face' and a 'back'. So when it is set up, it not only divides an undifferentiated space into two juxtaposed areas – that in front of it and that behind it – but also qualifies these two areas. To the person backed or surrounded by a screen, the area behind the screen has become hidden from sight; it has suddenly disappeared, at least temporarily. [...] Placed in the open air, the screen neither keeps off the wind nor partitions a walled space; its significance lies in this psychological relationship with the person in front of it – a gentleman who is gazing (with exaggerated tranquility) at some strangely pointed peaks beyond the palatial compound. Standing behind him, the screen 'blocks' any unwelcome gaze from the outside and supplies a sense of privacy and security; it guarantees that he be the only spectator of the landscape, and therefore it defines a place that is exclusively subjected to his vision.²¹²

In contrast to our family's, well-maintained living environment, the "wall collages" on the other side present a different world, a world of life energy that was created by people who do not care very much about being dutiful urban citizens. I began to think of these spontaneous collages as art, more as an unconscious community-based collaborative artwork and I decided to engage. I began to document the walls, took photographs and then printed them out. After closely examining the colours, shapes and textures in my photos, I applied white acrylic paint directly onto the surface to mimic the visual paradigm of traditional *shanshui* painting. To apply Wu Hung's insight to my own artistic conception, the wall becomes the screen. However, the conceptual *shanshui* in my artwork reverses the appreciation of *shanshui* painting from the perspective of a traditional gentleman as discussed in Wu Hung's writing. This well-educated community, in some degree representing the gentry class in ancient China in my interpretation, ironically faces the blank side of the wall, the screen. In contrast, the residents from the nail households become the potential

²¹² Wu Hung, *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 10-11.

creator and viewer of the art — the abstract “wall collages.” The only way I can create my conceptual *shanshui* is to move from the scholar side to the outside world, to immerse myself in the rambling and disorganized secular affairs, and to temporarily withdraw from the “sense of privacy and security” described by Wu Hung. As a way of responding to the idea of the true hermit in the mundane world in contemporary urban life, my intention is to show the imaginative and conceptual aspects of *shanshui*, to define and locate where the most ideal and the most secular negotiate and converge.

An untitled piece from this series, [Figure 37] shows a traditional Chinese pavilion within a mountain cave. For me, the monochromatic style and the semi-abstracted reference to a cave in the mountain symbolizes the internalization of *shanshui*. As the figurative embodiment of the artist’s inner spirituality, the pavilion now resides within the heart of the mountain. As mentioned earlier in this dissertation, it is also Guo Xi’s “heart of forests and streams” and thus represents the spiritual unification and integration of humanity and the natural world. Here, my mediated conceptual *shanshui* links the outer-physical to the inner-spiritual, and so, I redirect our relationship with nature in the way of the hermit. With no boundaries around us, and no obsession with the norms of social constructs, we can now imagine ourselves in the mountain and experience the enormous world of which we are a just a small part. The visual patterns of traditional *shanshui* painting are used as symbols and are then applied to the surface of the photographic print. They represent the spirit and insight of the hermit: the external appearance of our living surroundings cannot alter the fact that, “objective and subjective realities emerge from the same generative source and with the same ontological status.”²¹³ No matter how restrained we are, nor how much

²¹³ David Hinton, *Existence: A Story* (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2016), 88.

we are accustomed to the social isolation in the process of urbanization, we need to experience the boundless flow of vitality with humility, in a non-human-centric way.

Clearly, *shanshui* is a path rather than a terminus. Following this path, the spirit of *shanshui* can be experienced and internalized in our urbanized daily life. In addition, this path leads me to the sensation and reflection of the deep nature of existence, to the existence of selves; it leads me to the experience of the dynamic cosmos as part of the integrated whole. When I look at China's increasing urbanization thus far, when I worry about the loss of my past in the process of relocation, when I notice how my mind changes as it follows the rhythm of contemporary life, I can draw from the spirit of *shanshui* — this hermit's path — to remind myself of the free-flow and inner spontaneity of existence, beyond time and space.

5.3 For a Moment, Silence: Eliminating Boundaries in Shanshui

As a phenomenological form of experimental learning, the painting series, *For a Moment, Silence* [Figures 27 - 29], is the core project of my artistic exploration of *shanshui*. The series both connects the personal to the world as a whole and serves to highlight the correlation between my philosophical and pragmatic understandings of traditional Chinese philosophy. As an homage to both the *shanshui* visual tradition and its postmodern manifestation, this sustained artistic exploration forms the majority of the research gained through my art-based activity. It was painted for an exhibition held at the University of Victoria, in 2016, and was designed and presented as a complementary “text” to this written PhD dissertation. One of my major artistic intentions in this work was to echo my mother's complicated relationship with the sand. As mentioned in the preface above, this dissertation is my exploration of her narrative, the conflicting experience of the desert sands of Qinghai Province as being both something my mother is actually a part of and something

to conquer simultaneously. It is a journey that spirals around and captures the particular moment when she intuitively and momentarily experienced a sense of awe for nature. In this project new narratives are created when I combine her fragmented memory of the Gobi Desert – which I have never visited – with my personal reflections on the human-nature relationship through my own understanding of *shanshui*. To draw on this cross-generational, multiple and combined-perspective(s) of the world, in *For a Moment, Silence*, I intentionally depict the human-altered geographical environment in a series of gold acrylic paintings to echo my mother's experience of the sand and that very moment of her encountering the sandstorm on the telegraph pole [Figure 1].

For a Moment, Silence, gave me the opportunity to explore how *shanshui*, as a unique modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging, provides the path forward and allows for genuine and boundaryless communications with the world. Echoing the spirit of *shanshui* allows me to blur the chronology of events and gain access to a variety of phenomenological experiences that are obstructed by modern perceptual systems. Sometimes I choose to step out of my own skin and my own personal memories. Instead, as a way of eliminating self-boundaries, I enter the fragmented and distant memory of my mother to revisit: the confrontational relationship of human and nature in the Mao years; to reflect on its continuity in Contemporary China; and, to re-invoke the spontaneous and holistic view of the world in *shanshui*. A generation later, in this painting series, I try to capture this sublime aspect of nature in its dynamic tension and in my creative reflection, even if for a fleeting moment, only.

The first work in this series, *Dwelling* [Figure 38], is a gold and black acrylic painting on canvas that measures 48×48 inch. Echoing the idea of traditional Chinese *shanshui* painting, rather than depicting scenery from a real location, I drew references from my imagination, my mother's memory and my own dream, instead. After the night of the conversation with my mother, I

dreamed about living in a barren land and waking up in a temporary shelter on a rocky escarpment; I was yelling in the wilderness with no voice until I was awakened from this nightmare. When I reflected on this the next day, I became fascinated by how I had subconsciously absorbed my mother's overwhelming experience of nature's sublimity. In my dream the picture of me being isolated in the openness of the wild is so vivid that it overpowers reason and rationality. According to Malcolm Andrews, when we encounter nature's sublimity, "the mind cop[es] with shocking new experiences, [...] struggling to give articulate expression to the ineffable."²¹⁴ In this painting and to trace the aforementioned "shocking new experience", I decided to draw this picturesque view from my dream and thus express my vision of the ineffable in visual form.

My first move when painting this imagined view is to cover the whole primed canvas with black acrylic paint. As a subconscious choice, this decision is intuitive; there are no second thoughts. It is not until much later, when writing this dissertation, that I recall the reason for my decision. "Why didn't I follow the traditional *shanshui* painting paradigm to leave the untouched negative space blank, as it is?" I asked myself. Then I realized that my choice of and obsession with black can be traced not only to my first experience of learning to paint – with the thick black ink my teacher taught me to grind when I was seven years old – but also to my early gaming experience during the 1990s. Some of the strategy video games I played in childhood are *Civilization II* (1996), *Ages of Empire* (1997) and *StarCraft* (1998) and in games such as these, the unknown land on the imagined world-map is always displayed on the screen as black at the outset because it awaits exploration. Once the player moves into these black zones of uncharted territory, the underlying content is revealed. Here, black represents temptation, it entices players to keep playing, to turn the unknown land into organized territory through various strategies developed by

²¹⁴ Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 1999), 130-131.

human civilization and processes of modernization. I have come to consider this experience a form of reflective and experiential learning, which continues to this day in my art-making. The visual format of these games, though latent in the depth of my mind, has an impact; they show me basic human-centric ways of interaction and as such are a model of modernization. Because I was never personally in a desert, instinctively I connect my experience of exploring and modernizing a video game's virtual land to my mother's experience of the Gobi Desert in the real world. In my mind, the use of black fits with my mother's contradictory experience of the sand; it represents both alienation and familiarization and the process of taming and domesticating the primordial unknown.

As I have immersed myself in newly acquired knowledge gained through researching *shanshui*, I learned that the Chinese character for the colour black, “xuan”, also implies “the Mystery”. This adds another level of meaning to my understanding, a meaning that is hinted at in the darkness, the unknown areas depicted in video games: “xuan” indicates the primal, transcendental and ontological existence and transformation of all things in the context of Laozi's philosophy. This implication is present in the final paragraph of the first chapter of *Dao De Jing*, which can be translated as:

These two are the same,
But diverge in name as they issue forth.
Being the same they are called mysteries,
Mystery upon mystery –
The gateway of the manifold secrets.²¹⁵

To Laozi, black is the colour of the Dao, its meaning is highly significant because it is the colour that gives birth to all other colours. From my own perspective, when creating the series, “*For a*

²¹⁵ Translated by D.C. Lau from the original “此兩者，同出而異名，同謂之玄。玄之又玄，衆妙之門。” Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. D.C. Lau (Penguin Books, 1963), 57.

Moment, Silence”, I decided to combine the different symbolic meanings of the colour black. I began moving back and forth between the “no mystery, fully discovered territory” and the “unknown and untouched land.” In this manner – and as I later came to appreciate – I echoed fundamental aspects of traditional Chinese *shanshui* in a non-traditional visual paradigm, also.

Regarding the perhaps startling use of gold acrylic paint, I trace the reason for that choice back to the experience of my grandfather’s funeral. Thirteen years ago, my grandfather suffered a sudden cerebral haemorrhage and, after spending days in a coma, he passed away in hospital. During his funeral service – the first and only I have attended – I was overwhelmed by the use of the colour gold. It is part of the Chinese cultural tradition to burn paper imitations of gold after-world money during ceremonies that mark transitions – such as this funeral, the Ghost Festival and the Tomb Sweeping Day – but here, at this service, the amount was astonishing. I saw countless sheets of golden paper transformed into ashes at my grandfather’s funeral. I still remember standing in front of the crowd, watching the gold turn to black, the ash in the centre of the fire flash up, then blaze down as people cried. At that moment, I believe I felt something like my mother’s experience of the sandstorm all those years ago. I felt an irrational and uncontrollable surge of emotion from the softest spot within me. Intrigued by the deep mourning for the deceased, this emotional flux invited my programmed mind to return to the deepest subjective experience of life.

After the funeral, I realized that the golden after-world money is a contradictory symbol of mixed values and/or narratives. It is not just a part of Chinese ancestral veneration, not just a symbol of wealth and prestige, but also a way for people in contemporary China to conquer their fear of the total nothingness of death following the sense of Marxist materialism. Indeed, most Chinese people have become mired in this belief after decades of education in the Marxist

philosophy of dialectical materialism: pushed, on the one hand, by materialist atheism to fully de-supernaturalize traditional spiritual beliefs, to become increasingly secular in terms of material living, and to place the pursuit of financial success at the centre of life; yet, on the other, the animistic belief of traditional Chinese culture posits that it is impossible to be fully separated from the spiritual. Deep inside, many of us still unconsciously embrace the possibility that souls and spirits were/are around, that they invisibly inhabit the natural world.

Do I believe in the after-world? Probably not — at least, not one with concretely depicted details. Also, I highly doubt the secular currency system would actually work in the nether-realms. However, the gold after-world money is not simply an offering in the name of ancestral veneration, it is one that initiates dialogue. It creates a third space that allows for the ambiguity of our stance and for the correlation of the world as a whole. In this space, then, we don't have to tag ourselves as atheistic materialists nor as believers of superstitions. Instead, we can temporarily let go of rationality and let emotion take over completely. In this space we can allow ourselves to sense the ebb and surge of vitality. We can have a visceral response to the spiritual flux. We can dispel the absolute self to be part of the boundless energy flow of the world.

As I looked at these art works, I thought of how the gestural golden brushwork reflects the complicated feelings I experienced when I saw the after-world money burning, when I saw the gold paper turning to black and then into ashes. In this way my experience at my grandfather's funeral is similar on some level to my mother's experience of the sandstorm on the electric pole: for a brief moment, we both found ourselves in the middle of some kind of convergence between the traditional Daoist/pantheistic philosophy and the socialist atheistic materialism. In a sense, the new *shanshui* paintings I created during this research offer a form of reconciliation of these two forces. From gold to black and back, from presence to nothingness and back, beyond the reach of

words and scientific logic into words and attempted meaningful syntax and back away from words again, this series of paintings temporarily pull me out of myself, pull me out of the coordinate systems that locate me in contemporary everyday life.

In addition, as a process of re-mystifying, the black and gold colours are also applied as a form of de-materialization and de-rationalization of the personal experience of the world. In the words of Guo Xi, it is me, as a contemporary person, inventing a postmodern approach to re-discover, “the heart of forests and streams” when appreciating the spirit of *shanshui*. In this process, the painting technique and visual paradigm is hardly a traditional and authentic one. However, according to Jing Hao’s hierarchy of six principles noted in chapter one, compared with brush and ink, the energetic flow of the inner spirit and its ripple in the artists’ mind are of utmost importance. Accordingly, the loose, flowing quality of my mark making – the way I employed the gesture of my entire body when applying the black and gold paint to the canvas – became a way to reactivate nature in my own sensitivity. In this way, I re-embrace my naturalness in the process of the reconstruction of *shanshui*.

As discussed in chapter two, in traditional *shanshui* paintings, Chinese scholar artists had already experienced and reflected on the world from unconstrained and shifting perspectival points of view, which contrasts sharply with the linear perspective employed in much of the history of Western landscape paintings. In addition, not limited to the discussion of spatiality, this unique visual tradition also reveals the relationship between *shanshui* and temporality. As Chinese artist Hao Liang (1983-) states:

In Chinese painting, time tends to be mutable, hard to characterize, and a bit different in each work. Chinese painting tends not to care about the decisive moment, although its temporality also remains fundamentally linear.

Occasionally there appears a work that conveys a more complex understanding of time.²¹⁶

Hao Liang echoes this idea in his own painting series, *Eight Views of Xiaoxiang* (2014-2016). Xiaoxiang, in Hunan province, is where the Xiang River joins Dongting Lake. From the Northern Song dynasty, in the 10th century, and onwards, the traditional theme of the *Eight Views of Xiaoxiang* has inspired many artists from China, Japan and Korea.²¹⁷ In Hao Liang's contemporary re-interpretation of this painting motif – which is a series of works including eight large format (152.36 x 72.44 inches) *shanshui* paintings on silk – one piece titled, *Eight Views of Xiaoxiang – Relics* (2015-2016) [Figure 39] is particularly attributed to the artist's reflection on the concept of time. In this painting Hao Liang intentionally includes images of celestial bodies, such as the moon and saturn, into the traditional visual paradigm of *shanshui* painting. Being exposed to the temporality of the universe, this painting reflects on the unique world view of *shanshui*. As explained by the artist:

There are two kinds of relics. One of these relics, in historical Chinese texts and paintings, are actually ruins. But look at the images NASA released last year, about the most distant planet; the recent discovery of a red dwarf star in outer space. In fact, that is also a relic, but one that has just been found, whereas the relics in the *shanshui* paintings and texts have been there for long. These two kinds of relics seem like the past and the present, but they both belong to the sequence of time. [...] Here [in my painting] the recent scientific discoveries have been surrounded by the cultural and historical relics. It is the philosophy of *shanshui* that has conversely besieged the infinite universe.²¹⁸

In this sense, Hao challenges the linear perception of time, as well as the authoritative sense of scientific discovery in a modern sense. Hao Liang explains further:

While the scientific revolution was gradually opening the gate to the modern age,

²¹⁶ “Hao Liang: Portraits and Wonders,” Gagosian Quarterly, accessed July 18, 2021, <https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2018/05/21/hao-liang-portraits-and-wonders/>.

²¹⁷ These artists include Dong Yuan (934-962), Song Di (1015–1080), Muqi (d. 1281), An Gyeon (b. 1400), Sōami (d. 1525), Wen Weiming (1470–1559), and Kano Shōei (1519–1592).

²¹⁸ “Hao Liang - about ‘Eight Views of Xiaoxiang – Relics,’” Vimeo, accessed 18 July, 2021, <https://vimeo.com/264614449>.

we were also losing the ability to perceive the world with our body. Conventions were established. It is the greatest tragedy of man's individual existence. [...] Luckily, I have ink and wash painting, a non-scientific medium, to express my emotions. It brings me closer to the ancients, and it tempers my mortal body. Because of my interest and my profession I have more questions about science and modernity.²¹⁹

Like Hao Liang, the flowing and indeterminate sense of temporality and the primordial perception of the world became another inspiration for my painting series, *For a Moment, Silence*. However, unlike Hao Liang, my engagement with the spirit of *shanshui* is a more personal/phenomenological approach because of my interaction with my mother's memory. This cross-generational interaction, being reflected in my painting, disrupts and challenges the linear quality of how we perceive time.

Through this interaction, the fragments of my mother's memory can be preserved in a different, intersubjective form. Through the complicated process of remembering, mediation, reconstruction and individualization, the memory passed on to me is, of course, no longer the original and authentic memory that belonged solely to my mother. Rather, it becomes a cultural collective memory²²⁰ that, "link[s] us to a history, a heritage, a collective past."²²¹ Being part of this collective memory but not a participant in the event, I trace and reinterpret the fragmented memories mediated by the narrative of my mother in light of my own understanding and perception of the world. This is a symbolic communication across generations and serves to creatively explore the intersection and reconnection of the personal and the national in the context of collective memory.

As a method of intergenerational transmission of collective memory, the direct face-to-face conversation with my mother offers me the opportunity to delve deeper into her restrained

²¹⁹ Hao Liang in conversation with Chinese art critic and curator, Hu Fang, *Hao Liang: Secluded and Infinite Places* (The Pavilion, 2014), 90-91.

²²⁰ With no intention to delve too deeply into the specialized definition of collective memory from the perspective of the social sciences, I use this term to refer to a multi-faceted, collaborative and dynamic portrayal of past events.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

emotions within the historical context of collectivity. This sharing of memory is not about how accurate the details of that memory should be, rather, it is about a co-construction of a narrative based on shared understanding. Accordingly, the collective memory transforms — or, should I say, it is always in flux — when blended with my own perceptions and reflections of the same history. Through this fluid dynamic process of memory transmission, “we turn our memories of experiences into a subjective understanding and evaluation of the world and ourselves.”²²² Similarly, in this painting series, I have no intention of restoring a specific historical event — a precise and decisive moment in history. Instead, I have fabricated a fictional and ambiguous scene of a colony through shared yet fragmented memory.

In *Missing* (2016) [Figure 40], as part of *For a Moment, Silence*, I paint an imaginary panoramic *shanshui* painting on five separated panels of stretched canvas; each measures 48 × 36 inches and installed the series measures 48 × 192 inches. The choice of a series of panels instead of one large stretched canvas is deliberate for it provides a means to deconstruct the authority of a unilateral narrative. The content of each panel is logically connected but when displayed the space in between the pieces suggests the discontinuity, instability and unlikelihood of the narrative in the painting. In this sense, temporality cannot be precisely and objectively perceived. The linearity of history is blurred because the co-shared imaginary space depicted in this multi-panel painting is inherently incoherent and inconsistent. Neither do the panels in this painting follow a natural progression of events because the two visions/perspectives/narratives overlap and collide in a fragmented way. A sense of abstraction and vagueness pervades the work. In this way, the fact/past/historical is inextricably intermingled with fiction/present/personal, until they become inseparable. In this way, by taking the place of my mother, I can envision the past and have a

²²² Sven Bernecker and Kourken Michaelian, *The Routledge handbook of philosophy of memory* (London: Routledge, 2017), 269.

conversation with Mao's influence in the 1980s.

During the Mao years and following decades, high socialist ideals asserted that we must gain the upper hand in the fight against nature, no matter what the sacrifice; through the strength of the collective, we would prevail against the hostile onslaught of the desert. The panoramic painting series, *Missing*, highlights the confrontational human-nature relationship endorsed by Mao's ideology. Unnatural geometrical shapes are intentionally depicted as mining pits and waste disposal basins of an unknown colony. Epitomizing my mother's narrative of her time in the Gobi Desert, the large-scale human intervention and subsequent alteration of the geographical features represents the collective power of the human being. The free flow of the sand is consistently confronted with and interrupted by human made structures, including the electric poles scattering around the vast imagined world, as indicators of human civilization and a vanished world revived in my mother's memory.

At the time my mother was in the Gobi Desert, official documentaries and news reports portrayed the desert as a ruthless enemy. The sand was seen as just a substance, just meaningless particles of dust, there to be conquered. Following this attitude, in contrast to the untamed and unbounded sand dunes in the background, I paint an outpost-like monumental structure in the foreground as a symbol of the collective power of human beings, [Figure 40, Panel 2]. Surrounded by endless desert, this structure is the anchor for human activities and explorations out in the perilous land of unknown and unknowable nature. The function of this building is difficult to discern as it is painted with a sense of ambiguity: it could be an unfinished high-rise apartment of a new colonial force; it could be a military base in the middle of nowhere; or, it could be a railway bridge pillar erected on the surface of the floating sand. Despite the variety of possible interpretations, this artificial structure works as a visual symbol of unity and cohesion of human

forces. According to my mother, countless engineering soldiers wholeheartedly dedicated their sweat, blood and youth to the construction of the Qinghai-Tibet railway. To my mind, their collective spirit of sacrifice endows the railway with a sense of monumentality. For me in this work, this monumentality references the history of modern China, and even further, back to that of the Soviet Constructivism of the early 20th century.

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution is now years in the past, yet even so, everyday life and work in China continues to be influenced by Mao's thoughts and the theory of Marxism-Leninism. During the early 1980s, China was still in its late stage of a Totalitarian regime with only gradual, slight shifts toward a sense of centralized democracy. There was no room for dissidence in the army of my parent's time. As part of the working class, they and many others worked to create a utopian ideal that was based on the ideals of communism. Everyone was required to constructively contribute to the socialist revolution and this high degree of unity of thought and action brought forth the miracle of economic development and the wonder of new, Communist-driven infrastructure. However, the price was high. Both the philosophy of Mao and the Marxist-Leninist worldview insist on redefining the universe in physical terms only; religiosity and spirituality are an anathema as existence is built up of atoms, and physical materials only.

Similarly, according to the Maoist interpretation of materialism, the traditional Chinese perception and appreciation of art became untenable. Art that took us beyond the physical world toward the fleeting sparks that stir our innermost spirit was not legitimated. Instead, art was to serve a social and nationalist purpose. This artistic ideal — which was embraced by Mao and greatly impacted the formation of the communist perception of art — originated in Russia in 1913, with the Constructivist movement. In order that art could fulfill these utopian ambitions and reflect the glory of this new mass produced, futuristic world a core value of Constructivism was to take

art into the domain of construction.

Constructivist artists did not limit themselves to painting and sculpture, they even designed avant-garde architectural projects, many of which are unfinished. One of the most famous is the project for the Monument to the Third International, also known as Tatlin's Tower [Figure 41]. Although never built, the plan was to erect this monumental structure in Russia as a human-made miracle after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, to mark the success of a revolution and usher in a new, utopian way of life. Utopia is of course an unobtainable aspiration, and its architecture should be so, too. Tatlin's triumphant commemoration is a dynamic structure made from a twin helix that was to be built from spiraling iron, glass and steel. According to Tatlin:

[...] the constructivist object must exist as a necessary form in relation to two poles of being: the physical materials which are its substance and for which no other form could be appropriate, on the one hand, and, on the other, the social context within which it serves a need or function. [...The necessary form] was to express truth to materials, mankind's authentic creative will, the universal laws of human experience, and a social necessity.²²³

Following this principle, art and architecture would be guided in the direction of collectivity. The praiseworthy modern age should not be represented through the artwork made by an individual but through the miracle of a collective power.

In this view, Tatlin's Tower is not just an architectural miracle but a symbol of the unification of all human beings under the value of communism. Therefore, I borrow the metaphor and symbolism of Tatlin's Tower and apply this to my painting. I create my fictional monument as a symbol of this idealization of collective power and the obsession with the processes of labour and production in my parents' age. It is the evidence of the miracle of collective force, the force that has driven the fast-paced development of infrastructures in China for decades. Simultaneously, it gives visual form to the place that holds my parents' generation's collective memory of history.

²²³ Margit Rowell, "Vladimir Tatlin: Form/Faktura," *Soviet Revolutionary Culture* 7, (winter, 1978):85.

In this place, I meet my mother and listen to her voice. In this place, I experience my mother's narrative and empathize with her. In this place, I mourn my mother's lost self in the past.

As a Marxist manifesto, my monument makes clear the divisions of self and the world, subject and object, and materiality and incorporeality. However, this human-nature division from the materialist view doesn't offer an explanation as to the correlation of the spiritual world — the cosmos. This conflict between my mother's Marxist materialist ideological view and her fleeting experience of the primordial in the sandstorm finds resolution in the painting titled, *Fleeting*, also from 2016 [Figure 42]. In contrast to *Missing*, here I depict a more primordial world in response to the idea of ontological humility in the spirit of *shanshui*. In this painting, I choose to paint directly onto an unstretched raw canvas with the size of 72 by 160 inches to symbolically respond to the holistic aspect of traditional Chinese philosophy and the brushstrokes become more expressive as a means to blend matter with energy. In this way, the boundaries between things become blurred in a more primordial world. Matter and energy are intermingled in the rhythm of nature. Forms and shapes are formless and shapeless, being unstable, emerging and disappearing, and transforming into other forms and shapes endlessly. It is not a landscape segment that is sliced from a particular time and certain physical location; instead, here we find a murky and chaotic world of wandering when fully depicted scenery was still in its infancy, before the punchy touch of human beings.

After I had completed the painting, *Fleeting*, my ongoing research brought me an encounter with a similar spirit in the classical Chinese text, *Chi Bi Fu (First Prose Poem on the Red Cliff)* by Song literatus Su Shi. This prose tells of a romantic boat ride along the Yangtze River that the poet took with his friends. While they sailed their small boat along the river in the moonlight, Su Shi became inspired by the grandeur of the river and the magnificent red cliffs. In

awe of the vastness of the sky and open space of water, Su Shi described the temporality of life and human existence as being tiny specks in an ever-changing universe. He writes: “We are like mayflies wandering in this terrestrial world and we are as infinitesimal as pieces of millet drifting in the ocean.”²²⁴ Su Shi’s words present the floating sense of our fleeting existence as compared to the vast eternal universe. In this sense, the solidification of our thoughts in words becomes unnecessary. Following the grand cosmic vision of Su Shi’s prose, in this painting I focus on the contrast of the vastness and boundlessness of the universe and the insignificance and transience of the individual in this painting. Two small and out-of-focus figures, discernible on the right, are depicted in trivial forms in inverse proportion to the mountain [Figure 42b]. They are nameless, genderless, ageless and unattached to any socially constructed identities. I allow these miniature figures to be surrounded and dwarfed by the bold sections of the natural splendours, intending in honour Su Shi’s words and to capture the floating sense of our fleeting existence as compared to a universe that is vast and eternal.

In the exhibition, *For a Moment, Silence*, I curated and carefully choreographed a phenomenological viewing experience within the gallery as a way to arouse the bodily and emotional resonance of the audience. By placing the painting *Dwelling* and my mother’s photo next to each other on the wall near the entrance of the gallery space [Figure 26], I invited the viewer to begin their experience of the exhibition with the consideration of my mother’s memory as displayed through the reality of a fragmented photograph. The viewer could then move on to view the imaginary landscape painting juxtaposed with this photo. In this process the viewers’ sensations are challenged and disoriented with the muddling of the boundaries of what they might see as the real and the fictional. As the artistic mediator in this process, my goal was to stress the

²²⁴ Translated by Yang Liu from the original “寄蜉蝣于天地，渺沧海之一粟。”

individual's participation, perception and emotion in relation to history and to the world. As discussed earlier, I was interested in the way my mother experienced the desert in a phenomenological and mysterious way. She told me that sometimes when she woke up early while the others still lay dreaming, she felt like the sand was quietly devouring the tent. She feared they would all lose their breath, be buried in the sand, and eventually become part of the desert. When my mother recited her story from a private and domestic perspective, I felt her strong emotions. She offered me an individual reflection full of complicated sentiments, which are difficult to retrieve from the narratives of history documented in / by textbooks, radio, TV news and other political materials. In this exhibition, I aimed to restore my experience of this cross-generational conversation for the viewer. By juxtaposing my mother's photo and my painting, *Dwelling*, I re-mystified the viewing experience from historical to individual, from real to fictional and challenged expectations that things must always be considered from a rationalized point of view.

To contrast and set up dialogue between my mother's photo and the painting *Dwelling*, I installed the panoramic painting series, *Missing*, on the opposite wall of the gallery space. Spot lit from the ceiling to replicate the bright overhead lighting found on construction sites and installed slightly above normal viewing height, this group of work took on an eerie sense of artificiality. While viewing, the act of looking up endowed this grouping with a sense of monumentality, echoing my reflective thinking of modernization and collectivity with reference to my mother's story and the history of modern China. Besides *Dwelling* and *Missing*, the painting, *Fleeting* was installed on the main wall facing the entrance of the gallery. Again, lighting was carefully considered. In contrast to *Missing*, which was brightly spot lit from above, I decided to fully expose *Fleeting* to the vagaries of the natural light as it flooded through the narrow glass roof above the main wall. By inviting the outside into this human-constructed and institutionalized space, I

encouraged viewers to reflect on the boundaries between self and nature. At different times of day and as the natural light changed with the weather, the gold in *Fleeting* became an active participant. Interacting with the light, the gold paint shimmered and glowed, it constantly shifted and altered the viewer's perception and sensation of the sand dunes. When combined and installed, all is in motion and the form of the dunes are in continual change and flux. The gold serves as a light reflector and continuously returns this reflected light to observers as they move throughout the gallery. In addition, the viewer's own movements caused the experience of the colours to change. The gold paint reflects what is in the room, it takes on subtle tones of clothing, changes from gold to black, back to gold again according to the light conditions and also as the viewer walks by, thus, the viewer becomes disorientated in the inversion of dark and light.

To fully experience this exhibition as a whole, visitors find it necessary to destabilize their usual viewing positions and to rely on their bodies as sites of sensory experience; here, the theory of phenomenology offers a meaningful approach to understanding, for it, "entails an analysis of how an artwork's meaning presents itself through the spectator's field of perception."²²⁵ As a philosophy that embraces the idea of the body within the world and the world within the body, phenomenology offers a philosophical model for how to overcome the boundary between the body and the natural world and create a blended engagement of the two.

In the end, in this art-based research, *shanshui* also works as a tool to eliminate individual boundaries, helping me to remove the tags I usually put on my mother and myself before any communication. It helps me to not see my mother as only a mother, a communist soldier, a labourer, but as herself, as an individual, as a primordial human being with no shells, to listen to her and to feel what she feels. The spirit of *shanshui* towards the world contrasts with the belief in human

²²⁵ Amanda Boetzkes, "Phenomenology and Interpretation Beyond the Flesh," *Art History* 32.4 (September 2009): 690.

exceptionalism promulgated, historically, by the Western tradition and during the Mao years in mainland China; the emphasis on the boundaries and differences between human beings and non-human beings is replaced by the fluidity in cross-boundary communications. From this view, which is based on the existence of spiritual connections, the self becomes relational and interdependent.

In these boundaryless communications, I can temporarily reside in my mother's vision and mindset, can try to understand the world from her perspective. In this fictional and mediated world, I create this space for: the convergence of my mother's experience in the Gobi Desert in her memory haze; my own experience of hearing about the Gobi Desert but never having been there; my own vision of *shanshui* in my reflection of my mother's story; the interplay of personal feelings and individual narrative; and, my artistic refabrication of a collective memory. Echoing the spirit of *shanshui* – which at the end of this research I have a far deeper understanding of and appreciation for – I see this convergence as a path toward the Daoist sense of continuity, wholeness, and dynamism, which reside in all modalities of beings.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

The rediscovery and reclamation of *shanshui* by Chinese artists and scholars over the past seven decades, illustrates that artists are still profoundly aware of and intend to distill the inherent philosophical connotations from this traditional painting genre. The connection between Chinese artists and the unique modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging reflected in *shanshui* has neither been erased by the adoption of Western art nor the domination of Maoist art/cultural policies. In essence, the recontextualization and reconstruction of traditional *shanshui* painting demonstrates that contemporary Chinese art is neither a Western copy nor a close derivation, formed under the influence of imported ideas that are rooted in modernism and postmodernism. As argued above, it is an intra-dependent hybrid phenomenon that has developed within its own constructed logic. Freelance curator and art historian, Gerardo Mosquera (1945-) writes: “[...] cultures should not lock themselves in isolating traditions if they want to take part in today’s dynamism, only offering solutions to their own problems. Instead, what should be done is to make traditions work within the new epoch.”²²⁶

In accordance with Gerardo’s view, Chinese curator Lyu Peng (1956-) observes that contemporary Chinese artists are voluntarily searching for, “resources in Chinese traditional culture, even though they adopted their own contemporary perspective.”²²⁷ Therefore, I suggest that any analysis of contemporary artworks that critique and further the concept of *shanshui* must include a consideration of the unique traditional Chinese philosophy. The recontextualization of *shanshui* painting’s iconography is a deconstruction of its symbolic meaning and, in the context of

²²⁶ Gerardo Mosquera, “The Marco Polo Syndrome: Some Problems around Art and Euro-centrism,” in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, eds. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 316.

²²⁷ Lyu Peng, *Fragmented Reality: Contemporary Art in 21st Century China* (Milan: Charta, 2012), 411.

contemporary art, recontextualization is a way to distill *shanshui* to its very essence, its holistic, all-encompassing and transcendental nature.

The re-articulation of the traditional Chinese philosophy/world view from contemporary perspectives is the major concept central to the recontextualization of *shanshui* and this idea offers new visual paradigms that appropriate the images of traditional *shanshui* painting via different artistic approaches. According to Sinologist Elena Macrì, the legacy of traditional *shanshui* is: “always present, although it appears reinvented in a variety of forms, altered in its symbolic and aesthetic values and reshaped according to current needs[.]”²²⁸ With the common ground between Daoist and postmodernist thought in mind, consider the installation called, *Landscape Study* (2003) [Figure 43], by Lyu Shengzhong (1952-). This installation is a selection of five thousand books on a variety of subjects from the fields of science and the humanities. In this specially designed interactive space, Lyu covered and painted the book spines, then arranged them on a bookshelf to create an unstable array of elements to mimic a traditional *shanshui* painting by Five dynasties artist, Dong Yuan (934-962). By creatively reproducing this visual pattern on the spines – via the help of non-traditional digital input and output – Lyu expresses the idea that *shanshui* is not about a particular scene that only belongs to the literati class of the past; instead, it is a visual cue leading to a state of mind, which is inclusive of the world, the time, the cosmos and all civilization.

When viewers walk into this study room, their actions – the pulling out, viewing and replacing of books – contribute to the recontextualization of *shanshui* as per the intention of the artist. It is not required to return the book to its original place on the shelf and also, it is impossible to do so because these books have no call number. This huge, multipart *shanshui* work, painted on thousands of book spines, is complete when installed initially but is gradually and completely

²²⁸ 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*, Vol.16 No.1 (2017): 33.

deconstructed by viewers over time. The deconstructive approach successfully breaks down the oversimplified notion that the iconography of *shanshui* is a fixed cultural symbol. Lyu's work questions our preconceptions, it physically demonstrates that *shanshui* can be reactivated and extended in contemporary art practice; in fact, either intentionally or unintentionally, we are all taking part in the de- and reconstruction of its meaning through time and the interplay of the individual and collective experience.

Owing to the interdisciplinary nature of my dissertation, I have explored the complexity of *shanshui* both as an art genre and as modality of thinking, perceiving, and engaging and making. In so doing, I have actively and creatively engaged with the spirit of *shanshui* as both a scholar and an artist. First, I offered an historical review of the concepts of *fengjing*, *shanshui* and landscape, as they developed and differed depending on cultural context. I traced the early emergence and the philosophical trajectory of Chinese *shanshui* painting and analysed its developing course, demonstrating that even when taken beyond the discussion of its traditional visual paradigm it is equally valued today as a vehicle for a unique Chinese philosophical perspective.

In the Mao era, I discussed how traditional Chinese landscape painting became a symbol of feudalistic elitism and was consequently dismissed as dated. During this period, traditionalist artists were required to act in alignment with the propagandistic needs of the communist ideology. However, despite the enormous political pressure of Mao's unassailable art policy, certain artists strove to preserve the traditional cultural values of *shanshui* covertly, through their modified paintings. Then, I demonstrated how artists from the Reform era explored new possibilities of *shanshui* painting – using both colour and abstraction – and revived the long-lost humanist spirit of the Cultural Revolution as a result.

In the more open, social cultural environment of this post-Mao era, I considered contemporary artists who embraced and adapted the concepts of Western postmodernism as well. By adopting postmodern artistic approaches, such as appropriation, deconstruction and reconstruction, I illustrated how these artists played with the traditional visual paradigms of *shanshui* to find new possibilities. Some Chinese artists adopted nonexhibition and somatic approaches; they separated themselves from the established institutional system to reconnect with the complex interaction of the myriad cosmic processes in the continuity of being in *shanshui*. I argue that the recontextualization and reframing of traditional *shanshui* paintings' iconography can be seen as an effort to distill the spirit of *shanshui* to its very essence.

Lastly, under the framework of art-based research, as a visual form of self-reflection, social commentary and philosophical musings, my own body of artwork was introduced as a case-study to synthesize the previous academic discussion. I placed my own art within the context of *shanshui*, explored traditional Chinese cultural ideals and philosophies, and engaged in conversation with other *shanshui* paintings and artists across time and space. As a process of self-knowing and self-realizing, I drew inspiration from my personal experience of growing up in contemporary China, expressing among other things my concerns regarding specific issues in a world of increasing urbanization. All of this provides the context for my painting series, *For a Moment, Silence*, which was painted and installed as an exhibition as a visual, non-verbal response to the research presented here in written form and is based on the re-interpretation of my mothers' fragmented memory of the Gobi Desert. In the process of making these paintings that depict an imaginary landscape and as an interaction with collective memory, I interweave my personal re-interpretation of my mother's experience with my own understanding of *shanshui*. Further, when exhibiting this group of works in a gallery space, and with careful attention to the specifics of the

installation, such as lighting, viewing height and position, I offered the audience a phenomenological viewing experience that echoed my academic research; *shanshui* is more than a genre it is a mode of being in the world.

In the first chapter I set out several research questions as follows: How did artists in the past seven decades conform with, and react to the multi-faceted understandings of *shanshui* in their art practice? How might the artistic rediscovery and expansion of *shanshui* in a contemporary world be described and analyzed? How can we today, as individuals, make use of *shanshui* to eliminate self-boundaries in our interactions with the world; and, on the collective level, how can *shanshui* inspire the opening up of institutionalized categories, methods and ways of knowing? After the landscape I have traveled in this dissertation, I will develop and provide my answers from the perspective of both an academic researcher and a contemporary artist.

In this open-ended research of *shanshui*, one of the findings that became very clear was the level of passion and commitment exhibited by Chinese artists from different generations of the last seven decades. Indeed, their efforts have contributed not only to the continuation but to an expansion of *shanshui*. Using a variety of strategies, which differed according to the political climate of their times, these met with varying degrees of success. So, to clarify: artists in the Mao years, such as Li Keran, Qian Songyan, Wu Hufan and Shi Lu, kept the spirit of *shanshui* in their visual modifications as a means to conciliate the political pressure from the CCP; in the Reform era, by experimenting with colour and abstraction in their practice, artists such as Wu Guanzhong, Jia Youfu, Qiu Deshu and Qiu Shihua redirected the viewers' attention back to the spiritual realm of *shanshui* to offset the influence from Mao's ideology; and, after the launch of the Open Door policy in 1978, contemporary artists, such as Xu Bing, Zhan Wang and Cai Guo-Qiang, started to choose from a wide variety of creative methods, applying aesthetics and techniques more freely

than ever before, in order to evoke the spirit of *shanshui* through deconstruction and aesthetic hybridity in the contemporary era.

Step by step, the exploration and re-discovery of *shanshui* in contemporary Chinese art has now become diverse. As discussed in the review of *shanshui*-based exhibitions held during the past decade, we see that *shanshui* is experiencing a dramatic transformation because nowadays, artists in China are freer than before to engage in open dialogue with both traditional, historical and postmodern concepts. Postmodernism offers Chinese artists new methods and visual languages that enable them to reflect their unique cultural heritage in independent and distinctive ways. Based on their own knowledge, experiences, and interpretations, contemporary Chinese artists explore *shanshui* as a modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging both within and without the context of the art institution. Moreover, the use of various deconstructive methods has allowed contemporary Chinese artists to successfully overcome the constraints of the visual paradigm of traditional *shanshui* painting. Following different paths and possibilities these contemporary Chinese artists and their art production have added rather than subtracted from the conversation; the word *shanshui* now expresses the confluence of postmodernism and traditional Chinese philosophy in visual form.

To answer the last question, regarding the “opening up” of the institution, I drew on the strength of art-based research and entered the role of the artist to better explore the spirit of *shanshui*. More than a method of self-expression, through this method of reflective and experiential learning, my interaction with *shanshui* has become a step-by-step process to understanding my own relationship with nature, history, culture, tradition, ideology, philosophy, memory, family and identity. In addition, *shanshui* opens a door for me to interweave these complicated subjects, to pull them together and understand these relationships as an organic whole;

it gives me a way to connect the dots between me and the vast world in a self-reflective manner. Following the idea of eliminating self-boundaries, the core painting series of my art-based research, *For a Moment, Silence*, became a portal that allowed me to enter the inner world of my mother, to interact with her conflicted view of the world in the 1980s and to ponder the newly gained insights from this cross-generational experience of *shanshui*. After examining the visual, cultural and philosophical dimensions of *shanshui* in the process of my art-based research, I have come to recognize the openness and continuation of the spirit of *shanshui* in contemporary life and my own art practice. Following my artistic exploration of *shanshui* as a form of reflective and experiential learning, I suggest the spirit of *shanshui* can help us to re-examine the socially constructed and categorical distinctions rooted in fixed institutionalized narratives. On the collective level, the appreciation of *shanshui* — in ways of both viewing and making and living — is the process of dissolving narratives that distinguish the subject from the object, the us from the other, in order to respect the spontaneous ‘self-so/as-it-isness’ of all beings, to unify and become a being of a myriad of things.

As I reflect on this intellectual and artistic enquiry into *shanshui*, I suggest that it can stand as both a unique and universal aesthetics/art theory in the context of globalized contemporary art. The assertion of a globalized *shanshui* aesthetic is not a desire to return national superiority to China but to separate *shanshui* from its social and historical context so as to offer an alternative viable theoretical framework to stimulate and critique art production worldwide. If modernity as articulated by John Clark is, “transferable and reproducible beyond Euro-America,”²²⁹ then similarly, I argue, that the reverse is true, also: the *shanshui* spirit is transferable and reproducible beyond China.

²²⁹ John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), 11-25.

Now, after the adoption of modernity in China and other non-Western countries over the past hundred years, it is time to discuss the possibility of transferring and reproducing traditional Chinese philosophy globally. To succeed in this regard, it is important for spectators, critics and curators alike, to actively detach Chinese aesthetics from its own context and apply it through a viewer's interpretation of a potential artwork. If in today's global art world, it is viable for contemporary artists anywhere to borrow visual materials from other cultures, including non-Western cultures, I believe it is equally valid to apply different philosophies and methodological frameworks to analyze these works. Moreover, upholding pluralistic methodologies in the practice of art critique is an effective way to expand our understanding and appreciation of all contemporary art. It is imperative for global contemporary art to both be able to freely draw from the richness of the conceptual heritage of non-Western cultures and, also, to have it considered without a filter that is biased towards Western art. For the audience and consumer of all contemporary art, using ideas founded in non-Western cultures and traditions – such as self-dissolution and *shanshui* – would prevent interpretations that are limited and sometimes problematic. Lotte Philipsen explains:

the concept of modernity in art is in itself understood as synonymous with Western modernity in art, which results in a situation where the prevailing art institutions are unable to recognize modernity with a different face. [...] What stands out is the institutional staging of Western modernism as one firm unity, which is able to actively recognize, or approve, passive and objectified non-Western cultures.²³⁰

Thus, we see that when cultural differences are only understood in a Western oriented prototypical way – which poses a potential threat of cultural inequality between West and non-West – the enclosed monolithic structure hinders the comprehensive understanding of contemporary art. However, when the value of *shanshui* is included and applied as a generalized art critique

²³⁰ Lotte Philipsen, *Globalizing Contemporary Art* (Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 2010), 46.

methodology, this Western oriented one-directional interpretation can be re-adjusted, re-aligned: the spirit of *shanshui* plays an important role in showing the way to overcome dualism of mind and body, self and other and, furthermore, in the process *shanhui* offers an alternative way of creating, knowing and being in the world.

Postscript

When I began writing this dissertation, my aim was to rediscover and reemphasize the importance of the *shanshui* spirit in the context of modern and contemporary China, as it has been running through the whole history of Chinese cultural tradition. In the process, I encountered a sense of resistance from within myself when attempting to convey Chinese ideas into a different language and related cultural framework. It redirects me into the logic of the existence of Being.

Using the words of Francois Jullien (1951-):

It is [something] we constantly experience, leading us back to the indefiniteness of the foundational, but which science and philosophy left behind early on in their haste to treat things logically, to constitute a “this” that could be manipulated by thought, with the aim of replying to the question: “What is it?” [...] the unobjectifiable “fount of things”, which, once abandoned by science and philosophy, is so difficult to retrieve in the nets of the great European language.²³¹

How to articulate Daoist concepts and other aspects of Chinese philosophy in another language was problematic. However, later I began to consider this linguistic and philosophical divergence not as a hindrance but as an opportunity to explore the possible universality and intertextuality of the unique ethos of Chinese philosophy within the cultural context of world globalization. As a contribution to modern and contemporary art and, more importantly, to the philosophical discussion of ontology, the spirit of *shanshui* offers an alternative way of thinking, perceiving and engaging that discards the linguistic foundation of English, of exposition and challenges the concrete perception of the world based on empirical knowledge. In addition, the principles of *shanshui* eliminate the perceptible boundaries between human and nature and inspire us to see the value of inexhaustible spontaneity once again.

Here, I am not advocating against the importance of logic and science in the history of

²³¹ Francois Jullien, *The Great Image Has No Form, or On the Nonobject through Painting* (Chicago, III; London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), XV.

humankind. I only intend to express what I found immensely rewarding during the process of my academic research and artistic reflection, which is to temporarily put aside the representation of facts and assertions and to let go of the need to sculpt them into something concrete and immovable. I have delved into the world of *shanshui* first as a scholar, I communicated with it as an artist and then synthesized both in this dissertation. Now, at the end of this long journey, I try to shed these institutionalized identities and see myself just as a being, emerging, growing, perceiving and exploring following the spirit of *shanshui*. I believe the cross-cultural conflux in *shanshui* has far broader applications than art-making and art historical scholarship.

In the spring of 2020, my grandmother passed away after ten years of suffering with Alzheimer's disease. In the context of the sudden and unexpected COVID-19 pandemic, no funeral was held. In addition, the strict moratorium on international air traffic left me no opportunity to return to China, to reunite with my family and see my grandmother for one last time. My mother sent me a digital photo [Figure 44] that she found while she was packing up my grandmother's belongings. She asked me if I still remembered this miniature moss rockery my grandmother had placed in the corridor of her apartment. "Yes," I answered. From fragmented memories I recollected a scene of grandmother watering the moss on these rocks. Now, I understand that she saw the rockery as a metaphor for nature, the cosmos and the myriad things. The daily routine of watering became ritualized and confirmed her relationship with nature in an urban context. This daily routine, then, is also a Daoist way of internal cultivation. Despite aesthetic considerations, I believe the spirit of *shanshui* plays a subtle role in the daily lives of many Chinese people. I believe this spirit has an even greater role to play as we confront the most daunting challenges of our time.

In the two months following my grandmother's death, with the increasing global political tension, my mother started to call me every day to express her concerns about my safety in a

Western country. My mother's anguish about the present moment in some way echoed her anxiety during her stay in the sands of Qinghai. In conclusion, I would like to end my reflections on *shanshui* as it began in this dissertation and revisit the words of my mother. When I presented the finished paintings of the series, *For a Moment, Silence* to her in 2016, she fell silent. She stared at these paintings that were based on her fragmented memories for a long time. Then, with a subtle shake of her head, she said:

It is like one of my distant dreams...
I dreamed of the sand once,
I was sinking deeper and deeper into it.

Shanshui as a modality of thinking, perceiving and engaging tells us one thing: Nothing can exist apart from change and nothing can be immune to change over time. As this dissertation comes to an end and as a gesture to embrace the inconclusiveness in *shanshui*, which is also openness, I wish to let go of the academic analysis of various philosophies, the carefully worded descriptions of abstract terms and detailed information regarding history and names. Instead, it is time to plunge the mind into the world of flux and to experience the world, not in the asphyxiation of my mother's feeling of sinking into the sand, but instead by embracing full, deep respiration.

Illustrations

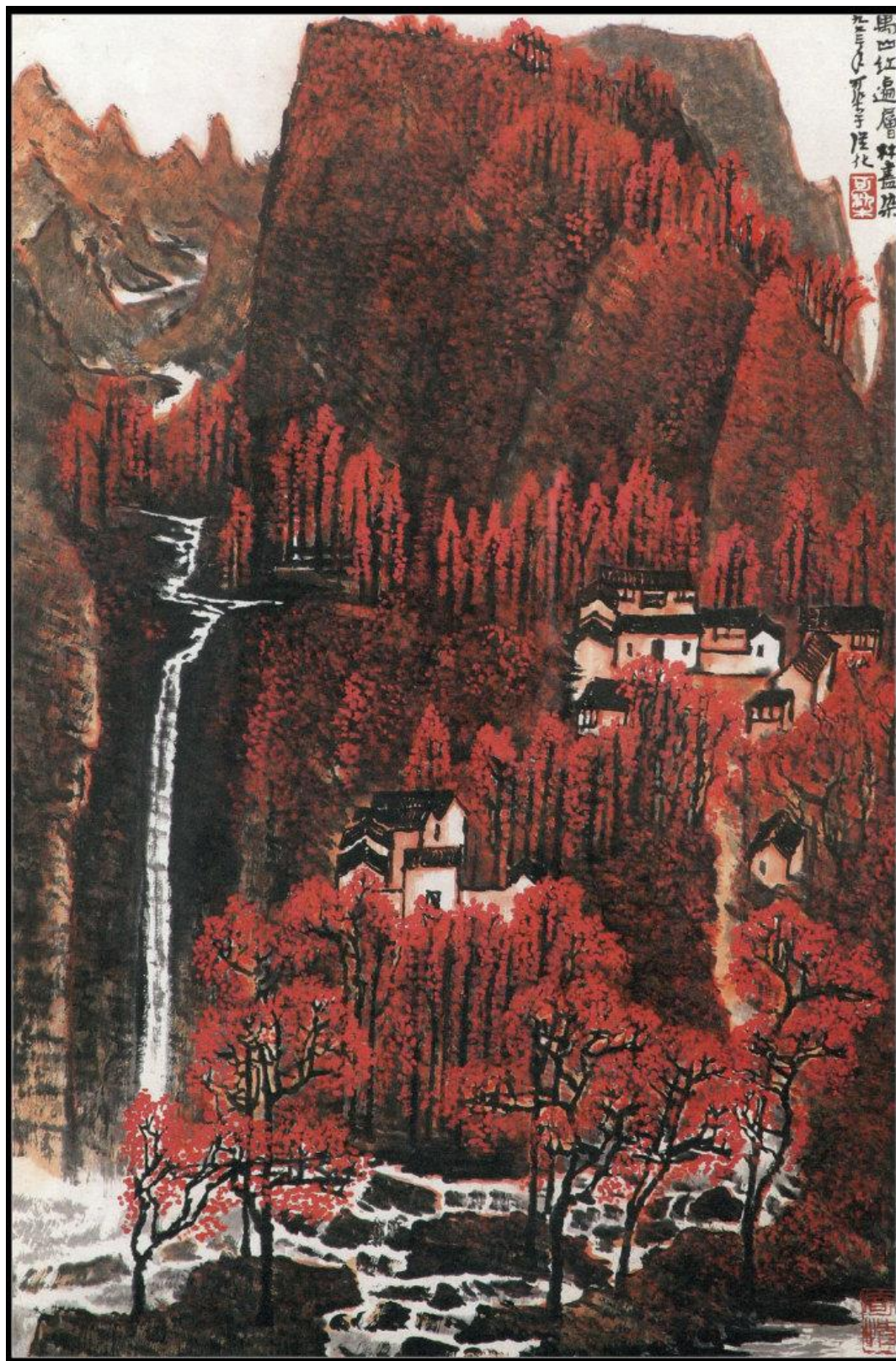
[Figure 1] My mother testing the communication circuits on a telegraph pole.



[Figure 2] Curated by Kong Bu, Zhang Huan and Zuoxiaozuzhou, photographed by Lyu Nan, *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain*, 1995, Chromogenic print (c-print), 120 x 160 cm.



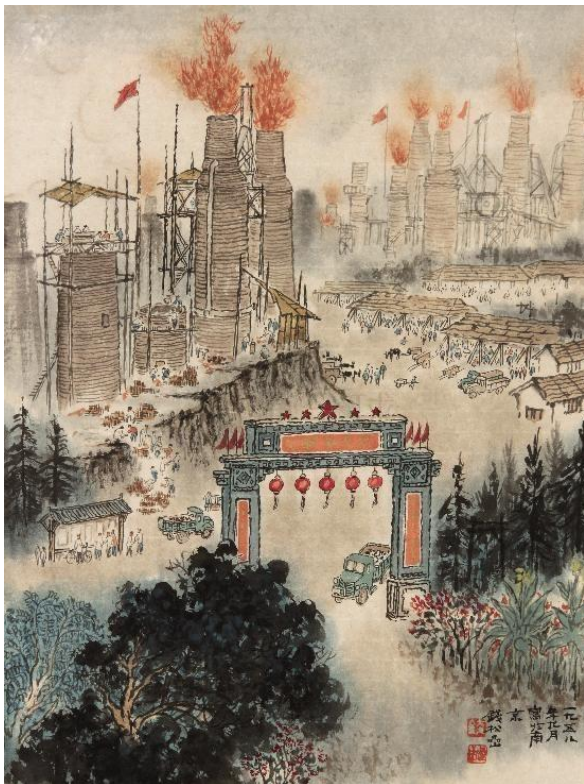
[Figure 3] Li Keran, *Ten Thousand Mountains Bathed in Red*, 1964, ink and colour on paper, 79.5cm by 49cm.



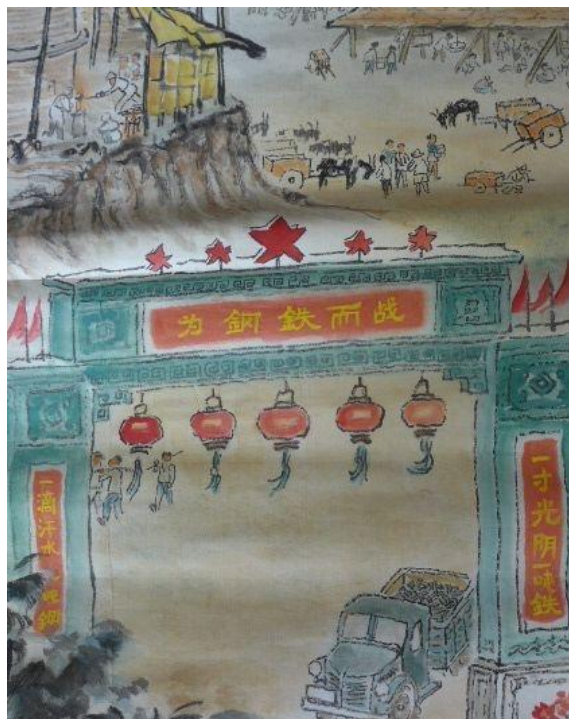
[Figure 4] Qian Songyan, *Fields in Changshu*, ink and colour on paper, 1963, 67cm by 46cm.



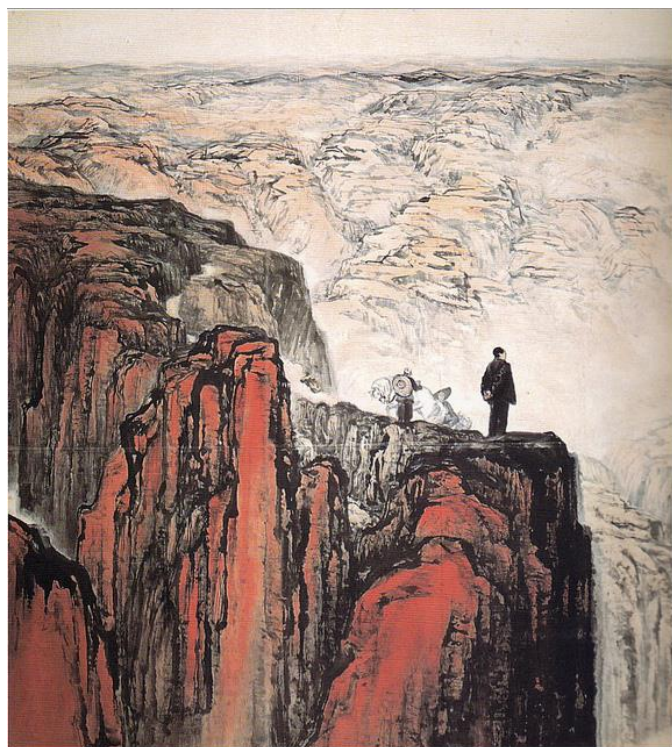
[Figure 5] Qian Songyan, *Earthen Blast Furnaces*, 1958, ink and colour on paper.



[Figure 6] Qian Songyan, *Earthen Blast Furnaces*, wash and ink painting (detail).



[Figure 7] Shi Lu, *Fighting in Northern Shanxi*, 1959, ink and colour, 233cm by 216cm. Image Courtesy of National Art Museum of China, Beijing.



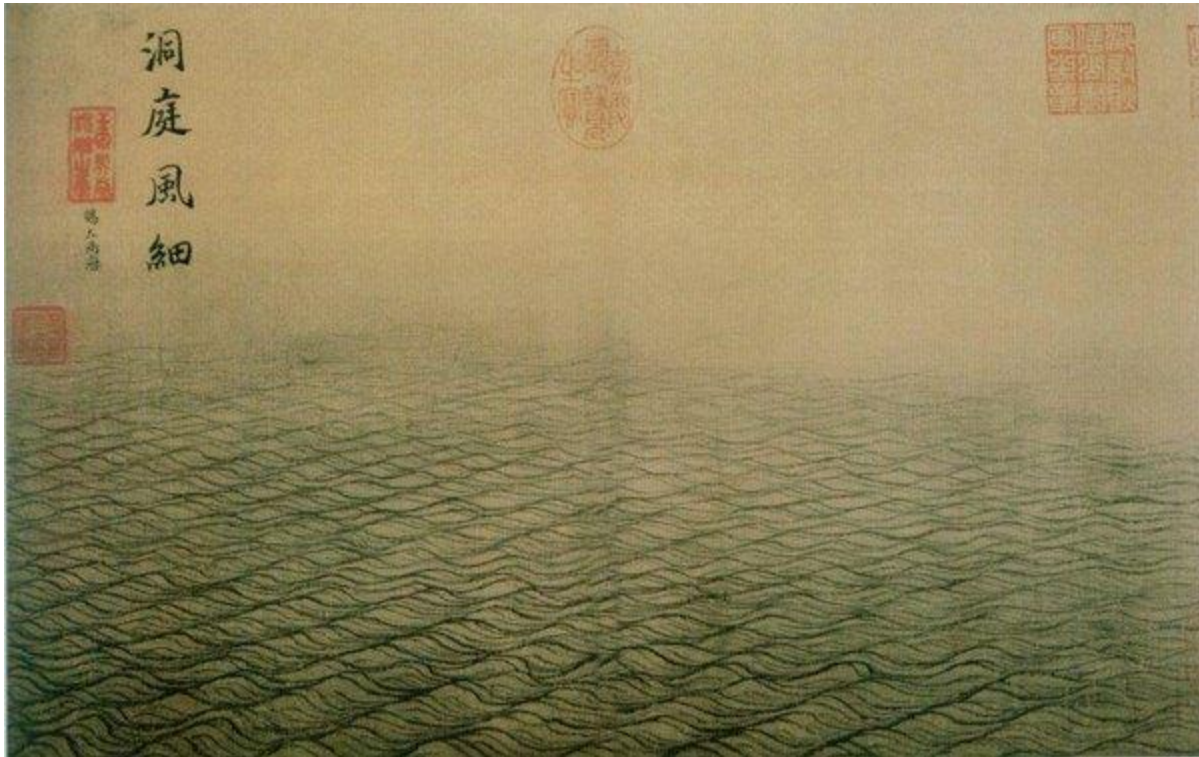
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[Figure 9] Wu Hufan, *Celebrate the Success of Our Glorious Atomic Bomb Explosion of 1965*, 1965, ink and colour on paper, 135cm by 67cm.



[Figure 10] Ma Yuan, *Water: Twelve Views – Dong Ting Feng Xi*, 1190-1225, ink and pale colour on silk, handscroll of twelve sections, each section: 26.8 by 41.6 cm.



[Figure 11] Wu Guanzhong, *Reminiscence of Jiangnan*, 1996, water and ink painting on paper, 68.5 by 137.8cm. Image courtesy of Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong.



[Figure 12] Jia Youfu, *Herding at Dusk - Taihang Mountains Series*, ca.1985, water and colour on paper, 69 by 139cm.



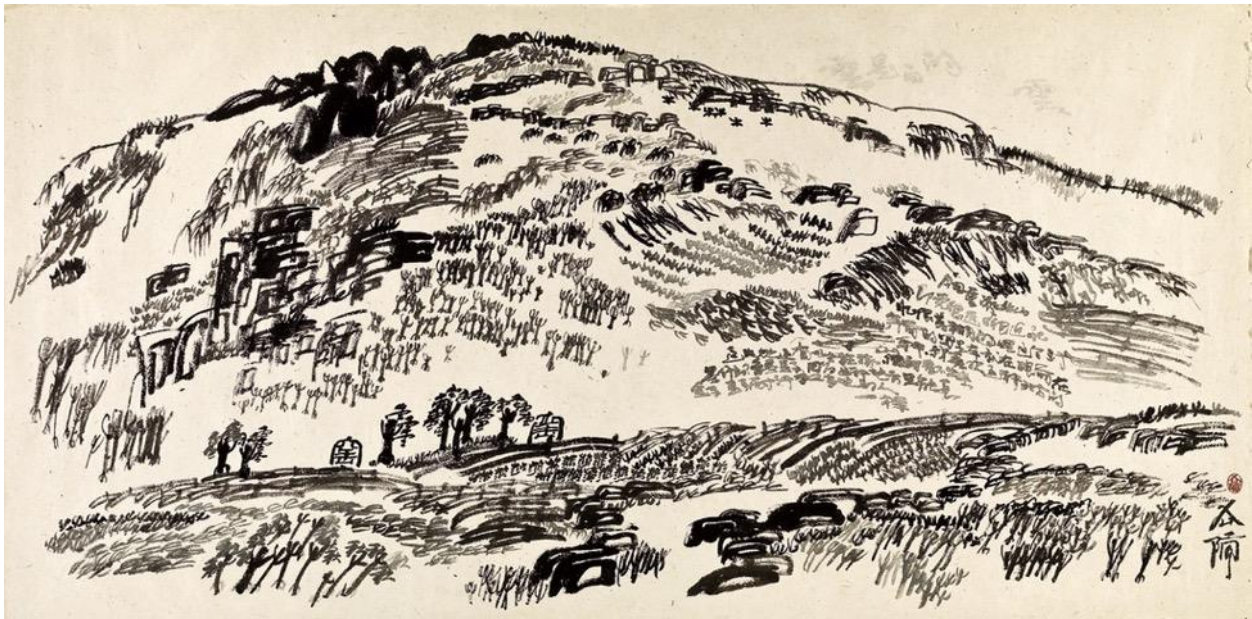
[Figure 13] Qiu Deshu, *Nature of Substance*, 1980-1981, Ink on paper. Image courtesy of the artist.



[Figure 14] Qiu Shihua, *Untitled*, 1995, oil on canvas, 128 x 238 cm. Image courtesy Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing-Lucerne.



[Figure 15] Xu Bing, *Landscape*, 2004, Chinese ink on Nepalese paper, 150cm by 300cm. Image Courtesy of the artist and the Ashmolean Museum



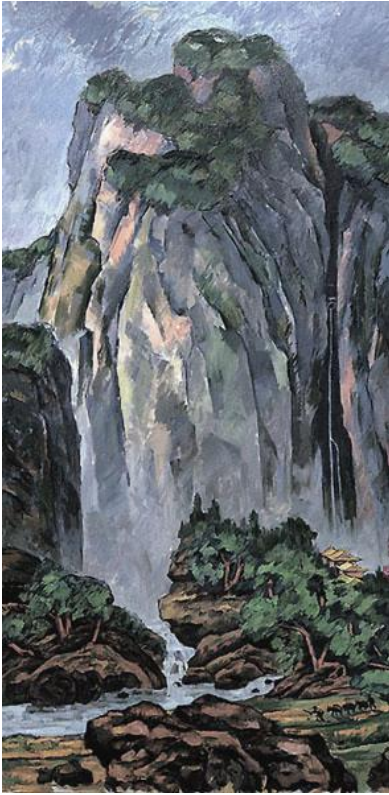
[Figure 16] Zhan Wang, *Jia Shan Shi 121 (Artificial Rock)*, 2007, Stainless steel, 247 x 177 x 120 cm. Image courtesy of Istanbul Modern.



[Figure 17] He Xi, *Untitled*, 2014, ink and wash painting. Photo by Yang Liu.



[Figure 18] Zhang Hongtu, *Fan-Kuan-Cézanne*, 1998, oil on canvas, 64"x32". Image courtesy of the artist.



[Figure 19] Xu Bing, *Background Story*, 2014, natural debris attached to frosted glass panel. Image courtesy of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum.



[Figure 20] Xu Bing, *Background Story (back view)*, 2014, natural debris attached to frosted glass panel. Image courtesy of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum.



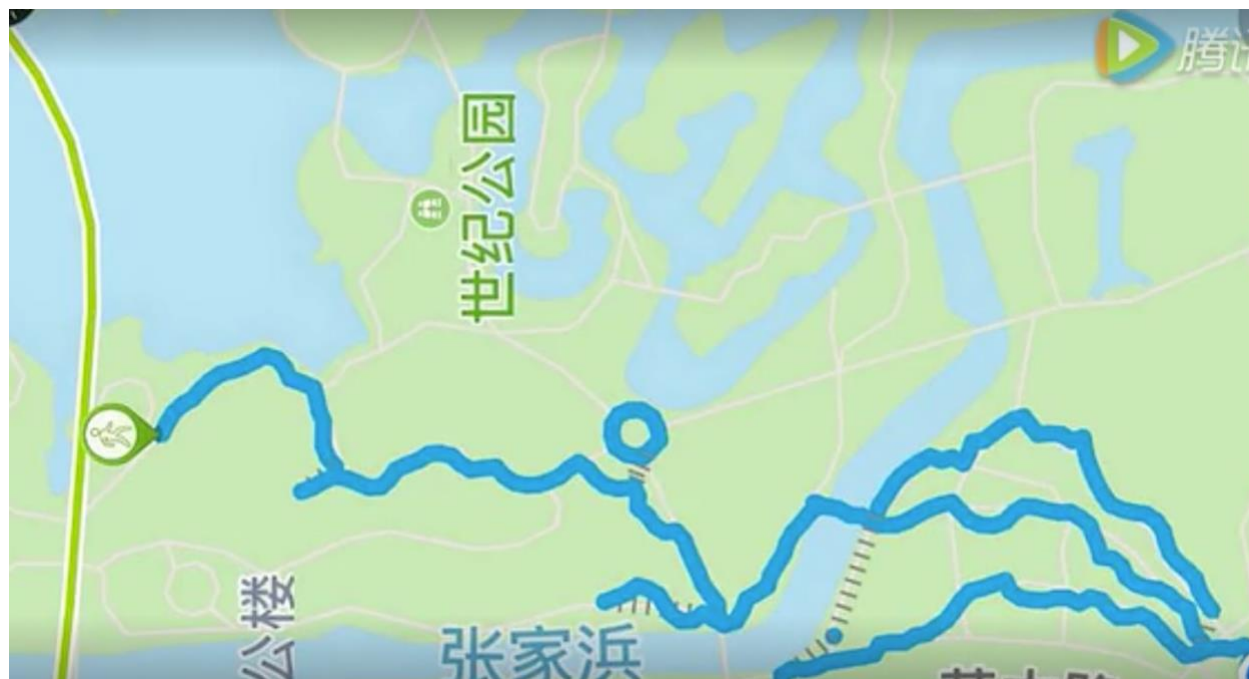
[Figure 21] Song Dong, *Stamping the Water*, 1996, Performance in the Lhasa River, Tibet, chromogenic print. Image courtesy of the artist.



[Figure 22] Song Dong, *Writing Diary with Water*, 1995, performance, chromogenic prints, 44 x 64 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



[Figure 23] Yang Qian, *Walking Shanshui*, performance, Shanghai Himalayas Museum, Shanghai, 2016. Image courtesy of Yang Qian.



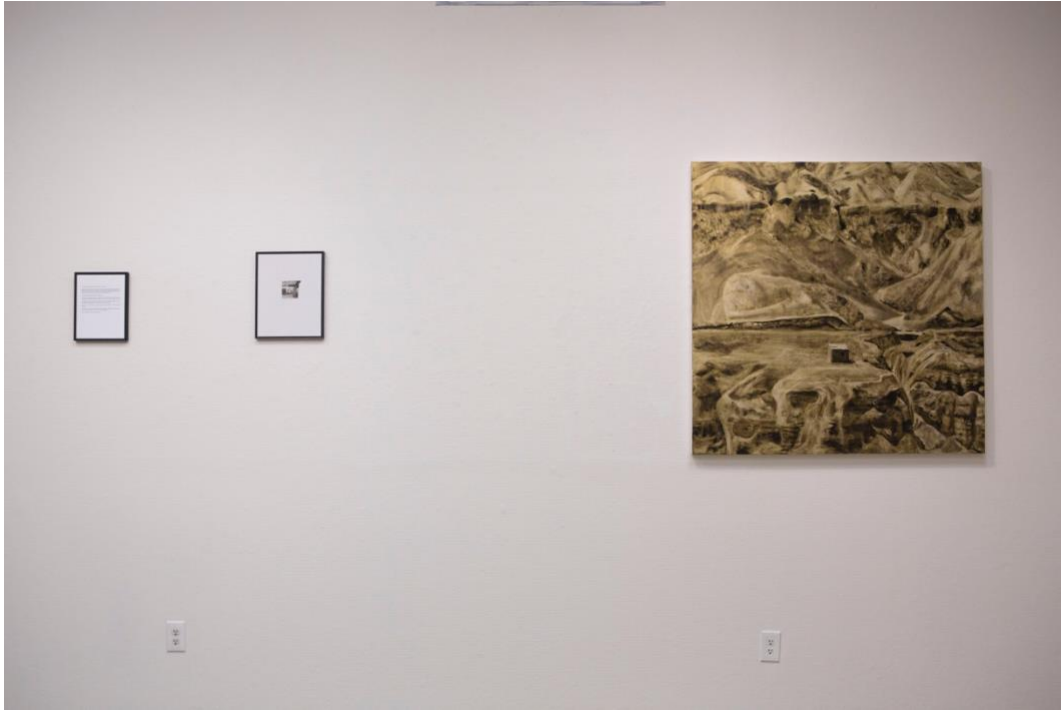
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[Figure 25] Cai Guo-Qiang, *Sky Ladder*, realized at Huiyu Island Harbour, Quanzhou, Fujian, June 15, 2015 at 4:49 am, approximately 2 minutes and 30 seconds. Photo by Lin Yi. Image courtesy of Cai Studio.



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[Figure 27] Liu Yang, *For a Moment, Silence*, 2016, gallery view.



[Figure 28] Liu Yang, *For a Moment, Silence*, 2016, gallery view.



[Figure 29] Liu Yang, *Hometown*, 2016, digital photo collage, 11×40 inches.



[Figure 30] Zhao Mengfu, *Autumn Colours on the Que and Hua Mountains*, 1295, ink and colour on paper, 28.4 x 90.2 cm. Image courtesy of National Palace Museum, Taipei.



[Figure 31] Hong Lei, *After Zhao Mengfu's The Autumn Colours on the Que and Hua Mountains*, 2003, framed chromogenic print, 21.7 x 120 cm. Image courtesy of Hong Lei.



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[Figure 33] Lyu Yanchuan, *The Mount Hua - Lichun*, 2017, black and white photography. Image courtesy of Lyu Yanchuan.



[Figure 34] Xu Bing, *Background Story: The Autumn Colours on the Que and Hua Mountains*, 2020, natural debris attached to frosted glass panel. Image courtesy of Xu Bing.



[Figure 35] Xu Bing, *Background Story: The Autumn Colours on the Que and Hua Mountains (back view)*, 2020, natural debris attached to frosted glass panel. Image courtesy of Xu Bing.



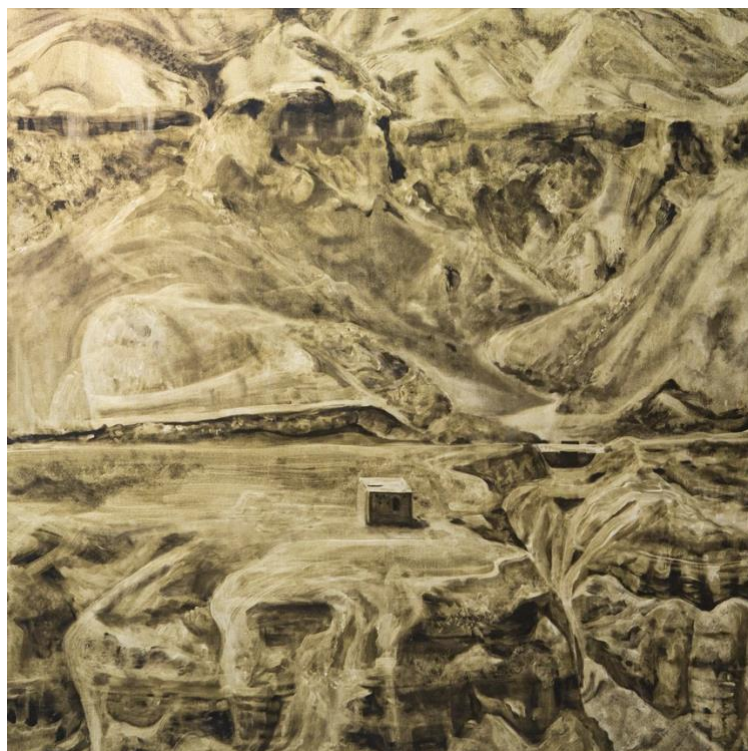
[Figure 36] Duan Jianyu, *A Basket of Eggs No. 3*, 2010, oil on canvas, 180.5 × 251 × 4.7 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



[Figure 37] Liu Yang, *Hermit No. 3*, 2015, white acrylic paint on giclee print, 17×22 inches.



[Figure 38] Liu Yang, *Dwelling*, 2016, acrylic on stretched canvas, metallic gold and black paint, 48×48 inches.



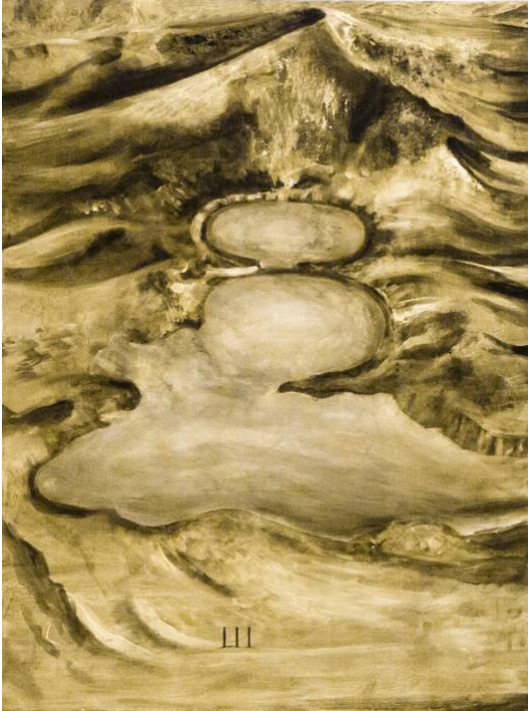
[Figure 39] Hao Liang, *Eight Views of Xiaoxiang - Relics*, 2015-2016, ink on silk, 152.36 x 72.44 inches.



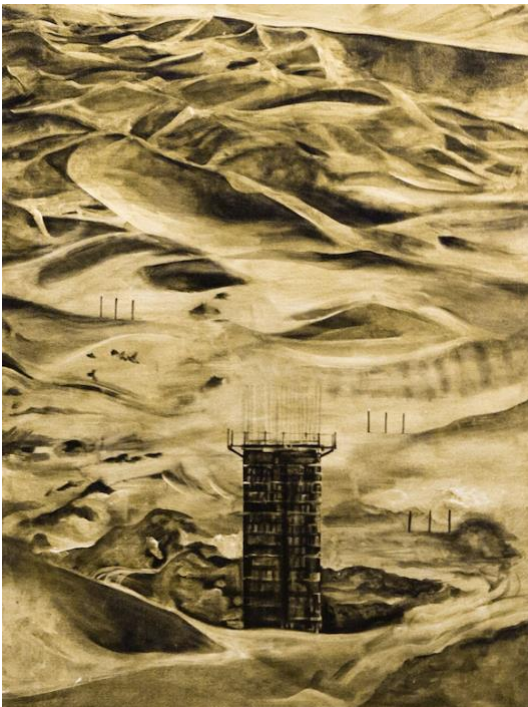
[Figure 40] Liu Yang, *Missing*, 2016, acrylic on stretched canvas, metallic gold and black paint, five panels each 48 x 36 inches, installed series 48 x 180 inches.



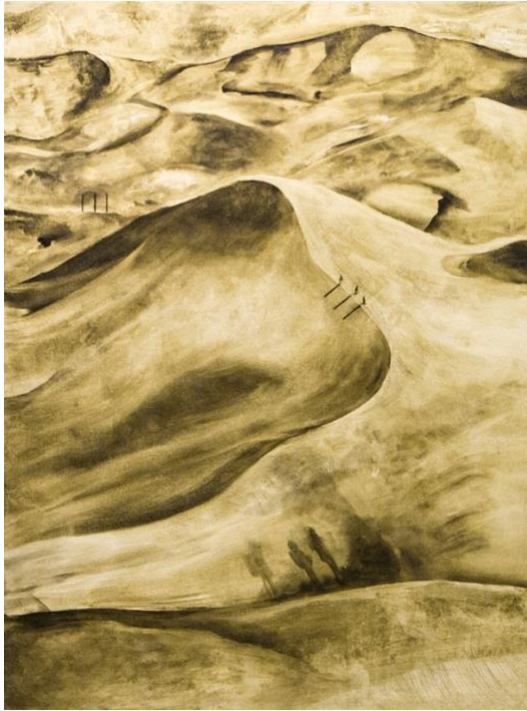
Panel 1



Panel 2



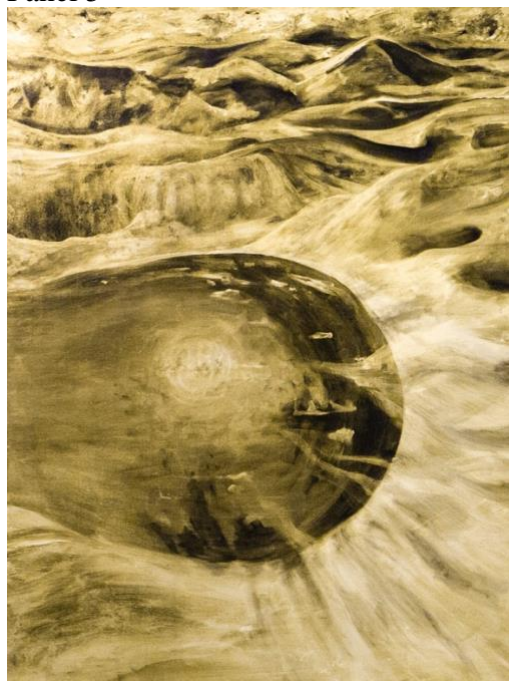
Panel 3



Panel 4



Panel 5



[Figure 41] unknown author, *Vladimir Tatlin and an assistant in front of the model for the Third International*, 1920, black and white photography.



[Figure 42a] Liu Yang, *Fleeting*, 2016, acrylic on canvas, metallic gold and black paint, 72 × 160 inches.



[Figure 42b] Liu Yang, *Fleeting*, 2016, acrylic on canvas, metallic gold and black paint, 72 × 160 inches. Detail.



[Figure 43] Lyu Shengzhong, *Landscape Study*, 2003, cultural ready-mades, books, ancient painting, mixed media, 800 by 600 by 300 cm, adjustable. Image courtesy the artist and Today Art Museum.



[Figure 44] Chen Xinmei, *Untitled*, 2020, digital photography.



Index of Chinese Names

Names:

Ai Qing 艾青
 Ai Weiwei 艾未未
 Cai Guoqiang 蔡国强
 Chang Shen 畅神
 Chang Tsong-zung 張頌仁
 Chen Chuanxi 陈传熙
 Chen Dehong 陈德弘
 Chen Duxiu 陈独秀
 Chen Shuren 陈树人
 Chen Yi 陈毅
 Chi Song 赤松
 Chuang Tzu 庄周
 Deng Xiaoping 邓小平
 Dong Yuan 董源
 Duan Jianyu 段建宇
 Fan Kuan 范宽
 Fu Baoshi 傅抱石
 Gao Jianfu 高剑父
 Gao Minglu 高名潞
 Gao Qifeng 高奇峰
 Gao Shiming 高士明
 Gongjin 公谨
 Gu Mingdong 顾明栋
 Guan Shanyue 关山月
 Guo Moruo 郭沫若
 Guo Xi 郭熙
 Han Zhuo 韩拙
 Hao Liang 郝量
 He Xi 何曦
 Hong Lei 洪磊
 Hu Fang 胡昉
 Huang Binhong 黄宾虹
 Huang Gongwang 黄公望
 Huang Qiang 黄强
 Hung Chang-tai 洪長泰
 Jia Youfu 贾又福
 Jiang Wenzhan 江文湛
 Jing Hao 荆浩

Kong Bu 孔布
Laozi 老子
Lee Yong-woo 李龙雨
Li Bai 李白
Li Keran 李可染
Li Ruiqing 李瑞清
Li Zehou 李泽厚
Lie Yukou 列御寇
Liezi 列子
Lin Fengmian 林风眠
Lin Yi 林毅
Liu Fenggao 刘凤诰
Liu Haisu 刘海粟
Liu Hong 刘宏
Liu Songnian 刘松年
Liu Xiaogan 刘笑敢
Lu Xun 鲁迅
Lü Peng 吕澎
Lyu Nan 吕楠
Lyu Shengzhong 吕胜中
Lyu Shoukun 吕寿琨
Lyu Yanchuan 吕廷川
Ma Desheng 马德升
Ma Gaihu 马盖虎
Ma Yuan 马远
Ma Zongren 马宗仁
Mao Zedong 毛泽东
Mi Fu 米芾
Ni Zan 倪瓚
Ouyang Xiu 欧阳修
Pang Zhuang 庞庄
Qian Jinfan 钱今凡
Qian Songyan 钱松岳
Qianlong 乾隆
Qin Shihuang 秦始皇
Qingyuan Weixin 青原惟信
Qiu Deshu 仇德树
Qiu Shihua 邱世华
Qiu Zhijie 邱志杰
Qu Jingdong 渠敬东
Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白

Sanjiao Heyi 三教合一
 Shen Kuiyi 沈揆一
 Shi Lu 石鲁
 Shi Tao 石涛
 Song Taizu 宋太祖
 Song Zhenxi 宋振熙
 Su Shi 苏轼
 Sun Wenqian 孙文倩
 Tang Taizong 唐太宗
 Tao Qian 陶潜
 Tao Yuanming 陶渊明
 Tsao Hsingyuan 曹星原
 Tu Weiming 杜维明
 Wang Chunjie 王纯杰
 Wang Duanyan 王端廷
 Wang Kangju 王康据
 Wang Lyu 王履
 Wang Mo 王默
 Wang Nanming 王南溟
 Wang Wei 王维
 Wen Zhengming 文征明
 Wu Dayu 吴大羽
 Wu Guanzhong 吴冠中
 Wu Hufan 吴湖帆
 Wu Hung/Wu Huang 巫鸿
 Wu Zuoren 吴作人
 Xia Gui 夏圭
 Xu Beihong 徐悲鸿
 Xu Bing 徐冰
 Xu Fu 徐福
 Xu Jianguo 徐建国
 Xu Junxuan 徐君萱
 Ya Ming 亚明
 Yang Jianfeng 杨建峰
 Yang Liu 刘洋
 Yang Qian 杨千
 Yang Rengeng 杨人梗
 Yang Yanping 杨燕屏
 Ye Lang 叶朗
 Zeng Han 曾翰
 Zeng Xi 曾熙

Zhan Wang 展望
Zhang Daqian 张大千
Zhang Ding 张仃
Zhang Hongtu 张宏图
Zhang Huan 张洄
Zhang Sengyou 张僧繇
Zhang Wei 张伟
Zhang Wei 张未
Zhang Zai 张载
Zhao Mengfu 赵孟頫
Zheng Lu 郑路
Zheng Shengtian 郑胜天
Zhong Kui 钟馗
Zhou Ruiwen 周瑞文
Zhou Yan 周彦
Zhou Yang 周扬
Zhu Da 朱耷
Zhu Liangzhi 朱良志
Zhu Qingsheng 朱青生
Zhuangzi 庄子
Zong Baihua 宗白华
Zong Bing 宗炳

Terms:

Beijing 北京
 Bifa Ji 笔法记 - Art of the Brush
 Chan Buddhism 禅宗
 Changshu 常熟
 Dai 傣
 Daming Lake 大明湖
 Dan 淡
 Dao De Jing 道德经
 Dao 道
 Da 大
 Dongguan 东莞
 Dongting 洞庭
 Dou ban 豆瓣
 Fujian 福建
 Gobi 戈壁
 Guangdong 广东
 Guangxi 广西
 Guangzhou 广州
 Haikou 海口
 Hainan 海南
 Han Dynasty 汉朝
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 Han Wudi 汉武帝
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 Ling Nan 岭南
 Meishu 美术
 Minduo Zazhi 民铎杂志

Ming Dynasty 明朝
Ming-Qing Dynasty 明清时期
Mogu 没骨
Mount Hua 华山
Mount Que 鹊山
Mt. Hua-bu-zhu 华不注山
New Suyuan Shipu 新素园石谱
Ningxia 宁夏
Penglai 蓬莱
Qi 气
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Song Dynasty 宋朝
Sui Dynasty 隋
Suzhou 苏州
Taihang 太行
Taiji 太极
Taishi 太始
Taiwan 台湾
Taiyi 太乙
Tai 泰
Tan Zhongguohua 谈中国画 - Talking about Chinese Painting
Tang Dynasty 唐朝
Tang 汤
Tiananmen 天安门
Tianjin renmin meishu chuban she 天津人民美术出版社 - Tianjin People's Fine Arts Publishing House

Wangwu 王屋
 Wei-Jin period 魏晋时期
 Wei 魏
 Wenyibao 文艺报- Journal of Literature and Art
 Wu 无
 Wuji 无极
 Wuxing 吴兴
 Xiang 象
 Xiang Tu Yi Shu 乡土艺术 – Native Soil Art
 Xiaoxiang 潇湘
 Xinhai Revolution 辛亥革命
 Xining 西宁
 Xinjiang 新疆
 Xuan 玄
 Xuzhou 徐州
 Yan'an 延安
 Yangtze River 长江
 Yangzhou 扬州
 Yi 一
 Yi 易
 Yi 彝
 You 有
 Yuan Dynasty 元朝
 Yuanzhen 元贞
 Yunbiao Qifeng 云表奇峰
 Zhuan 转
 Zui Weng Ting Ji 醉翁亭记 - The Old Drunkard's Arbour
 Zuo wang 坐忘 - sitting oblivion

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Appendices

Appendix A

沁园春长沙

独立寒秋，湘江北去，橘子洲头。

看万山红遍，层林尽染；漫江碧透，百舸争流。

鹰击长空，鱼翔浅底，万类霜天竞自由。

怅寥廓，问苍茫大地，谁主沉浮。

携来百侣曾游，

忆往昔峥嵘岁月稠

恰同学少年，风华正茂；书生意气，挥斥方遒。

指点江山，激扬文字，粪土当年万户侯。

曾记否，到中流击水，浪遏飞舟。

Appendix B

赵孟頫题款（原文）

公谨父齐人也，余通守齐州。罢官归来，为公谨说齐之山川。独华不注最知名，见于《左传》。而其状又峻峭特立，有足奇者。乃为作此图。其东则鹊山也。命之为《鹊华秋色图》。

元贞元年十有二月，吴兴赵孟頫制（钦“赵子昂”）

Appendix C

山中间答

问余何意栖碧山，

笑而不答心自闲。

桃花流水窅然去，

别有天地非人间。