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**The Landscape of Contemporary Chinese Artists:
An Evidence of the Transformation of Space and Time**

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Introduction

Landscape occupies a prominent place in the history of Chinese painting. Mountains and waters, in Chinese *shanshui*, have been inspiring artists for one and a half millennia, giving rise to a genre praised as one of the finest forms of visual art. Notwithstanding its long history and the *apparently* repetitiveness of its subjects, pre-modern *shanshui hua* (“landscape painting”) actually is a significantly diverse and complex painting style, ranging from the idyllic vistas of the Tang dynasty (618–907), to the monumental landscapes of the Northern Song (960–1127), and the intimate and lyrical sceneries of the later Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279), to recall but a few.

If art is supposed to reflect the age it belongs to, as suggested by the well-known Secessionist motto “To every age its art, to every art its freedom,” the evolution of *shanshui hua* throughout the centuries must be considered as an evolution of necessities, ideas, and influences that have affected the artists engaged with the representation of the landscape. Whether they intended to epitomize the power of the ruling class, express alienation from society or a kind of longing for the past, these paintings were meant to convey much more than merely mirror the landscape. Change of dynasties, periods of political disunity and foreign invasion naturally affected painters, who found in *shanshui hua* the perfect means to express themselves freely.

Chinese landscape painting, or rather landscape art, lives on in the contemporary era and clearly reflects the changes which China and more generally the world have undergone in the last few decades. The research presented here, thus, aims to find an answer to the question: How do contemporary Chinese artists perceive the landscape?

The analysis is based on a selection of artworks created by nineteen Chinese artists between the second half of the 1990s and 2018. I have eventually decided to group them into three categories based on the type of landscape they are supposed or are likely to represent.

The first chapter is devoted to those landscapes which, compared with the others, are more evocative of the traditional idea associated with *shanshui hua*. These artworks portray the landscape in what seems to be the most conventional way, retaining in their composition the essential elements of the landscape as conceived by past masters. At the same time, however, they are surprisingly innovative, for they bring in innovations regarding techniques and media used. This type of landscape often clashes with the real face of the contemporary environment, so heavily altered by the advent of industrialization, which has created new ways of conceiving the landscape.

As a consequence, we feel that these artists are particularly attached to the idea of *shanshui* peculiar to the past. This feeling inevitably arouses a sense of longing for a place and time that seem to have now disappeared, leading to the depiction of a kind of scenery bearing utopic connotations. The artworks presented in this chapter thus establish a dialogue between past and present, a relationship sustained by the concepts of nostalgia and utopia, which constitute the major thread running through this section. Although this contrast is especially evident in contemporary art, for we live in a transformed world, these concepts are not new in Chinese and East Asian landscape painting in general, as clearly shown in *Landscapes: Seeking the Ideal Land*, a catalogue edited by Lee Soo-mi for the homonymous special exhibition held at the National Museum of Korea, Seoul, in 2014.

The second group of artworks exhibits a totally new reality, a landscape spoilt by the advent of urbanization and industrialization, made up of buildings, machinery, and pollution. The landscape which now dominates our surroundings is an urban one, which may be fascinating for its high-rises and night lights but is above all frightful in the prospect of the daunting future we may face one day. The artists selected for this chapter portray the reality of Chinese and, occasionally, international cities which have been severely changed due to the advent of modernization. The most shocking artworks make use of photographs, a medium that unmistakably mirrors reality, or are created taking pre-modern landscape paintings as a source of inspiration so that the contrast results undeniable and particularly worrisome. If the first group of landscapes recalled idyllic and utopic sceneries, these ones represent their negative counterparts, giving shape to dystopic environments. At times they merely portray actual sceneries, other times they exaggerate the degradation of the environment and the deterioration of a piece of land. As Wu Hung stresses in *A Story of Ruins: Presence and Absence in Chinese Art and Visual Culture*, the depiction of the ruins of a grandiose past, portrayed beside mountains of garbage and busy streets, accents the distance of a bygone era.

Due to their perturbing images, these urban landscapes seem to raise criticism and to call for awareness regarding the real issues we are facing today. Adopting a term introduced in China at the beginning of the twentieth century, Elena Macrì (2015, 167) has suggested *fengjing hua* rather than *shanshui hua* in order to define the artworks which are more related to the area of culture instead of the area of nature, preferring to regard the landscape as a proper “scenery” and not a composite of “mountains and waters” like it was conceived in the past. While pre-modern *shanshui hua* was based on the harmonic relationship between the natural environment and the human presence, urban landscapes tend to make unstable this relationship, lending more weight to human beings and their behaviour towards nature.

The last chapter collects a third type of landscape that Chinese contemporary artists have tried their hands at. It is a kind of landscape which cannot be properly grouped under the label of natural nor urban landscape, which represent the focus of the first two sections. Compared to the other two types, it is a more intimate landscape, one that cannot be found in our surroundings but is to be searched within ourselves. These artists give expression to the landscape of their minds, creating a kind of imagery that is sometimes difficult to reconnect to that of a proper landscape. Nevertheless, these often-abstract artworks fit perfectly in the tradition of landscape art because, like pre-modern paintings, they conceive the landscape as something that goes beyond the mere representation of an open-air space.

Many Chinese artists engaged with the representation of the landscape in the contemporary age have gained visibility following a few exhibitions organized in the last decade around the world. “Shanshui: Poetry Without Sound? Landscape in Chinese Contemporary Art – Works from Sigg Collection” on display at Luzern Kunstmuseum, Switzerland, in 2011, and “Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China” (containing a section called “New Landscapes”) on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2013–14 have been particularly relevant for the research. The respective catalogues, one edited by Peter Fischer and the other written by Maxwell K. Hearn, offer a precious compendium of artworks related to contemporary landscape art, enriched with comments given by the artists themselves and, in the case of the first catalogue, with a selection of essays by connoisseurs such as Uli Sigg, Hu Mingyuan, and Yin Jinan. It is interesting to observe how these sources try to relate the artworks they present to very specific notions or examples from the past, offering the reader a way to look at these works from an evolutionary point of view. By doing so, we are able to assess how much of the tradition these artworks retain and how today’s artists fit into this tradition. It could either be a matter of techniques and media used, elements represented, or messages meant to be conveyed.

That the role of landscape as shelter has been undermined with the advent of modernization is a subtle message that is intrinsic to the whole artistic production of this genre, and one that is clearly remarked in the above-mentioned sources. It is a theme particularly stressed by scholars and journalists and it is necessary that it is so, for phenomena such as urbanization and environmental pollution are central to our age. It is by virtue of this connection that landscape art produced nowadays can be called “contemporary” and represent its proper age. However, there are many nuances through which artists can give expression to their feelings regarding these issues. The following research has the aim to distinguish these different nuances and categorize the selected artworks by virtue of their affinity to the natural landscape, or rather the most evocative of the kind of environment depicted by past masters; the urban landscape, that is the one peculiar

to the new age; and the mind landscape, the most subjective one, free from preconceptions and strict boundaries related to the subject. Sometimes it is not even a matter of conveying particular messages or criticisms, for landscape art has also become a subject through which artists can experiment with, using materials and techniques that were once inconceivable. Nevertheless, the artworks of each category share undeniable similarities regarding their visual appearance and for this reason, they have been grouped together. Furthermore, on a more comprehensive level, each of them establishes a dialogue with the past, retaining some elements from the tradition while breathing new air into it.

The Landscape of Nostalgia

Standing in front of a contemporary artwork depicting the uncontaminated landscape, at times one has the impression to be looking at a scene coming from a forgotten place and era, for often the environment we live and work in is significantly different from the pristine and pure lands which these works of art show us. These sceneries take us back to an idealized past, untouched by modernization and distant from concerns and anxieties we may experience in the contemporary world. While it is still possible to find such settings moving away from urban centres, sometimes the very source of inspiration for these idyllic landscapes are past artworks themselves, which offer contemporary artists a wide array of stimulating possibilities for depicting these kinds of views. This is the case of certain contemporary Chinese artists, whose works sometimes may appear rather familiar to the viewer acquainted with pre-modern *shanshui hua*. The attachment to tradition is truly significant in contemporary artists who are engaged with this artistic genre, and this closeness to past masters' works is particularly evident in the artworks presented in this chapter. Although contemporary artists approach pre-modern landscape painting diversely, the resulting works evoke a sense of nostalgia for a place, or rather time, that now seems to be unattainable. For this reason, we have the feeling that these artworks portray bygone sceneries and utopic realities which are only possible to recall and represent through artistic production.¹

Nostalgia is often intertwined with the concept of utopia, as the utopian dimension is intrinsic to such feeling (Boym 2001, XIV) and, likewise, utopian thinking is often characterised by nostalgic sentiments (Harvey 2000, 160). However, this utopian aspect of nostalgia is not directed towards the future (for utopias are generally set in a far-off age) but rather in the past, for we tend to romanticize the object of our longing and only capture the most desirable facets of its time, therefore turning it into a utopia. The discontinuity between contemporary society (with its swift rise of modernization and industrialization) and pre-modern times may be experienced negatively by people sensing the impossibility of mythical return and the loss of a blissful world projected in the past, whose “slower rhythms” and values are frequently yearned for by the nostalgic (Boym 2001, 8, 16).

¹ Ironically, the landscape depicted in pre-modern *shanshui hua* did not inevitably refer to actual surroundings. The ideal land shown in these paintings could either refer to authentic mountains and rivers celebrated for their memorable scenery, or to idealized landscapes that could not be found in nature (Lee 2016, 5).

In the case of Chinese landscape painting, this idea is not properly a contemporary one, for pre-modern *shanshui hua* frequently did not depict actual landscapes that the artist had previously seen but portrayed imagined landscapes which could even be modelled on their antecedents' masterpieces, a practice that developed especially from the Ming period (1368–1644) (Fischer 2011, 12). Countless paintings bear inscriptions which pay homage to past masters, declaring that rocky mountains and streams were depicted in the manner of an exemplar. However, the imitation of past masters was not intended as a matter of copying but rather as a way of learning and, eventually, creation through an act of self-cultivation (Fischer 2011, 23).

The impulse to take inspiration from past artworks may be associated with the longing for the kind of scenery that these paintings depicted but on a deeper level, they actually evoke the yearning for a different time, a mythical period when nature and man were in perfect harmony with each other. According to Svetlana Boym, this is what nostalgia precisely is about, for through nostalgia we long for “the repetition of the unrepeatable” (2001, XV–XVII). Thus, in contemporary artworks concerned with the representation of the landscape we find once again the essential features of a *shanshui* painting, namely mountains and waters, and other natural elements such as trees and rocks. The art of imitating past master is, therefore, still salient nowadays; however, these works have enriched the genre with new techniques, new media, and new meanings which reflect the sense of discontinuity with pre-modern times and its artistic tradition. Many of the landscapes in this category are, at first glance, a faithful reproduction of the works by celebrated painters of Imperial China, while others seem like they could have been depicted by past masters, for the pictorial elements which they include are exactly the same. Nevertheless, the works considered here all bear a kind of innovation whether in the material in which they were produced, the composition and support they adopt, or the meanings they lay emphasis on.

Throughout his artistic career, Xu Bing (b. 1955) has devoted his work to this kind of “innovative” reproduction of pre-modern paintings on different occasions. The series *Background Story*, which the artist has been working on since 2004, is composed by artworks which take inspiration from celebrated *shanshui* paintings. However, Xu's landscapes are not reproduced on silk or paper, nor are they made with ink; the elements of his works are constituted by debris and dried plants attached to panels of frosted glass mounted on a wooden box. The spectator looking at these installations is easily deceived by a game of lights and shadows and has the impression of standing in front of works by artists such as Gong Xian (1618–1689), Huang Gongwang (1269–1354), and Wang Shimin (1592–1680), until he or she is invited to see what is hidden behind the cases. In this area, the viewer discovers that grass, hemp, twigs, branches, cotton wool, and pieces made with modelling clay are taped to the verso of the glass panel together in order to form the

shapes of mountains, rocks, trees, and other features you would expect to find in a landscape painting (**Figure 1**). The installations have been shown in many museums both in China and abroad, and Xu has frequently chosen the work which to take inspiration from according to the collection of the host museum, in order to establish a relationship between his work and the history of the exhibition site and the local materials (Wang 2014). Therefore, when in 2006 the Suzhou Museum planned to exhibit *Background Story 3* (**Figure 2**), the artist recreated the handscroll by Gong Xian (**Figure 3**) collected in the same place; and the hanging scroll by Wang Shimin (**Figure 4**) in the British Museum's collection was the model for Xu's *Background Story 7* (**Figure 5**), which was created on site and displayed in the museum in London in 2011. Xu Bing's shadow-and-light boxes engage a dialogue with the past and the artists whom he draws inspiration from, a dialogue at times further enhanced by the placement of the original scroll (or a facsimile) in the same room in which his work is displayed. According to the artist, the materials used and the way they were combined created, in the case of *Background Story 7*, "a rhythm and grandness which matches the rhythm of the brushstrokes of Wang Shimin's painting" (The British Museum 2011).



Figure 1. Xu Bing. *Background Story 4* (verso), 2008. Light box and natural debris. China Academy of Art, Hangzhou.

What appears on the recto of the panel is not a mere impression of landscape but specifically of landscape painting, an illusion achieved through the placement of different items on the other side of the glass, for these wasting materials do not simply try to depict natural elements but texture strokes and ink washes especially (Harrist 2011, 38). The composition thus obtained

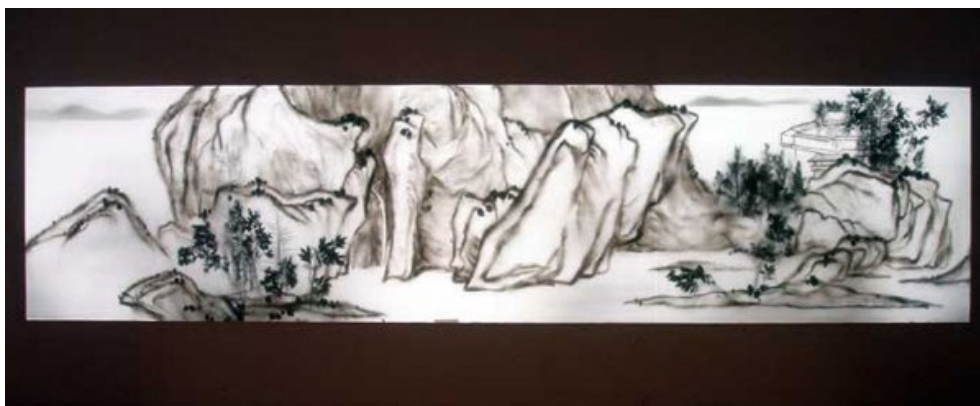


Figure 2. Xu Bing (b 1955). *Background Story 3*, 2006. Light box and natural debris, 170 x 900 cm. Suzhou Museum.



Figure 3. Gong Xian (1618–1689). *Landscape* (detail), Yuan dynasty. Handscroll; ink on paper. 35 x 283.3 cm.



Figure 4. Wang Shimin (1592–1680). *Untitled*, 1654. Hanging scroll; ink on paper, 177.8 x 245.8 cm. The British Museum, London.



Figure 5. Xu Bing. *Background Story 7*, 2011. Natural debris attached to frosted glass panel. British Museum, London.

is faithful to the original painting: proportions and orientations are correctly achieved by taping printouts on the glass as visual guides for the artist and his assistants (Harrist 2011, 38) and a game of lights and shadows creates the illusion of brushwork on the surface. Beyond the surface, however, the illusion vanishes, revealing the “background” of these installations.

The use of pre-modern, celebrated landscape scrolls as the source of inspiration for Xu’s artistic production is not merely confined to the *Background Story* series; the *Suzhou Landscripts*, a project which the artist had been working on for ten years and which was exhibited in the Ashmolean Museum in 2013, pays homage to four hanging scrolls from the collection of the Suzhou Museum. The *Landscript* series actually began in 1999, when Xu started to sketch landscapes using Chinese characters while at the Himalayas in Nepal. His finished work of art, which gave rise to landscapes-in-script, constitutes a new form of artistic expression, in which calligraphy and landscape art are combined together (Fischer 2011, 191). It is the pictographic origin of the Chinese characters which makes it possible for the artist to compose the entire scenery in this way. The same concept was applied to the *Suzhou Landscripts* (**Figure 6**), in which the features of the landscape are, in fact, obtained through the repetition of the characters denoting those very elements: for instance, rocks are made up of large and small versions of the Chinese character for “stone,” and “willow” or “apricot” hang down from the branches of the trees (Ashmolean Museum 2013).² What makes this last series unique, however, is the fact that these landscapes-landscripts



Figure 6. Xu Bing. *Suzhou Landscripts*, 2003–2013. Litograph prints in two colours, 924.4 x 386 cm.

² The characters Xu uses to depict landscape elements may be drawn in an archaic form in order to emphasize their similarity to those very elements (Vainker 2013, 116).

do not imitate the actual scenery but recreate (and not replicate) hanging scrolls by Liu Jue (1409–1472), Zheng Yuanxuan (?), Zhai Dakun (1730–1804), and, once again, Wang Shimin. For the original scrolls which the artist takes inspiration from are themselves copies, Xu brings into focus the notion of copying, considered as a respected teaching tool in China, whereas in the West, a copy is generally thought of as being a fake or forgery (Vainker 2013, 5, 8).

The hanging scroll or handscroll formats are effective visual expedients used by contemporary artists to establish a connection with pre-modern paintings, for their shape reminds of landscapes depicted on silk or rice paper. However, as said above, artists nowadays tend to reinvent the works from the past with new techniques in order to breathe new life into the genre. New media is, indeed, a major issue in contemporary artworks; while landscape-related imagery is fundamental in order to be part of this artistic genre, the use of traditional techniques may appear rather dull for the public, making these works look not contemporary “enough.” Technical innovation enriches the genre instead, engaging a dynamic dialogue with the past and even drawing more attention into the artworks, which relive and renovate the past at the same time. Although certain supports and methods adopted by these artists may seem to break away from the common conception of *shanshui hua*, nevertheless these works of art recall landscape painting and its values, which are cherished and constitute points for reflection in the contemporary era. Painting the landscape and taking inspiration from classical motifs, thus, becomes a way to investigate the artist’s own cultural heritage, an idea that is well conveyed by *Chinese Landscape–Tattoo*, a project by Huang Yan (b. 1966). The artist became fascinated with the idea that landscape painting was a means of self-expression for literati painters of the past and, as such, *shanshui hua* constitutes “the most authentic representation of the literati philosophy” (Fischer 2011, 113). Captivated by the idea that each element of a landscape painting and each stroke meant to represent it was an expression of those masters’ feelings, in 1994 Huang began the *Chinese Landscape–Tattoo* series, constituted by photographs of human faces and bodies, painted with a literati-style landscape. A number of these pictures represents the artist’s naked torso and arms (**Figures 7a, 7b**); Huang’s body, which appears anonymous since his face was cropped away in the images, becomes the subject of the work, suggesting the centrality of man in the context of landscape painting. This idea is related to the Daoist vision of the body as the miniature of the cosmos, the body having priority over the rest of the universe and controlling the harmony of the terrestrial environment by first attaining harmony for itself (Schipper 1978, 355–57). The artist’s body, wholly covered by a mountainous landscape, thus becomes a cosmic emblem, the miniature incarnation of the bigger universe. The body as medium turns out to be central for the project since it allows to establish a relationship between the body and the landscape, or rather the human and the cosmos. The imposing peaks,

Figures 7a–b. Huang Yan (b. 1966). *Chinese Landscape–Tattoo*.



Figure 7a. *Chinese Landscape–Tattoo No. 1*.



Figure 7b. *Chinese Landscape–Tattoo No. 10*.



Figure 8. Wang Yuanqi (1642–1715). *Landscape for Zhanting*, 1710. Hanging scroll; ink and colour on paper, 95.2 x 47 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

rocks, and trees seen in the images were painted by Huang’s wife, Zhang Tiemei (b. 1968), who executed a kind of landscape which reminds of the Qing dynasty (1636–1912) painter Wang Yuanqi’s (1642–1715) scrolls because of the use of similar colours (**Figure 8**) (Fischer 2011, 113).

Huang’s photography artworks have been exhibited in many museums around the world and have also appeared in a solo exhibition named “Tattoo Utopia” hosted by Leo Gallery in Hong Kong in 2018. The term “utopia” was chosen because the artist claims that, since he has started the *Chinese Landscape–Tattoo* project, he has been engaged in the depiction of the literatus Tao Yuanming (365–427)’s descriptions of mountains and waters, flowers, and landscapes (Leo Gallery 2018) in his renowned “Peach Blossom Spring,” a tale about the discovery of an idyllic land. The people living there are disconnected from the outside world and are not touched by political concerns, a situation which was well different from the poet’s reality, one of political instability and

national disunity.³ The imaginary world described by Tao Yuanming, its beautiful pools and fragrant grasses, inspired many East Asian artists throughout the centuries, who transferred this utopic environment into paintings and accompanying poems (Lee 2018, 18). Huang Yan's landscapes, then, refer to an imaginative realm which was initially thought as unattainable even in the past. Nevertheless, these mountains and trees painted on skin simultaneously evoke Song and Yuan landscapes, as the artist himself has pointed out (Hearn 2013, 102).

Huang's tattoo landscapes, however, may conceal a double, contrasting message. As Maxwell Hearn has questioned, the tattoo may signify that Chinese culture is more than a superficial appropriation, but it could also indicate that the adoption of cultural attributes (the literati-style landscape) is a mere façade (2013, 102). Huang's work makes us wonder whether it is possible to rediscover literati values, or if these are ultimately unattainable in the contemporary era.

Although they are inspired by the works of their ancestors and seem to look for a continuity in the tradition of *shanshui hua*, a great many Chinese artists working today have received a Western education, which gives them the possibility to experiment with foreign art forms and aesthetics. While brush and ink (or paint) were still present in the works of Xu Bing and Huang Yan, Shao Fan (b. 1964) abandoned traditional equipment in favour of a humbler instrument: the pencil. Through hatching, *Landscape* (2009; **Figure 9**) recreates the middle section of Wang Hui's (1632–1717) *Summer Mountains amid Mist and Rain* (**Figure 10**), placing the upper



Figure 9. Shao Fan (b. 1964). *Landscape*, 2009. Pencil on paper, image: 150.2 x 150.2 cm; sheet: 156.8 x 163.2 cm.



Figure 10. Wang Hui (1632–1717). *Summer Mountains amid Mist and Rain*, 1681. Ink on paper, 137.2 x 63 cm. Tianjin Museum.

³ Tao Yuanming lived during the Six Dynasties period (220–589), which followed the fall of the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) and preceded the Sui dynasty (581–618) and was characterized by political and territorial conflicts.

rock and trees upside down so that even when turned, the drawing can still be read as the representation of a landscape (Hearn 2013, 82). The blend with Western art forms, however, does not merely lie in the technique used, for Shao adopted the square format and extended the scale of the drawing compared to the original (Hearn 2013, 82). As a result, Shao's work combines a Western medium with a Chinese subject, the last of which, however, is not represented by a contemporary, actual landscape but by one belonging to the past and to the memory of the *shanshui hua* tradition.

The fusion of traditional pictographic elements with newer techniques makes it possible to establish a dialogue between past and present. This kind of dialogue may be suggested, as in the artworks presented above, by recreating the same landscape features in a manner which reminds of pre-modern paintings, or else by literally merging the past with the contemporaneity. In some cases, in fact, the paintings do not merely serve as a source of inspiration but are actually used to create an entirely new work of art. The pre-modern painting becomes the essential element permitting the artist to create, the component without which the contemporary work would not have been produced. Sometimes, however, these paintings are so heavily modified and deconstructed that it could be hard to identify the origin of these works. One example is an untitled work by Chen Guanghui (b. 1960) which is primarily based on *A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains* by Wang Ximeng (1096–1119) (**Figure 11**). The work is made up of eighteen horizontal stripes placed one on top of another (**Figure 12**). At first glance, one would find it hard to detect the Northern Song dynasty painting which was used to create this work, and it could even be put in doubt that its subject is indeed a landscape. In fact, Chen altered the original painting many times, playing with scales and colours, subtracting or adding elements to the point that the majority of the stripes is almost irrelevant to Wang Ximeng's scroll (Fischer 2011, 71). However, on closer inspection, a few bands may still be associated with the original, with the first stripe at the bottom being the closest reproduction of the painting, since the green and blue colours are still visible and the mountain peaks still recognizable. Nonetheless, these pictorial elements are not the only ones making up Chen's artwork, for other details are placed alongside the mountain chain, such as a red-

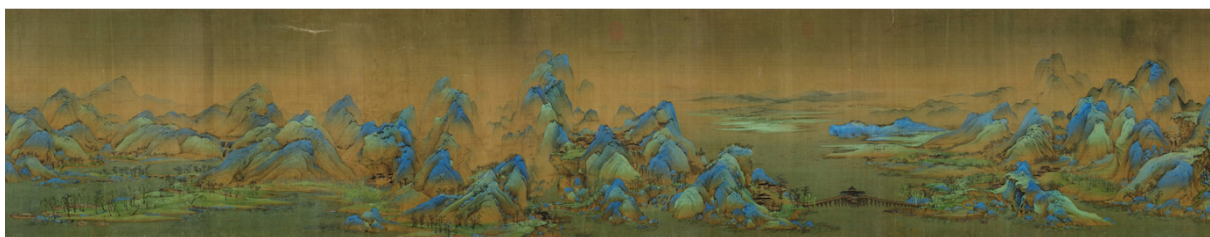


Figure 11. Wang Ximeng (1096–1119). *A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains* (detail), Northern Song dynasty. Handscroll; ink and colours on silk, 51.5 x 1191.5 cm. The Palace Museum, Beijing.



Figure 12. Chen Guanghui (b. 1960). *Untitled*, 2007. Lacquer on wood, 240 x 220 cm. Sigg Collection.

roofed building and the Beijing Olympic Stadium, two contemporary constructions placed on a landscape in the blue-and-green style of painting (Fischer 2011, 71).⁴

It may be hard to relate the concept of nostalgia to artworks such as Chen Guanghui's, for even the ones schooled in *shanshui hua* could be bewildered in front of them, since they are apparently so distant from the pre-modern paintings which the artists claim they take inspiration from. However, what is common to all these artworks is that they do not take nature as a starting point but find in an existing painting the source for their development. For these artists, the landscape to be represented in their artistic production is not the one that can be found in the open air but is to be sought in manuals of Chinese painting and in museums' collections. Under such

⁴ The building is Uli Sigg's house in the municipality of Mauensee, Switzerland.

logic, the computer becomes a suitable medium for rethinking those paintings and giving them a new life, permitting the artists to retouch them as they wish. Seemingly irreconcilable, the anonymous computer technology and the personal expressiveness peculiar to *shanshui hua* eventually become compatible, as in Feng Mengbo's (b. 1966) *Wrong Code Shanshui* (**Figure 13**) (Fischer, 2011 89). With the help of Bryce software, which allows the user to create 3D synthetic landscapes, Feng is able to use the computer as an artistic tool and produce an original artwork

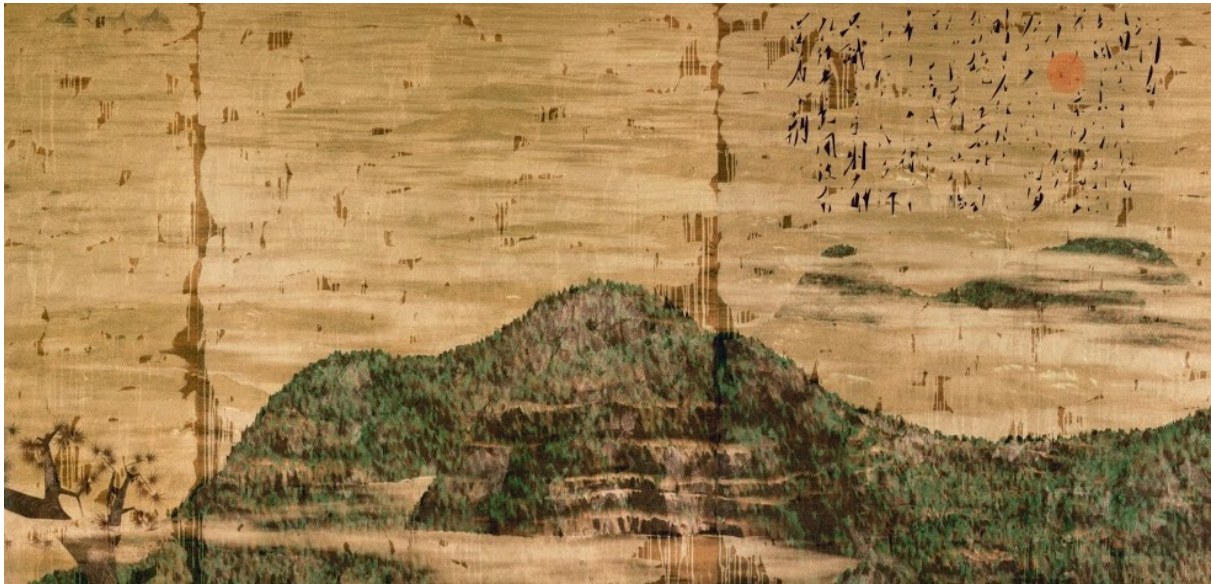


Figure 13. Feng Mengbo (b. 1966). *2007WCSXL01 (Wrong Code Shanshui XL No. 1)* (detail), 2010. Acrylic and VeeJet on canvas, 200 x 900 cm. Sigg Collection.

combining the pre-set landscape elements available in the program. Apart from these ready-made textures, Feng also uses textures he himself imported into the software, created by digitally scanning pre-modern Chinese landscape paintings. Rather than observing nature, the artist has meticulously studied the works of Chinese *shanshui hua* painters in order to find inspiration for his artistic production. Specifically, Feng turns to the “Four Wangs,” a group of artists of the early Qing dynasty who found in old masters, and not in nature, the source of inspiration for their landscape paintings. Feng shares with his ancestors (Wang Shimin, Wang Jian (1598–1677), Wang Hui (1632–1717), and Wang Yuanqi (1642–1715)), the idea that a painting has to allude to other images rather than to the experienced world and that the intellectual pursuit of the mind is essential to good landscape painting (Kesner 2008, 26). The Four Wangs had acquired painting skills by making copies of former masters’ paintings, from which they then absorbed brushwork techniques and pictorial elements to produce artworks which did not, however, resemble simple imitations of those masterpieces (Barnhart et al. 1997, 259–63). Their style followed Song and Yuan techniques, which they enriched with variations executed in their own fashion, embracing the model of scholar-artist and theorist Dong Qichang (1555–1636). In a similar way, Feng creates his panoramic images (a

format that reminds of traditional handscrolls) by merging texture patterns and recombining the elements to be found in the scenery with the help of Bryce software; the final result is then printed on a canvas whose surface is covered by cracked tempera layers (Kesner 2008, 25). Along the lines of landscape paintings by the Four Wangs (Ledderose 2001, 205–06), Feng picks out his motifs from a restricted repertoire and uses them as modules which, however, do not retain the artist's individuality and touch, for the computer acts as an obliterating agent of his artistic intervention, completely deleting his body (Kesner 2008, 28). However, if we are aware of the process by which Feng creates his landscapes, we nevertheless feel that his predecessors are actually encapsulated in these works and that the past is able to relive by virtue of a new medium through which the artist can give his contribution to his legacy.

Although the artworks presented so far are deeply connected with actual pre-modern landscape paintings, it is not necessary for a work to recreate masterpieces in order to evoke a kind of longing for the past. In fact, various contemporary artists are able to recall such a feeling not by referring to a particular work but by representing those same subjects that had inspired ancient



Figure 14. Hongren (1610–1664). *Pines and Rocks in Mount Huang*, 1664. Ink on paper, 198.7 x 91 cm. Shanghai Museum.

masters many centuries earlier. Beautiful and renowned places constituted a kind of imagery which was frequently portrayed in landscape painting, and famous mountains became a particular recurrent motif in the seventeenth century (Lee 2018, 107). These included Mount Huang, or the Yellow Mountains, a mountain range located in Southern Anhui Province, which has long been acclaimed for its impressive scenery. In the seventeenth century, Mount Huang became a prominent pilgrimage destination and a place providing shelter to Ming loyalists after the Manchu conquest of the country (Lee 2018, 107–09). It was in this period and in this very area that the Anhui school of painting arose, whose painters such as Hongren (1610–1664) were often inspired by the surroundings of the mountain range in their artistic production (**Figure 14**). Unlike most sceneries of *shanshui hua*, which are difficult or even beyond the bounds of possibility to identify, a landscape painting depicting the mountain chain deeply relied on the actual scenery, and the resulting work was often easily recognizable as a representation of the real Mount Huang, almost like it was a photograph. This location still inspires artists

today and has become a recurrent subject for modern photography. Hong Lei (b. 1960) is one of the artists whose interest was captured by its mountainous landscapes. Since 1999, Hong has been taking pictures of Chinese mountain ranges, including the Yellow Mountains (**Figures 15, 16a, 16b**). Each photograph of the series is rendered in black and white, a choice allowing the artist to really focus on the subject portrayed. Moreover, the monochromatic palette really brings out the misty atmosphere surrounding the peaks, which reminds of the foggy mountains depicted in *shanshui* paintings and adds up the nostalgic feeling conveyed by the pictures. This effect seems to remove the sceneries from the present, taking them back in time, provoking the viewer to fall into a reverie, for this is something peculiar to photographs, which stand for a reminder of a thing's "mortality, vulnerability, mutability," and thus promote a sense of nostalgia (Sontag 1977, 11). It is by no accident that cameras began to spread in a time when the environment began to change



Figure 15. Hong Lei (b. 1960). *Yellow Mountain*, 2001. Photography, 500 x 600 mm.

Figures 16a–b. Hong Lei. *Anhui Tunxi Mount Huang*, 2016. Photography, 280 mm.



dramatically; they permit to make immortal what could disappear in the future. Although a photograph may seem a transparent recording of the subject portrayed, Hong's pictures do not differ so much from a painting by the Anhui school, for the artist adopts a series of techniques which remind of the painting methods once used in *shanshui hua*. Actually, as Susan Sontag claimed, "photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are" (1977, 5). According to Hong Lei, to depict the Yellow Mountains (or other Chinese mountain ranges) today is not dissimilar from ancient masters' experience in depicting the same landscapes in the past, for time is irrelevant in the spirit of landscape art, especially if "the mountains and rivers we face today are the same faced by the ancients" (Fischer 2011, 105).

The same principle applies to Duan Jianyu's (b. 1970) series *Beautiful Dreams* (2008) which comprises, for the majority, renowned Chinese sights, such as Mount Huang and its "Welcoming-Guest Pine" and the Karst mountains in Guilin. The silhouettes of these landmarks are painted in monochrome ink on flattened cardboard boxes wearing effect of previous use. Duan made the most out of these signs of deterioration by using them as features for her landscapes, so that, for instance, the wavelets of the Li River are further enhanced by the corrugated surface of the box (Figures 17a–c) (Wang 2014). The artist chose to depict a series of landmarks that her ancestors

Figures 17a–c. Duan Jianyu (b. 1970). *Beautiful Dreams*.



Figure 17a. *Beautiful Dream 2*.



Figure 17c. *Beautiful Dream 7*.



Figure 17b. *Beautiful Dream 4*.

could have been able to admire even in the past and that have certainly provided inspiration for their paintings on multiple occasions. This choice, however, conveys a dual meaning. On the one hand, it alludes to and criticizes the use of traditional Chinese subjects into the emblems of commercialization; on the other, it allows these motifs to really stand out and transcend their ordinary medium (Hearn 2013, 98). Although trapped by the reality of a materialistic world, the beauty of traditional imagery goes beyond this material and captures the spirit of landscape painting (Fischer 2011, 83).

Even though the artworks described in this section may appear unrelated to each other, they are, in fact, surprisingly similar. I have decided to group them under the name of “nostalgic landscapes,” as nostalgia is a complex feeling, a personal contemplation that can generate an array of different emotions. It is not univocal, for it is characterized by a duality, or rather an experience of both pleasure and regret (Dickinson and Erben 2006, 223–25). This kind of bittersweet emotion really shows through the works of these contemporary artists, who express their thoughts and seem to refer to an ancient reality in their own unique way. Thus, artworks like those of Xu Bing recall renowned landscape painting scrolls, while Feng Mengbo uses those very scrolls as a primary instrument for the creation of his prints. While *shanshui hua* was once restricted to ink and pigments applied onto silk or paper, landscape art in China today makes use of any kind of medium, which reflects the personality and the preferences of the artists themselves. Hong Lei sees the landscape through the lens of his camera, while Shao Fan has adopted a medium and style of Western origins, which he has blended with a Chinese motif.

Seemingly so distant from one another, all these artworks take traditional subjects and imagery as a starting point. The landscapes they create, or rather recreate, seem to offer shelter from the chaotic and mundane world that we live in today. This kind of natural environment, however, frequently appears only to be found in paintings, for artists now experience a reality that has dramatically changed on multiple levels. The past, thus, is frequently sublimated and romanticized, for the time of ancient masters is often thought as a utopic age, where idyll was to be easily found in one’s surroundings. To revive such imagery and ideas connected to it offers the viewers and the artists themselves a pleasant experience, but it also originates a sense of regret for a reality that now seems to be unattainable.

The Landscape of Dystopia

Since the times of Plato's *Republic*, the concept of "utopia" has been closely linked to the one of "city," as the materialization of the imagined perfect place has frequently acquired urban forms throughout history (Harvey 2000, 156). Widely influenced by utopian thinking, urban and city planning have been chasing after the myth of the "utopia of globalization," an ideal that has been thought to be pursuable with the human conquest over nature, long seen in opposition to civilization (Salerno 2003, 216). By offering a constructive vision of what would be considered a "just" and "perfect" world, a utopia withholds a criticism of a present condition which, from a dystopian perspective, may be overemphasized in order to warn us of the possible unpleasant or even dangerous effects that that situation may acquire in the near future (Friedmann 2000, 462).

Utopias and their negative counterparts have represented an appealing subject in the arts, permitting artists to translate visually their imagined realities and represent a veiled criticism of a current condition. However, while utopias are ideally detached from the space-time continuum, dystopias are imaginatively placed in the proximate future and sensed as a possible reality, exaggerating existing negative trends (Cafuri 2012, 35). In order to represent visually such a reality, therefore, the artist-thinker must be aware of things as they are (Sears 1965, 474) and recognize the menacing features that could compromise our own existence in the near future.

A marked change in nature, causing the environmental degradation of a place that once used to be different from the present condition, could be thought-provoking for certain artists. Contemporary Chinese artists engaged with the representation of the landscape have been facing a radical transformation of their country, which, to a great extent, was severely denaturalized due to the rise of the phenomenon of urbanization. The constant change of the scenery has modified the perception that these artists have towards the landscape, which is reflected in the works they produce. These works represent the materialization of the new kind of relationship that now ties human beings with the environment, radically changed in the last few decades due to the rapid urban development that has affected China (Macri 2017a, 163). As *shanshui hua* was never meant to be a mere representation of the landscape, but rather a reflection of the artists' position with reference to the world (Fischer 2011, 11), contemporary artists seem to fit perfectly in this tradition. They are aware of the changes that have transformed the surrounding landscape and reflect on this situation by portraying the effects of the impact of human activities on the environment. The

iconography making up these new landscapes refers to the features that constitute the new spatial reality of the contemporary era: the city. Buildings, cranes, litter, and pollution have become a constant in these works and have now almost replaced mountains, trees, water, and mist that once were the indispensable components of a *shanshui* painting.

By portraying the new essential features of the transformed landscape and showing the effects of the human impact on nature, Chinese artists seem to call for reflection over the environmental consciousness regarding their cities. At times exaggerating the extent of the sensed danger of these urban realities, the landscapes portrayed in their works bear a close resemblance to a dystopian scenery, warning viewers of the threatening possibilities of the near future of the country and the whole globalized world too, since certain artists also allude to and reflect on the process of urbanization as a more global phenomenon, not only restricted to China.

Although *shanshui hua* by definition had as its principal motifs mountains and rivers, the human presence was equally always represented or at least suggested, becoming thus an integral part of most landscape paintings (Hearn 2013, 73). However, while looking at pre-modern *shanshui* paintings one has the impression that human beings were once in perfect harmony with the environment and had but a marginal role in nature, they now are its centrepiece and regard it as a resource to be consumed and exploited (Fischer 2011, 11–12). Even if at first glance these new types of landscapes may seem traditional *shanshui* paintings, a feeling which is also due to the will and interest of the artists to set themselves in this genre, the main protagonist of these works is not the natural environment but man himself. What contemporary artists show in their works seems to be a critical celebration of human power over natural surroundings, which are very distant from the ones that were once contemplated and portrayed in ink on paper or silk.

The landscapes by Yang Yongliang (b. 1980) are perfectly capable of such deception: arranged in a horizontal or vertical format that reminds of ancient paper or silk scrolls, his landscapes in black and white immediately evoke the monumental landscapes of the Song dynasty, in which imposing peaks dominated the entire painted scene. At first glance, the sceneries appear as a utopic idyll but, on closer inspection, they turn into a frightening reality: Yang's mountains are made up of a myriad of high-rises and other buildings and the whole scenery bears no trace of vegetation, since everything has been erased by concrete and trees have been replaced by transmission towers.

Yang works with hundreds of digital photographs which he assembles on the computer to create virtual cityscapes in a way that reminds of the peculiar composition and tonality of traditional *shanshui hua* (Fischer 2011, 203). By overlapping pictures of the city as if they were brushstrokes (and, in particular, Song “raindrop” brushstrokes which gave the texture to rock formations)

(Hearn 2013, 109), the artist obtains mountain forms that rise up from the water, the other essential element of a landscape painting. Although the medium he uses is extraneous to traditional ones, Yang claims that his mode of expression is “entirely founded on the *shanshui* tradition” and, as such, he is capable of maintaining the creative spirit of past masters (Fischer 2011, 203). The use of contemporary means of expression, however, gives him the opportunity to portray the ecological issue that China is facing nowadays. His computer-based landscapes show the exaggerated consequences of the rise of modernization and globalization at the expense of the environment and invite the viewer to re-think the relationship between human and nature. This sinister metamorphosis is especially visible in wealthier urban centres such as Yang’s hometown, Shanghai, in which he has taken the majority of the photographs he uses for his works.

Yang’s attachment to tradition clearly shows through the way he draws inspiration from past masters. *View of Tide* (2008; **Figure 18, 20**) recreates a Southern Song handscroll by Zhao Fu (active ca. 1131–62), *Ten Thousand Li of the Yangzi River* (**Figure 19**), from which the artist takes both format and imagery. The inkjet print also has a special affinity with the colours once used to



Figure 18. Yang Yongliang (b. 1980). *View of Tide* (detail), 2008. Inkjet print, 45 x 100 cm. M+ Sigg Collection, Hong Kong.



Figure 19. Zhao Fu (active ca. 1131–62). *Ten Thousand Li of the Yangzi River* (detail), Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279). Handscroll; ink on paper, 45.1 x 992.5 cm. The Palace Museum, Beijing.



Figure 20. *View of Tide* (detail).

depict the landscape on the paper scroll, although Yang's work presents a sharper contrast between the blackish mountains and the white mist and water. The main difference, however, is that while Zhao's painting portrays a fully natural landscape, Yang introduces the icons of contemporary urban China in the scenery, which are so densely fitted that the landscape is not capable of supporting life anymore (Hearn 2013, 106–09). However, the work does not simply show the negative side of rapid urbanization, for it also seems to remind us of the power of nature, which could rise again especially when mankind does not show consideration for it, an idea suggested by the tsunami-like tidal wave at the end of the print-scroll (Hearn 2013, 106).⁵

Yang does not only combine his photographs in images meant to be printed, for he also works with videos, which allow him to bring in another element in his cityscapes: sound. Sound seems to follow the viewer while he or she realizes that the seemingly beautiful scenery actually conceals a sinister nightmare. In *Journey to the Dark* (2017; **Figure 21**), for instance, the traffic noise becomes more and more intrusive as the video develops and the music in the background progressively changes from calm to tense, unveiling the soullessness of the city.

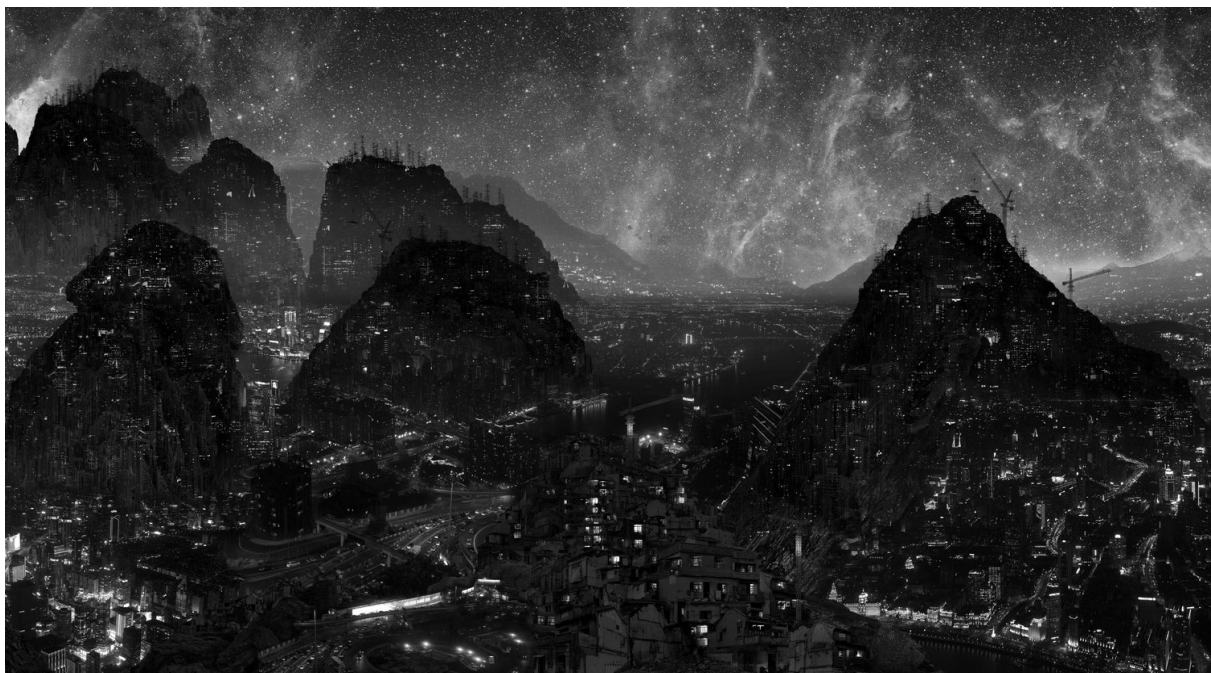


Figure 21. Yang Yongliang (b. 1980). Still from *Journey to the Dark*, 2017. 3-channel 4K Video, 9 min 50 sec. Sound effect available on Yang Yongliang's website.

The two symbolic realities of Yang's works, the city and the landscape, bear two antithetic meanings: the artist deeply appreciates and disdains them at the same time. The city is a familiar environment to Yang, but he fears its uncontrollable growth. Similarly, the artist is deeply

⁵ Zhao Fu's painting ends with a surging wave reminding of the tidal bore of the Qiantang River passing through Hangzhou, a frequently depicted phenomenon in late Song paintings (Hearn 2013, 106).

connected to traditional Chinese art but dislikes its “non-progress attitude” (Yang, n.d.). While *shanshui hua* once expressed the appreciation of nature by ancient masters, with his dystopia-like landscapes Yang is capable of criticizing reality in the way he perceives it and raises awareness about the current state of global cities (Yang, n.d.; Beaumont-Thomas 2015).

While Yang Yongliang usually adopts the colours of traditional monochrome ink paintings, *shanshui hua* does not only offer black-and-white landscapes to take inspiration from. The basic colours of the archaic “blue-and-green” (*qingli*) scheme, the landscape style that was established in the pre-Tang and Tang periods, are also found in the works of contemporary artists, who select these basic tints to colour their landscapes. In Yao Lu’s (b. 1967) works, blue and green figure as the predominant colours but, while old masters obtained their pigments from azurite and malachite or copper carbonate, Yao alters the colours of his photographs using computer software. The computer, in fact, offers Yao and many of his fellow artists a suitable medium to produce works which are in line with the change of the landscape. The artist concentrates on debris and waste material covered in green protective nets, which he photographs and then assembles in order to create mountain-like forms and evoke the iconography of a *shanshui* painting (Macrì 2017b, 40). Yao is based in Beijing, a city that has undergone a major drama that was unusual in world history due to rapid urbanization and commercialization, which have filled the territory with scaffolding materials and mountains of garbage (Wu 2012, 203). Many of his sceneries directly refer to China, for he often includes Chinese architectural structures and monuments which, however, do not seem to be the veritable icons of the country anymore. By using the same imagery and shades of colours of a traditional painting style, Yao’s landscapes first appear as idyllic sceneries which, however, on closer inspection prove to be unpleasant and even repulsive settings. The contemporary landscape is not the shelter of fishermen and scholar-officials anymore but is the working place of bricklayers covering garbage and rubble with dustproof nets, the real icon of new China (Gu, n.d.). In Yao’s *New Landscape* series (2006–2012), the symbols of a glorious past look like they are disappearing at the expense of modernization, raising the viewer’s realization of a disappeared historical reality (Figure 22).⁶



Figure 22. Yao Lu (b. 1967). *New Landscape VI-01 High Pavilion in Cool Summer*, 2012. Chromogenic print, 102 x 72 cm.

⁶ *Haigu* sentiment, which is stimulated by historical traces and erasure, arises from the confrontation of a past that is hopelessly separated from the person looking at or thinking about the ruins of a city (Wu 2012, 18–19).

Historic sites had to be altered in order to accelerate the modernization of the Chinese capital, where thousands of residents saw their houses being demolished and had to be relocated, with the consequence that the city and its inhabitants seem not to belong to one another anymore (Wu 2012, 203). This sense of alienation between the two is the focus of Ai Weiwei's (b. 1957) *Provisional Landscapes*, a set of photographs taken by the artist himself throughout the six years preceding the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics, portraying areas around Beijing (**Figure 23**). Images



Figure 23. Ai Weiwei (b. 1957). *Provisional Landscapes*, 2002–8. Nine chromogenic prints from a series, each 97 x 122 cm. M+ Sigg Collection, Hong Kong [Exhib.]

of the old city and its buildings razed to the ground are juxtaposed to other pictures portraying the new infrastructures that are taking their place in order to document the radical transformation of the Chinese landscape (Hearn 2013, 111). Many images place modern buildings with old ones close to one another, whereas others document the changes that a single place has undergone throughout the years. Due to the constant demolition going on in the capital, Ai senses that Beijing as a developed city “lacks a human dimension” and is thus not fit for humans anymore (Hearn 2013, 111). For a 2012 edition of the *New Statesman*, Ai went back to the same places that had been the subjects of his photographs ten years earlier and took pictures of the sites once again to further record the never-ending transformation of China, which appears as “one enormous construction zone” (Ai 2012; 2011, 52). As works which express an explicit criticism towards the continuing destruction and dehumanization of the city, these transient landscapes seem to be imbued with

certain political and social values and, thus, capture not a natural scenery but a social landscape which, in Yin Jinan's words, is "not *shanshui*" but a "post-shanshui image in the postmodern era" (Fischer 2011, 45–46).

The yardstick for judging a contemporary work related to landscape art in China seems thus to be pre-modern paintings, and the comparison with the tradition is indeed a dear theme for contemporary artists who are engaged with the representation of the landscape. They often draw inspiration from the scrolls of past masters, whose depictions of nature bore a close resemblance to a pristine, ideal land and often provide present-day artists with a stimulus for reflection on the new type of surroundings that we live in today. Contemporary works of this genre are thus surprisingly similar to pre-modern *shanshui* paintings on one hand but are equally significantly distant from them on the other. Qiu Anxiong (b. 1972) brings the comparison between past and present a step further: his videos show the actual evolution of the landscape from a natural setting to an urban one, which occasionally leads to an apocalyptic vision of the world. The horizontal layout of his three-channel videos reminds of the traditional medium of the handscroll format, while the images following one another in the animations recall monochrome ink paintings and often take inspiration from pre-modern *shanshui hua* (**Figure 25**) (Hearn 2013, 119–20). The videos are made up of computer-manipulated photographs of a series of canvas which Qiu paints himself with water-soluble acrylics, a medium which, unlike ink on paper, allows him to make quick changes on the surface of the canvas, adding and erasing previous marks (Hearn 2013, 120). His animations include *In the Sky* and the *New Classic of Mountains and Seas* trilogy, which show the pure, natural landscape being spoilt by the advent of unrestrained modernization. *In the Sky* (2005; **Figure 24**) opens with the depiction of a natural scenery from which mountains and erupting volcanoes



Figure 24. Qiu Anxiong (b. 1972). Stills from *In the Sky*, 2005. Single-channel animated video with sound, 8 min. 17 sec.

emerge and disappear. As minutes pass by, the first aeroplane bursts into the scene, preannouncing the stage of urbanization, introduced by a shocking air crash. The scenes follow one another on the background of Tchaikovsky's *Dance of the Sugar-Plum Fairy* from *The Nutcracker*, interspersed with ghostly and thundery sounds when the images get more dramatic.

The *New Classic of Mountains and Seas* trilogy takes inspiration in both title and content from the *Classic of Mountains and Seas (Shanhaijing)*, a Chinese classical text which offers a compendium of mythic geography and fauna of the lands beyond the edges of the known world. The first episode of Qiu's series, dated 2006, presents the birth and death of civilization: the unspoiled landscape is soon altered by the appearance of a castle and the Great Wall (Hearn 2013, 120). From this moment on, the music in the background changes and gets distressing as skyscrapers rise from the ground and highways take the place of rural areas. The following scenes present the cruel abuse of natural resources as the greatest danger to civilization and portray the technological means by which the environment is being destroyed, allegorically represented by mutant beasts which remind of the fantastic animals of the *Shanhaijing*. Finally, a mushroom cloud devastates the urban scenery, leaving only a lone, black figure standing in the middle of a wasteland, suggesting the advent of a post-apocalyptic world (**Figure 26**) (Hearn 2013, 120). The use of water-soluble acrylics, whose marks can be easily modified and overpainted, suggests a fatalistic message, that is the "impermanence of the material world and the inevitability of change" (Chang 2007). In *New Classic of Mountains and Seas II* (2007), cows are sent for slaughter and sheep are cloned, and the achievements of humanity in the biotechnological domain appear as a monstrous reality. Finally, the planet Earth is submerged by waters, reminding us of a Biblical act of destruction (**Figure 27**) (Pollack 2018b). *New Classic of Mountains and Seas III* (2017), the last episode of the trilogy and the most sophisticated one in terms of video achievement, presents a futuristic city in which virtual reality has taken the place of real life (**Figure 28**) (Pollack 2018b). A constant in all the three films is the presence of fantastic creatures resembling modern machines, such as tank-elephants and camera-tortoises, which seem to have a life of their own and are thus not controllable by humans anymore. Even though the realities depicted by Qiu in the three videos are conceived to be part, as the title suggests, of a distant and unknown world, they are frighteningly not so far away from history and actuality. What we see in these animations is an account of the state of dying traditions of humankind, contemporary societies' environments, and excessive misuse of nature (Chung, n.d.). In most of Qiu's production, there clearly emerges the obliteration of the landscape, a theme that conveys the minor role that nature has acquired in contemporary urban life and the dysfunctional relationship that man now has with the environment (Macrì 2017a, 41). These terrifying views of the present, however, are not merely related to China, for Qiu has also painted scenes which remind of other

parts of the world: the cityscape destroyed by the mushroom cloud at the end of the first episode, for instance, recalls the World Trade Centre complex on 9/11. Landscape imagery in the works of contemporary Chinese artists dealing with this genre, thus, does not only pertain to the native sceneries of *shanshui hua* but concerns global anxieties affecting the artists.



Figure 25. Huang Gongwang (1269–1354). *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* (detail), Yuan dynasty, 1350. Handscroll, ink on paper, 33 x 636.9 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.



Figure 26. Qiu Anxiong (b. 1972). Stills from *New Classic of Mountains and Seas*, 2006. Video animation, 30 min 05 sec.



Figure 27. Qiu Anxiong. Stills from *New Classic of Mountains and Seas II*, 2009. Video animation, 29 min 35 sec.



Figure 28. Qiu Anxiong. Still from *New Classic of Mountains and Seas III* (detail), 2017. Video animation, 30 min.

While the Great Wall, Buddhist pagodas and temples are emblematic structures peculiar to the Chinese landscape, other symbolic buildings from different countries are portrayed by artists to move the subject of landscape art elsewhere. The aim of Yang Jiechang's (b. 1956) artistic production has been that of introducing Chinese traditional painting and aesthetics in a

contemporary context because he believes that “artists today should not be restricted to traditional dreamscapes” (Hearn 2013, 89; The Met 2014). The five triptychs (originally intended to be six) making up the 2002 *Crying Landscape* series show a few widely recognizable settings in China, Great Britain, and the United States: the Three Gorges Dam spanning the Yangzi River, the Palace of Westminster in London, a Las Vegas casino, and the Pentagon in Virginia (**Figures 29a–e**). The remaining triptych depicts an oil refinery which, however, may be set anywhere. The saturated tones standing out in the paintings are, once again, the ones of the blue-and-green style which, however, are not used to colour the rocky mountains appearing in traditional *shanshui hua* but to depict the symbolic buildings of industrial, political, and military power. Moreover, the sceneries are realized using the *gongbi* technique,⁷ which “generally depicts beautiful sceneries,” but Yang uses “to combine beautiful forms and problematic events” (The Met 2014). These vivid colours usually allure the viewer, who would eventually find himself worried upon discovering the vulnerability of these buildings (Hearn 2013, 93). Yao brings out the negative side of society and subverts the promise of security and stability conveyed by these iconic structures representing the threat of industrialization, modernization, and even terrorism. Thus, the crimson sunset behind the oil refinery reminds of a conflagration; the contrail in the sky above the Yangzi river seems to presuppose that an incoming missile may crash into the Three Gorges Dam; the streetlamps lighting the Westminster Bridge appear as bombs blowing up in the London night sky; the symbolic monuments of New York are transformed into mere entertainment symbols; and the depiction of the Pentagon conflates the moment of the 9/11 attack with the immediate aftermath of the tragic event (Hearn 2013, 93).

Figures 29a–e. Yang Jiechang (b. 1956). *Crying Landscape*, 2002. Set of five triptychs, ink and colour on paper, each triptych 300 x 500 cm. Private collection, New York [Exhib.]



Figure 29a. *Crying Landscape: BASF.*



Figure 29b. *Crying Landscape: Yangzi River.*

⁷ The *gongbi* technique is characterized by the meticulous use of the brush and detailed description. Opposed to *gongbi* is the *xieyi* technique, literally “writing thoughts.”



Figure 29c. *Crying Landscape: London.*



Figure 29d. *Crying Landscape: Las Vegas.*

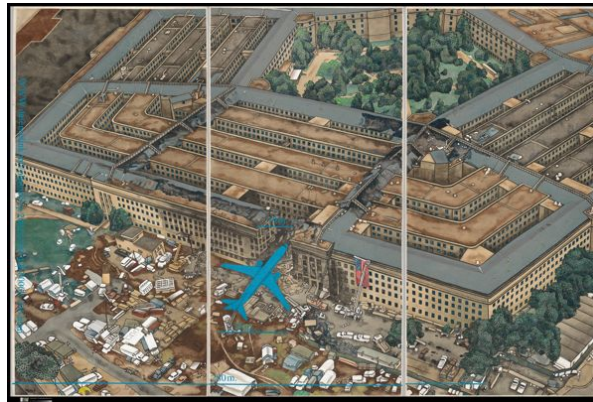


Figure 29e. *Crying Landscape: Pentagon.*

The few examples presented above show that the vivid colours of the blue-and-green style are a recurrent expedient used by the artists in order to highlight the contrast between the aesthetic qualities of a work of art, reminding of an idyllic past, and the connotative meaning of it. The colour palette offered by this style is usually alluring to the eyes of the viewer, but these pigments can be overshadowed by the significance they acquire. In the case of Yuan Xiaofang's (b. 1961) *Flight Plan* series (**Figures 30, 31**), aeroplanes and helicopters rendered in monochrome dominate over a colourful landscape in the background. The blue, green, and orange rocky mountains seen in the series are directly taken from two paintings dating back to the Song dynasty (Fischer 2011, 209). Sections of these landscape paintings, *A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains* by Wang Ximeng (1096–1119) (**Figure 11**) and *Autumn Colours on Rivers and Mountains* by Zhao Boju (1120–1182) (**Figure 32**), were selected by the artist, rearranged and their colours enhanced and were reproduced in oil on canvas as the background for military aircraft. Helicopters and aeroplanes, symbols of the military power, appear imposing and menacing and seem to be projecting aggressively towards the spectator (Fischer 2011, 209). By merging colourful and monochrome elements together, Yang visually emphasizes the difference between past and present, idyllic landscapes and nightmarish sceneries, reminding of the harmful face of modern technology, under which power, nature seems to succumb.



Figure 30. Yuan Xiaofang (b. 1961). “F-16” *Flying Plan*, 1997. Oil on canvas, 160 x 120cm.



Figure 31. Yuan Xiaofang. *Jaguar Flying Plan*, 1998. Oil on canvas, 160 x 120 cm.



Figure 32. Zhao Boju (1120–1182). *Autumn Colours on Rivers and Mountains*, Northern Song dynasty. Horizontal scroll; ink and colours on silk, 55.6 x 323.2 cm. The Palace Museum, Beijing.

The painting of splendid landscapes once provided artists with a possibility of escaping from the pressure of everyday life, offering shelter from difficult situations. *Shanshui bua* sought to represent nature at its ideal state (Lee 2016, 214), a condition almost impossible to achieve but possible to create in the artist’s studio, where the mind could wander and recall beautiful sceneries once encountered. The sceneries which may be encountered in the contemporary world, on the other hand, widely offer artists an opportunity to reflect on the changes that the landscape has undergone in the last few decades. The artworks they produce manifest their worries about the present and seem to forecast a future made up of appalling scenarios. These sinister urban landscapes sometimes merely reflect reality, as in the case of Ai Weiwei’s photographs of the construction sites in Beijing, or aggravate the reality of industrialization, as suggested by Yang Yongliang’s cityscapes, where nature has been completely effaced by iron and concrete. While mountains and rivers were once the foundational and basic features of *shanshui* painting, natural

features do not bear the same function anymore and have lost their primary importance. If represented, the glorious mountains and rocky cliffs which remind of idyllic places and times are but a ploy to stress on the striking differences that the present bears with a romanticized past. Therefore, the last stills from Qiu Anxiong's videos are disturbing to the viewer who had appreciated the beautiful landscapes depicted at the beginning of the short films, and Yao Lu's images arouse a feeling of nostalgia because of the suggested neglect of the past.

Because of their explicit or hinted criticism of the rapid process of urbanization that hit China in a short period of time and that has dramatically changed not only the face of this country but the whole industrialized world too, these landscapes are often defined as social or political. As such, they are sometimes denied belonging to the *shanshui* genre because of the significant distance they have developed compared to pre-modern paintings. These artworks have been defined as "post-*shanshui* image[s] in the postmodern era" (Fischer 2011, 45) and have also been identified as *fengjing hua*, an expression that considers the representation of a scenery rather than a proper landscape in Chinese terms (Macri 2017b, 167). However, as *shanshui* painting was not solely intended to be a representation of natural features and often was not a faithful depiction of an actual landscape, these contemporary artists do fit in this tradition too, refreshing it in the light of new media and, especially, new anxieties. The natural environment does not guarantee a place of shelter like it used to anymore, simply for the fact that artists do not perceive the environment as past masters once did, for nature has little to do with the surroundings in which contemporary artists live and work today. They have now gained consciousness about the transformation of the landscape and represent their feelings about the city and the kind of relationship it has developed with man in the works they produce.

The Landscape of the Mind

Whether real or imaginary, we generally tend to consider a piece of landscape art as a faithful representation of the features of an area of land. Once, this could only be conceived as a cluster of solely natural elements portraying mountains, valleys, and rivers illuminated by sunrays or darkened by the presence of nimbus clouds. As we have seen, the landscape may now also take urban forms, for urban areas have largely superseded the countryside. Whichever their nature, these landscape views in art may exist in real life as well as be fictitious. A landscape painting to be found in an art gallery, in fact, is frequently deeply altered from the artist's impressions, for the landscape, by definition, is to be seen from a personal viewpoint (Nisbet 1976, 42).

In the history of Chinese painting, this is particularly true, since artists never painted their works *en plain air* like Impressionists such as Claude Monet (1840–1926) or Realists like Gustave Courbet (1819–1877) would do but collected sights and feelings during outings and then blended them together in their studios. As a consequence, the painting of a landscape never genuinely mirrored the actual scenery but was endowed with greater significances, going beyond the mere representation of the visible world. In particular, a so-called mind landscape, which incorporated allusions to earlier masters and was said to personify the inner spirit of the artist, showing through calligraphic brushwork, flourished during the years of the Mongol rule (1271–1368), under the Yuan dynasty (The Metropolitan Museum of Art 2004). Landscape painting acquired a highly personal significance, as it had never had before, becoming a means to express an artist's individuality and feelings, to carry political messages and personal grievance (Fong 1984, 94; Barnhart et al. 1997, 154–63). For these artists, the landscape was not necessarily one that could be found in the natural environment, but it was rather constructed in their minds and subsequently recreated on the scroll. Still, one is capable of recognizing all the features of a landscape in these paintings, since those views were composed of clearly delineated mountains and realistic trees. This is, however, not the same for landscape paintings rendered in splashed ink, a technique associated with the late Tang eccentrics⁸ and certain Chan painters of the thirteenth century, such as the monk Yujian (Sullivan 1979, 86). The technique consists in painting using a brush heavily loaded with wet ink, creating undelimited forms of lighter and darker, thicker strokes. We perceive *Mountain*

⁸ The term “eccentrics” refers to those artists of the late Tang dynasty whose painting techniques tended towards eccentricity in brushwork. Splashed ink, for instance, was one of the techniques used by the eccentrics.

Market, Clearing Mist as a landscape painting only by virtue of the rendering of two countrymen and a few roofs in clear, sharp brushstrokes on the paper; without these elements, the mountain forms would hardly be recognized as what they are (**Figure 33**). Ink splashing does not pursue verisimilitude, rather it aims at obtaining expressive abstractionism, for it generates from a state of high excitement.



Figure 33. Yu Jian (active 13th century). *Mountain Market, Clearing Mist*. Handscroll, ink on paper, h. 30,6 cm. Idemitsu Museum of Arts (Tokyo).

The contemporary artists introduced in this section have conceived the landscape as something that goes beyond the representation of usual landscape features. These works often appear quite abstract, sometimes it would be hard to link them to landscape art if it was not for the title they bear or the artist's statement on the subject. They cannot be associated with the natural environment, for mountains and rivers are not easily distinguishable or are not even there, nor can they be assimilated to the urban landscape, for no skyscrapers are present in these works. Although one would not expect to see such imagery when thinking about *shanshui hua*, these contemporary artworks are sometimes surprisingly similar to pre-modern landscape paintings. Yet, they also are profoundly contemporary and freed from the strict boundaries of pre-modern Chinese landscape painting, reminding us of other influences and art traditions. The urban landscape, for instance, has inspired Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) in his New York phase, during which he produced abstract paintings representing the rhythm of the American metropolis (**Figure 34**). Indeed, these artworks all generate from

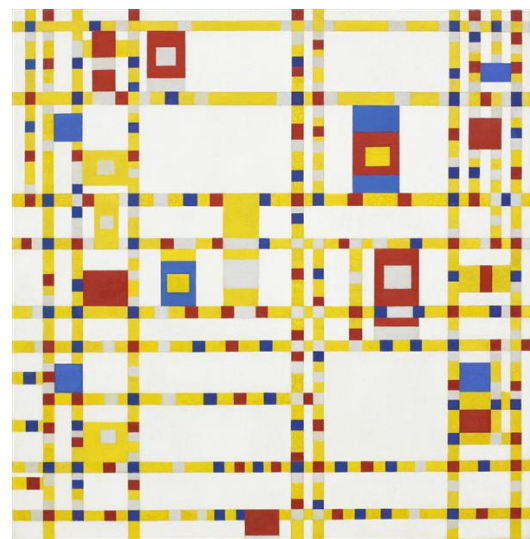


Figure 34. Piet Mondrian (1872–1944). *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, 1942–43. Oil on canvas, 127 x 127 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

the mind of the artists and, as such, they bear deeper meanings and embody feelings and ideas, becoming the mirror not of the visible world but of the inner spirit of the artist. One should not expect to capture the essence of these kinds of works at first glance; a deeper examination is necessary in order to make associations and discern the sense from artworks like those that follow.

Qiu Shihua's (b. 1940) paintings particularly require the beholder's attention to detect the elements forming his compositions. To the casual eye, his works would appear as monochromatic, empty paintings, white canvases only enriched with a light texture pattern and a hint of pink or blue at times. This whiteness, however, conceals a landscape to be found solely under close scrutiny, for the elements covered by the glazed surface only reveal themselves through a long and thorough inspection (**Figures 35, 36**). Qiu executes his landscapes in oil and then covers the canvas with many layers of semi-transparent paint that eventually render his brushstrokes almost undetectable. Furthermore, none of these paintings bears a title that could link them with the landscape, so it is entirely up to the spectator to make sense out of them in a disorientating atmosphere. Qiu's untitled works oscillate between complementary opposites, between absence and presence, visibility and invisibility, and reach a kind of balance that is in line with the artist's Daoist beliefs (Hearn 2013, 82–86). As the director of the Nationalgalerie in Berlin Udo Kittelman has remarked, Qiu's paintings "really depend on our perception," for his "white fields" show themselves for what they truly are only if we devote our entire attention and time to them (Easydoesitberlin 2012). At times, his landscapes are meant to represent an actual area of land; however, the artist does not paint on site, but he paints his canvases while in his studio, taking inspiration from an impression he had, because "facing a landscape can confine the mind. After leaving the scene, you become gradually



Figure 35. Qiu Shihua (b. 1940). *Untitled*. Oil on canvas, 150 x 292 cm.



Figure 36. Qiu Shihua (b. 1940). *Untitled*. Oil on canvas, 80 x 355 cm.

more liberated and freer” (Easydoesitberlin 2012). These works are thus the result of the artist’s mental activity, and eventually require the beholder’s mental scrutiny in order to grasp his intentions. They thus truly qualify as landscapes of the mind.

Being a product of the artist’s imagination, these mental landscapes are not immediately nor easily understood by the viewer. However, they are able to transform themselves in the spectator’s imagination, in which they go through a kind of metamorphosis that eventually leads these artworks to be read as some kind of landscape. This very process does not only occur while approaching one of Qiu’s paintings, for it can also describe the experience of other works as well. Li Xi’s (b. 1979) paintings on paper or canvas are another significant example. Her works appear as an intricate series of lines, arranged in a way to form abstract figures which are challenging to grasp. Li uses Chinese ink and colours to allow her brush to flow freely on the chosen support, which is covered by a coloured textured pattern. The artist, in fact, does not deliberately control the brush, so that the resulting shapes are able to change and grow spontaneously (Fischer 2011, 131). This unconstrained flow of ink eventually leads the artist to create imposing masses that recall mountain shapes or gentle swirls that bring to mind the movement of waters (**Figure 37**). It is up to the beholders and their imagination to make sense of the figures, which metamorphose in their minds, passing from being unclear, non-delineated shapes to being meaningful forms. What then appears on paper or canvas is not, however, the depiction of actual landscape features but the expression of the spirit of the artist herself, which is actually what was sought for in a so-called mind landscape of pre-modern times. A few paintings bear a title which connects the abstract landscapes to the Tibetan Buddhist concept of *bardo*, or rather the transitional state between death

and rebirth. According to the religion, life is made up of a series of phases of consciousness, and between these, the principle of consciousness is said to part with the physical body, and the individual is thought to go through three stages during which he or she experiences symbolic visions (Evans-Wentz 2000, LXVI, 28–30). Similarly, with her *bardo* landscapes, Li Xi gives expression to her kinds of visions, bringing her personal, intimate landscapes to the public with the aid of ink (**Figure 38**) (Fischer 2011, 131).



Figure 37. Li Xi (b. 1979). *No Name Name No*, 2010. Mixed media, 190 x 238 cm.



Figure 38. Li Xi. *Bardo-Full Mirror*, 2009. Mixed media, 248 x 166 cm.

A mental landscape artwork is essentially a materialization of the spurs that the mind receives over time. Influences may derive from any kind of experience; however, something that always deeply affects the newer generation of artists is their artistic legacy. Hao Liang (b. 1983) is perfectly aware of this; furthermore, his paintings aim to show the connection between different historical moments and places (Hao 2018). His works combine different influences and thus give expression to his personal constructs and reflection over his artistic legacy, while adding to that legacy his contribution at the same time. Hao is often celebrated for working with the classic technique of ink wash painting, but his paintings are significant for this section for much more, for they are the result of the blending of ideas and suggestions coming from the outside world, recollected in a very personal way. A representative work is *Streams and Mountains Without End*, which was considered the centrepiece of the artist’s solo exhibition “Portraits and Wonders” at Gagosian Gallery in New York in 2018. Moving from the right end of the silk scroll to the left of it, one notices how deeply the landscape changes from being a more accurate representation of natural features to becoming growingly a group of abstract figures (**Figures 39, 40a–d**). This visual

metamorphosis reflects a major change in art history, moving from Dong Qichang-like mountains (**Figure 41**) to Wassily Kandinsky's (1866–1944) abstract and colourful forms (**Figure 42**), transforming trees and rocks into geometrical shapes (Dafoe 2018; Pollack 2018a). The aforementioned artists are, in fact, those whom Hao claims he has taken inspiration from, in order to bring together the artistic ideas of the two painters (Hao 2018). *Streams and Mountains Without End* in no way resembles an existing area of land but seems to translate visually Hao's gathering of ideas and influences, giving him the possibility to traverse across the past and the present through his fantasies (Dafoe 2018), and giving us the chance to look into a personal construction of his in the form of a landscape.



Figure 39. Hao Liang (b. 1983). *Streams and Mountains Without End* (installation view at Gagosian Madison Avenue, New York), 2018. Ink and colour on silk, 42, 4 x 1.004 cm.

Figures 40a–e. Hao Liang. *Streams and Mountains Without End* (details).



Figure 40a.



Figure 40b.



Figure 40c.



Figure 40d.



Figure 41. Dong Qichang (1555–1636). *Shaded Dwellings among Streams and Mountains*, ca. 1622–25. Hanging scroll; ink on paper, 158.4 x 72.1 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 42. Wassily Kandinsky. *Red Spot II*, 1921. Oil on canvas, 131 x 181 cm. Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich.

It is tempting to compare Hao's intricate landscapes to Liu Dan's (b. 1953) paintings because of the combination of the same format and similar imagery. Liu's works, however, are much more political and emerge from the artist's need and will to express the drama experienced during the years of the Cultural Revolution, during which he joined a faction of the Red Guards, and after the events in Tiananmen Square (Munroe 1993, 8–12). He began working on *Ink Handscroll* just after June 4, 1989, to express his “anger and darkness for the tragedy of China” by creating a visionary landscape made up of complex shapes, intermingled together, transmuted into various states of being (Munroe 1993, 12). The abstract forms develop across a huge handscroll, beginning from the right end with elements depicted in red cinnabar ink, recalling tongues of fire, or flows of lava coming from a volcano and originating the whole twisted landscape (**Figure 43a**) (Hearn 2013, 74). As we move towards the left end of the scroll, however, the red ink fades into black and greyish figures reminding of the tones of monochrome ink landscape paintings (**Figures 43b, 43c**). Due to its dense composition and preponderance of heavy, dark hatch marks, *Ink Handscroll* has been compared to *A Thousand Peaks and Myriads Ravines* (Munroe 1993, 13; Hearn 2013, 82), a work by the Ming loyalist Gong Xian (1618–1689), whose imagery and heavy strokes are saturated with political hints, too. The strong tonal contrast and gloomy hue characterizing the mountain peaks (**Figure 44**) convey a feeling of restraint and oppression which matches the resentment of an artist seeing the territory of the Ming dynasty conquered by a foreign people, the Manchu, who would have given rise to the Qing empire. Gong Xian's painting, like many artworks by other Ming loyalist artists, acquired a deeper meaning, concealing a veiled political protest towards the current situation (Munroe 1993, 13). However, while pre-modern “mindscapes” retained a pronounced similarity in respect to the actual natural environment, Liu Dan's scroll

Figures 43a–c. Liu Dan (b. 1953). *Ink Handscroll* (details), 1990. Handscroll; ink and colour on paper, 95.6 x 1780 cm. The San Diego Museum of Art.



Figure 43a.



Figure 43b.



Figure 43c.

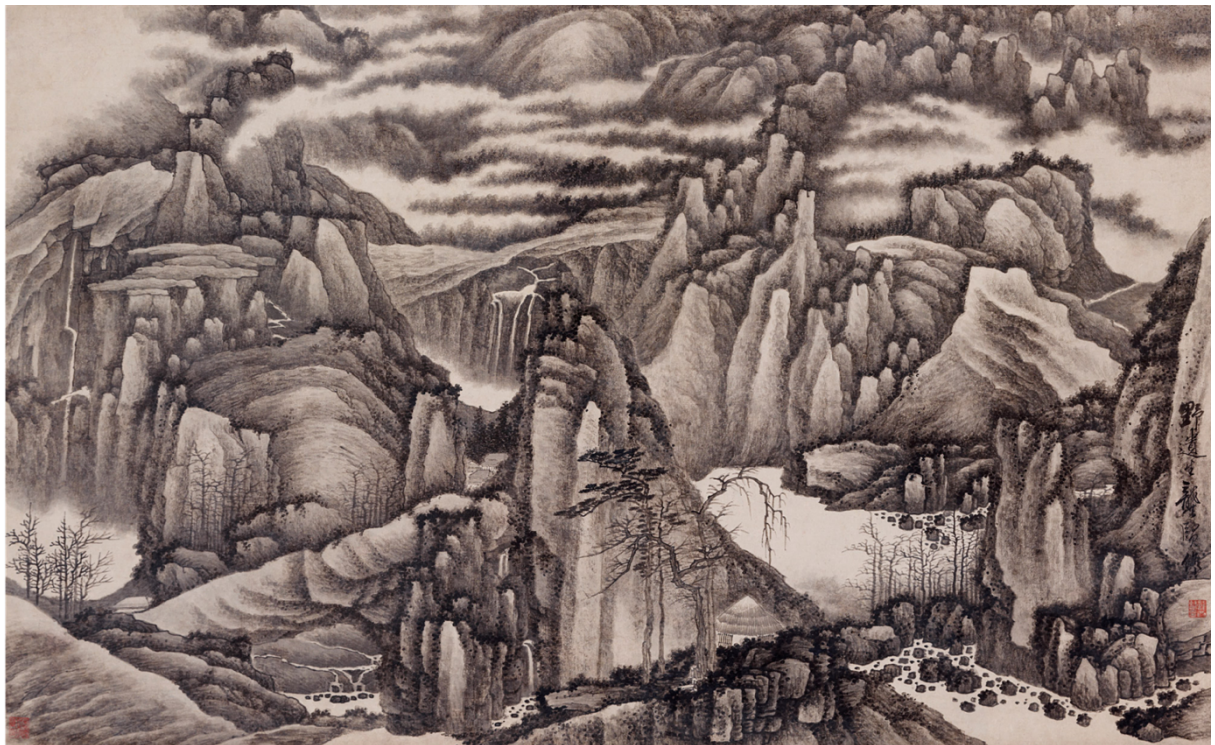


Figure 44. Gong Xian (1618–1689). *A Thousand Peaks and a Myriad Ravines*, early Qing dynasty, 17th century. Handscroll, ink on paper. Museum Rietberg, Zurich.

takes this whole concept of mental landscape to the extreme, presenting us an abstract representation of his feelings. The artist remarks how “the Chinese landscape is a mood [...], a mental stage” (Ashmolean Museum 2016), so that, although his starting point is based on Western art, which clearly explains the small, preparatory pencil drawings that he uses to be guided on the full-size scroll on the wall (Munroe 1993, 11–12), the philosophy behind his works is purely Chinese. It should not surprise, then, if the 2016 painting *Redefining Pleats of Matter* had at its basis a drawing by Raphael depicting Saint Benedict receiving his first disciples (**Figure 45**). In his work, Liu Dan



Figure 45. Raffaello Sanzio, called Raphael (1483–1520). *Saint Benedict Receiving Maurus and Placidus*. Black and red chalk, pen and brown ink, brown and grey wash, squared in black chalk, partially indented with stylus, an added section of paper at the left of the sheet, 36.8 x 41.3 cm. Private collection.



Figure 46. Liu Dan. *Redefining Pleats of Matter*, 2010. Ink on paper, 200 x 301 cm. Eskenazi Ltd, London.

maintained the original composition by the Italian Renaissance artist, while replacing the human figures with blackish twisted masses which remind of rocky formations dissolving in the mist (**Figure 46**). *Redefining Pleats of Matter*, then, becomes the visual translation of the artist's imagination, a complete reinterpretation of a Western work eventually embracing a Chinese tradition.

If the political message is one that connects contemporary Chinese mindscapes with pre-modern paintings of the *shanshui hua* tradition, nowadays these works may address new issues, which reflect the problems faced in our era. Like most urban landscape artworks, environmental matters can be at the centre of a landscape entirely generated in the mind. Shang Yang (b. 1942) is one of those artists engaged with such problems, as he turns to art to express his concerns for the natural environment. The artist particularly deals with the relationship between human beings and nature, an issue which is especially central in his *Great Landscape* and *Dong Qichang Project* series. *Great Landscape* represented the leading theme of Shang's artistic production in the 1990s, and the idea behind it was conceived thanks to a visual impression that the artist had while waiting in an outpatients' department. The people there, coming and going, reminded him of a landscape that had fallen into pieces and was then stitched together chaotically (Shang 2017). In *Great Landscape*, we see a representation of the landscape as an accumulation of geometrical shapes (**Figure 47**), which reflect the growing sense of human alienation from the environment (Fischer 2011, 165) and that would become a constant in the artist's following artistic production. Since 2000, in fact,



Figure 47. Shang Yang (b. 1942). *Great Landscape*, 1991. Oil on canvas, 97 x 130 cm.

Shang Yang has been working on *Dong Qichang Project*, which is strictly related to the previous series, although it better shows the juxtaposition of traditional painting and digital media. The title of the series, in fact, is a clear reference to the late Ming literatus, who is here taken as a symbol, and his landscape paintings are regarded as the emblem of the classical Chinese perception of nature, representing the harmony linking human beings with the natural environment (Yang 2016). The works making up this series show abstract mountain forms which, however, have nothing to do with the natural landscape; the shapes are often dark, giving the impression, as Yang Jing (2016) has suggested, of diseased black lungs, which stand as symbols of the environmental issues we are



Figure 48. Shang Yang. *The Dong Qichang Project – 20*, 2008. Mixed media, 360 x 306cm.

facing today, and are rendered in a sketchy style so as to express the grief and resignation of the artist over the topic (Figures 48, 49). Shang senses so deeply the threat of industrialization that it seems that pine trees and water streams cannot represent the landscape anymore, and the only types of landscapes that can still be depicted are “social, cultural and psychological” (Shang 2017). In order to express his ideas, the artist uses a combination of media, merging computer-generated images and recycled materials, most of which are industrial wastes, so as to be consistent with his cause.



Figure 49. Shang Yang. *The Dong Qichang Project – 31*, 2010. Mixed media, 218 x 506cm.

Although these types of landscapes are unrelated to the representation of the real environment, this does not preclude contemporary artists to encapsulate the influences they have inherited from their legacy. Often, as we have already seen for Liu Dan and Shang Yang, these

works present peculiarities which are linkable to a specific composition, technique, or idea that we generally associate with pre-modern *shanshui hua*. Sometimes, this is the only way we have to recognize these contemporary artworks as dealing with the depiction of a kind of landscape. The *Gu's Phrase* series by Gu Wenda (b. 1955) is indeed centred on the artist's interest on the creation of Chinese “pseudo-characters,”⁹ but the backgrounds created for them remind of a compositional theory peculiar to pre-modern landscape paintings. The background for *Study from Nature Series #6: Wind and Rain*, like the others in the series, does not clearly depict the features of a landscape, which is only vaguely suggested by the presence of thick brushstrokes in the first plane similar to clumps of grass growing in between rocks, and a cracked texture on the third plane reminding of the surface of a mountain (**Figure 50**). However, once compared to Fan Kuan's (930–1030) *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* (**Figure 51**), a painting displaying the “three planes” theory once dominating the composition of vertical monumental landscapes (Jansen 2013), Gu's background immediately becomes clearer.



Figure 50. Gu Wenda (b. 1956). *Gu's Phrase – Study from Nature Series #6: Wind & Rain*, 2005. Ink on rice paper mounted on wooden board, 274 x 183 cm.



Figure 51. Fan Kuan (930–1030). *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams*. Hanging scroll, ink and slight color on silk. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

⁹ Gu Wenda's “pseudo-characters” have appeared in the artist's artistic production since the creation of the *Mythos of Lost Dynasties* series (1983–). Pseudo-characters are created by combining different Chinese characters which eventually acquire new meanings. One example is the character denoting the presence of hate beneath the feeling of love, obtained by merging the Chinese character for “love” 爱 with that indicating the verb “to hate” 憎 (Fischer 2011, 97).

Similarly, the subject of *Yanbuang DNA Landscape* is indeed recognized by the beholder as a landscape only by virtue of the title that this series of paintings bears. The brushstrokes covering the custom-made green tea paper only vaguely recall the shape of a mountain or rocks; the scene appears rather abstract and minimal, requiring the spectator's imagination to sense it as a landscape (Figure 52). However, this mindscape actually conceals a more profound meaning behind its façade, something suggested by the use of ink, which allows the artist to remain tied to tradition. Nevertheless, Gu has frequently sought to reinvent tradition and classic ink art in order to give them more international visibility and convey new meanings. The ink the artist uses in *Yanbuang DNA Landscape*, in fact, is obtained through the pulverization of human hair, a medium that both refers to tradition and brings in innovation. However, unlike his well-known *United Nations* series, which comprises site-specific installations of human hair collected across the globe, *Yanbuang DNA Landscape* contains the genetic sequence of fellow countrymen only,¹⁰ and this measure allows him to convey a Chinese sense of belonging to the ink tradition and to guarantee a “cure for [Chinese] cultural anxieties” (Gu 2014), possibly referring to the need to return to his people's cultural roots.



Figure 52. Gu Wenda. *Yanbuang DNA Landscape #1*, 2012. Green tea rice paper on wooden board and ink, 207 x 2760 cm.

When asked to think about the landscape, our mind tends to visualize bucolic natural settings, vast expanses of green, or imposing peaks covered by dense vegetation. The mind, however, has no restraints, and it may wander along streams of thoughts and through steep paths trodden by personal experiences and feelings. In the past, landscape painting did not merely mean to mirror the natural environment but frequently originated from the artist's inner spirit and aimed at subtly conveying his feelings and ideas. Regardless of the nature characterizing the ideas at the foundation of a landscape painting, *shanshui hua* in the past still retained the actual elements of a landscape. Political frustration, for instance, had to be concealed behind mighty, dark summits, and the sense of alienation from society could be represented by depicting desolate surroundings. Nowadays too, the imagery associated with the landscape is willingly adopted by contemporary artists trying to convey more profound meanings. Unlike ancient masters, however, who had to hide their feelings behind realistic features of a landscape, contemporary artists take more freedom to express themselves and do not strive to stick to traditional canons of *shanshui hua*. The visionary landscapes by Liu Dan and the complex shapes in Shang Yang's oeuvre reflect the artists' state of

¹⁰ The national specificity of this series is already clear in the title, for Yanhuang refers to the ethnic community which once lived in the Yellow River basin area and who gave origin to the Chinese people.

mind; concerns regarding political matters or environmental issues are metaphorically assimilated to imposing peaks which, however, do not resemble actual mountain forms nor realistic views but still remind of abstract landscapes. Nonetheless, as the artworks presented above have proved, mindscapes do not need to rely on personal anxieties and concerns to find expression in the arts, as they can originate from different suggestions, beliefs, and experiences that are peculiar to each artist. The works by Hao Liang and Liu Dan betray Western influences, while Qiu Shihua and Li Xi seem to remain faithful to Daoist and Buddhist principles, respectively. However disparate these artworks might appear, they each still may be assimilated to *shanshui hua* by virtue of the techniques used, the compositions adopted, or simply because of the artists' intention to be part of that legacy. References to great masters of the past are sometimes clearly stated by the artists, while other artworks suggest the influence of particular pre-modern masterpieces. This closeness to *shanshui hua*, however, is not always obviously discernible, as artists may make heavy use of modern techniques and media to produce their works or take abstractionism to the extreme. Mindscapes are the most personal among all types of landscapes, and artists are now free to show it as they had never been before.

Conclusion

Chinese artists have long been portraying the landscape from their special viewpoint, hiding feelings and concerns behind the elements of the scenery. In the last few decades, the landscape has gained an even more subjective significance, coming to denote a great variety of vistas and mental constructions that frequently have nothing to do with mountains and waters, the once essential elements of *shanshui hua*.

On the wake of their ancestors, contemporary artists still turn to the subject of landscape to express themselves, although this style seems now freed from the stricter boundaries of pre-modern landscape painting. This research has tried to prove that, however different from each other, the artworks created in recent times are perfectly integrated within the tradition, even though a great many of them clash with the “canons” of *shanshui hua*. The environment changes and so does art, and the concept of landscape itself may now stand for a variety of possibilities that artists are free to portray in their artworks. By virtue of that, landscape art can really give voice to its time.

As we have seen in the first chapter, some artists remain tied to the more traditional idea of landscape, one that, however, is mainly to be found in the works of ancient Chinese masters and is thus based on memory. Highly different artworks have been grouped under the concept of nostalgia, a feeling that makes us consider the past that these works seem to recall as an ideal age. Nevertheless, however different they are, these artworks all find in actual landscape paintings their starting point. This fact makes us wonder whether pure nature can still inspire artists or not and makes us think that maybe genuine landscape art can only rely on past masters’ works.

Some artists grouped under the second chapter, the one dedicated to cityscapes and urban realities, have found inspiration in classical works, too. However, these urban landscapes have also proved that it is important for landscape art in China produced nowadays to show how space has changed throughout time. The direct comparison with the kind of landscape depicted in the past or the juxtaposition of the same places to be portrayed in different moments provide opportunity for thought regarding the changes occurred in our natural surroundings in the last few decades. By adopting the same kind of visual imagery, format, and colours used in the past, artists are able to place themselves within the tradition, creating something new by depicting the new elements of the landscape at the same time. While the environmental degradation that can be seen in some of

these works is often overdramatized, it is not hard to liken these urban landscapes to actual modern cities, where we live and work in.

The artworks presented in the third chapter show how loose the limits of the category of landscape art have become, allowing the artists to give free rein to their inner spirit. Mountain- and water-like motifs become the visual representation of thoughts, feelings, and experiences that artists do not have to hide behind actual landscape elements anymore. For these artists, landscape has acquired extremely personal connotations like it never had before, coming to denote vistas that cannot be found anywhere in the visible world.

Landscape art in China is able to live on and embody the time it belongs to thanks to the will of these artists to blend traditional elements with innovations brought by the advent of modernization. While the basis of this genre is to be found in *shanshui hua*, landscape art nowadays has been enriched by many external influences. New artists live in an interconnected world and have been affected by a multitude of influences coming from different art traditions and, for the greatest part, the introduction of technology. The use of computer software, photography, and other media different from ink and paper allows the artists to step out from the conventions of a remote past and to fall within the endless possibilities offered by the more fluid bounds of contemporary art. While brushwork was once essential in order to detect and comprehend the spirit of the single artist, it is now the choice of a different medium that reflects the individuality of contemporary artists. Thus, their stylistic adoptions show their interest in experimenting and their preferences for a specific technique over the others, expressing the will of these artists to reinvent a tradition and suit it to new trends and necessities.

Compared to the past, the focus of many contemporary artworks seems to have changed. While *shanshui hua* was once about the individual artist behind the painting, his personality and cultivation detectable through brushwork, recent artworks seem much more related to feelings and concerns that do not exclusively interest the creators but a whole generation of people and, at times, the whole humanity. When this occurs, contemporary artists almost seem to act as spokespeople for a global cause, first and foremost the environmental one, which is a subject that has been dealt with in each of the three categories of landscape analysed.

The landscape has been inspiring Chinese artists for thousands of years and probably will continue to stimulate artistic production in the future. As a consequence of the modification of time and space, artists' perception towards the landscape has changed and will possibly undergo further alterations in the future, causing the artists' will and need to translate visually their thoughts and the spurs induced by these changes. Future research on the matter should thus be centred on

detecting the way artists conceive the landscape, whether the concept of landscape will acquire new significances, and how artists interact and negotiate with traditional landscape representations.

Landscape art in China now combines a romanticized past with an uncertain future, traditional forms with modern and contemporary media, memory with imagination. Artists do not have to stick to what is generally referred to as “tradition” in order to feel part of it, since “being part of a legacy has no limitations” (Lim 2009, 246). Contemporary landscape art epitomizes the age and space it belongs to. It has become a fluid category which has no strict boundaries.

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