

山水

SHANSHUI

From Cliff Inscriptions to "Writing the Mountain": Constructing the Agency of Contemporary Shan Shui Art

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By: Mo Kanan 莫堪安

Introduction: Spiritual Nomadism and Cultural Homecoming in the Technological Age

Yu Yingshi 余英时 once profoundly stated: "The attitude of 'the unity of man and all things under heaven' is indeed not 'modern,' yet it may possess a new, transmodern revelation."¹ This statement precisely anchors the starting point and core of this discussion. We find ourselves in an unprecedented era: the wave of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is reshaping the fundamental structures of society, and economic globalization continues to erode cultural diversity. On China's necessary path towards rejuvenation, there also lies a significant danger: in the process of catching up with Western technology and material civilization, our long-standing cultural individuality may be stifled, and our cultural character, evolved over millennia, may be uprooted.

As the world tends towards homogenization, and the connection between culture and its native soil is severed, the spirit loses the soil it depends on for survival. Culture, which should be full of warmth and creativity, becomes cold and rigid due to "insufficient spiritual

blood supply." Ultimately, humans lose their "cultural hometown," becoming wanderers, spiritually adrift. Under the impact of the dominant Western value system and the logic of capital expansion, ecological and spiritual crises arrive in quick succession. At this moment, looking back at the luminous and warm wisdom of our ancestors, and re-advocating the value of "emulating nature" (道法自然) that emphasizes harmonious coexistence with nature, becomes particularly urgent.

However, historical lessons tell us that both the wholesale Westernization of "borrowingism" and the fragmentary, selective worship of Western civilization harbor significant perils. They prevent us from seeing the integrity of our own culture and from grasping the essence of Western thought, ultimately leading us astray based on misunderstandings. The traditional Chinese concept of harmonious coexistence with nature had long maintained a high vigilance against potential conflicts between humanity and nature. Today, in the "human-made world" represented by AI, while enjoying convenience, humanity is also "kidnapped" by its own creations. "Consumerism" prevails, while "metaphysical spirit" atrophies. Since the May Fourth Movement, our understanding of

1 余英时 Yu Yingtis. 《现代儒学的回顾与展望》 [Review and Prospect of Modern Confucianism] [M]. Beijing: Life-Reading-New Knowledge Three-Link Bookstore, 2004.

"science" has often been confined to the technical level, equating it with endless progress and material pursuit, while stripping it of its humanistic connotations—this is a profound misunderstanding.

Therefore, connecting ancient Shan Shui with humanity is not simply about nostalgic retrospection, but about "casting off restraints and rediscovering spiritual awe and cultural authenticity." Modern science has dispelled the mystical fog of antiquity but has also stripped humanity from its integral existence as spiritual and religious beings, reducing it to materialized, commodified individuals "upon the earth." Can we sever these "unnecessary bonds" and reconnect with the spiritual state of the ancients who "wandered freely between heaven and earth"? They held a religious-like reverence and affinity for the cosmos and deeply understood the timing and rhythms of the natural world. Picking up this "Shan Shui spirit" again—this spirit that preserves ancient reverence, emphasizes internal and external harmony, and focuses on inward effort unique to the Chinese people—aims to re-establish humanity's position within vast nature and find a home for the wandering soul.

I. The Contemporary Value of the *Shan Shui* Spirit: Rebuilding Spiritual Coordinates on the Cultural Ruins

The *Shan Shui* spirit contains the vastness of heaven and earth and profound traditional value. In con-

temporary times, although this spirit has been lost, once picked up again, it can still cause the soul to tremble and evoke deep yearning. It should be like the sword and jade worn by the ancients: not only a symbol of identity and character but also a constant reminder and a gentle constraint.

We long labored under a cognitive misconception: equating "Westernization" with "modernization." Recent decades of economic development have allowed China to regain some confidence, but rebuilding a cultural edifice that was nearly destroyed cannot be achieved overnight. As an ancient cultural nation, to complete the psychological and cultural adjustment during its transformative rejuvenation, we must first answer the fundamental questions: "Who are we?" and "What are the basic values and central concepts of our tradition?"

Yu Yingshi once used the ancient saying, "The rise of rites and music requires a century of accumulated virtue before they can flourish," to warn that modern China precisely lacked such a long stage of "accumulating virtue."² Cultural construction must be based on a profound foundation of academic thought. In the past, we often sighed with the sentiment of "gazing at the fish by the abyss" (临渊羡鱼 - admiring from afar without action); now, we need the solid work of "retreating to weave nets" (退而结网 - preparing diligently). He further pointed out that "any new

2 Yu Yingtis. *op cit*.

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Fault - The Landscape of Words - Night Snow Gradually Disappears (夜雪初霽) featuring geological cracks © Mo Kanan Studio

attempt at Chinese cultural reconstruction must start with a fundamental change in value concepts."³ Over two hundred years of continuous input of Western values have drastically altered the face of Chinese cultural values. The current slogans of "cultural confidence" and "national rejuvenation" should not be the blind pursuit of other civilizations by an injured nation, nor a rootless pagoda detached from the nation's basic values.

In the future AI era, while we certainly need a global perspective, as a nation with profound historical resources, the key is to transform historical and ideological resources into momentum for improving reality, rather than viewing them as a burden to progress. Chen Yinke's judgment in his review report of Feng Youlan's "History of Chinese Philosophy" remains a guiding principle for cultural construction today: "Those who truly can form their own systematic thinking and achieve something original must, on the one hand, absorb and import external theories, and on the other hand, not forget the position of their own nation. This two-fold attitude, opposite yet complementary, is the true spirit of Daoism, the old path of Neo-Confucianism, and what the history of our nation's contact with other ethnic groups' thoughts over two thousand years has revealed."⁴ This inspires us to embrace an open mind, break through black-and-white narrow-mindedness, and achieve the contemporary activation of the *Shan Shui* spirit through creative transformation and innovative development.

From a sociological perspective, Professor Qu Jingdong's 渠敬东 analysis hits the mark: In the tide of modern capitalism, heaven, earth, mountains, and water have gradually lost their place in concrete social operations.⁵ Consequently, humanity has also lost its position in nature and

³ Yu Yingtis. *op cit*

⁴ Yu Yingtis. *op cit*

⁵ 陈寅恪 Chen Yinke. 《冯友兰中国哲学史下册审查报告》 [Review Report on Feng Yonglans Volume 2 of "History of Chinese Philosophy"] [J/OL]. // Jinming Pavilion Collected Works II, 2001.

the cosmos. The way to resolve the modern crisis requires reflection within the Western civilizational framework on one hand, but more importantly, it requires "re-problematizing modernity as a traditional problem." That is, based on a dual transcendence, to reconstruct the complete *Shan Shui*, reconstruct the Chinese cosmology, and reconstruct the Chinese holistic transcendent world. Chinese *Shan Shui* is the necessary path for the rejuvenation of our modern civilization. As a constituent of nature, it is the dwelling place for the existence of the human spirit and the key to mending the separation of divinity, humanity, and matter characteristic of modern society.

II. *Shan Shui* as Contemporary Artistic Agency: From "Writing the Mountain" (写山) to the Practice of "Inner Observation"

In the new global landscape, how can Chinese people find their own way of responding from the *Shan Shui* spirit? This requires us to enter the traditional context with the most cutting-edge contemporary problem consciousness, actively trace historical 脉络 in artistic practice, and construct a contemporary "*Shan Shui* spirit."

1. The Shift in Artistic Concept and the "Literal Landscape"⁶

6 韩文彬 Han Wenbin. 《铭石为景：早期至中古中国的摩崖文字》 [*Monuments*

From an art-historical perspective, Professor Zhu Qingsheng 朱青生 points out that the inception of the concept of "art history" in China came at the cost of obscuring China's own artistic concepts.⁷ Therefore, clarifying China's concept of "active art" is crucial. For contemporary art creators, although the ancients were external to the *Shan Shui*, they could perceive the cosmos with their own spirit. When walking along the mountain paths, we find the traces of the ancients' practice and engage in dialogue with them, contemplating the sedimentation of culture. Among these, "cliff inscriptions" (摩崖石刻), as an ancient and common channel of interaction between humans and mountains, construct a "linguistic public sphere." They organize words into a field possessing the dimension of the *Shan Shui* spirit, forming a unique "literal landscape" (文字的风景).

Cliff inscriptions are characters carved on granite boulders and cliffs, an engraving project that continued for thousands of years, forming a vast archive of writing for research. They not only alter the appearance of *Shan Shui* but also brand its

as Scenery: Rock Carvings in Early to Medieval China] [M]. Peking University Press, 2024.

7 渠敬东 Qu Jingdong. Mountains, 《山水、物象与心性——现代性处境中的中国文明意义》 [*Waters, Forms and the Nature of the Mind - The Significance of Chinese Civilization in the Context of Modernity*] [J]. Xuehai, 2019(1).



吹天山

莫愁安

十五歲來尋天山
三十歲上言天山
四十歲下言天山
五十歲下言天山
六十歲下言天山
七十歲下言天山
八十歲下言天山
九十歲下言天山
一百歲下言天山

米

來

書畫印板著

莫山成印

畫林全式

四山文萃與山水水墨斷古果畫圖宋版墨跡
自責幹大學日計本十里畫卷表紙山水畫
山松山四山書衣太山空問文集小竹三冊出
畫山竹圖

四山山竹圖

莫山成印

月明心舍
新學書
並合月人十
好竹

莫山成印

莫山成印

莫山成印

如是山

莫斯安

十五歲來景靈山龍靈山並不謂山

非本不愛登歸靜因山或林並申

三十而立言面山靈新書收順風山

山怕雨山習志韻林是太古歌書山

四不慮再臨山靈是必靜與式象

是動於下江及新靜至天而易時

topography with an indelible cultural-geographical imprint. Studying cliff inscriptions means paying attention to the calligrapher, style, audience, and the relationship between the poetry/text and its location—that is, studying how the Chinese people, through the medium of writing, transformed geological forms into literary, ideological, and even religious landscapes imbued with Confucian and Daoist thoughts.

2. "Writing the Mountain" as Method: Personal Practice and the Path of "Inner Observation"

The concept of "Writing the Mountain" (写山) is an artistic methodology aimed ultimately at establishing a contemporary *Shan Shui* order. It observes the juxtaposition of space and time through the relationship between text and natural geological forms, and is an ink practice (水墨行为) that integrates multiple definitions of culture, history, philosophy, and *Shan Shui* imagery.

In this practice, the "on-site viewing mode of text and geography" is crucial. *Shan Shui* does not originate from a landscape existing prior to language but precisely stems from the "already deadly purity of the word." Starting from the carved stone, writing truly sends signals to our spirit. People enter the realm of "between"—the dialogue between "mountain" and "text." In this dialogue, mountain and human draw closer to each other, forming an equal "covenant."

The author uses the anecdote of Su Shi, Su Zhe, and Hainan's Jiang Tangzuo to illustrate the concept of "connection." Su Shi was exiled to Danzhou, and his brother Su Zhe to Leizhou. Together, they composed a poem for their Hainan disciple Jiang Tangzuo, using the power of culture to "connect" the severed cultural veins across the sea. Su Shi's inscription of "First Among Ten Thousand Mountains" (万山第一) for the Tianning Temple in Leizhou, where there are no mountains, erected a spiritual peak in a place without physical heights. This "posthumous recognition" (追认) and "connection" is a model for our cultural practice today: through tracing cultural roots, connecting with the spirit of ancient worthies, allowing historical ideological resources to burst with vitality in the present.

"Writing the Mountain" is a speculative act. It involves reconstructing the text of cliff inscriptions through "inner observation" (内观), using ink on paper and comprehensive materials, following the principle of "Regarding Blank as Black" (计白当黑). Yu Yingshi pointed out that "since the 'transcendental breakthrough' in ancient China, 'self-cultivation' or 'cultivating oneself' (修己) was a concept commonly emphasized by the Confucian, Mohist, and Daoist schools."⁸ Whether it is the Analects' "cultivate oneself with reverence," the Mozi's "cultivating one's person," or the Laozi's "Cultivate it in your person, And

8 朱青生 Zhu Qingsheng. 《艺术史在中国》 [Art History in China] [J]. Literature and Art Research, 2011(10).

its power shall be genuine," all point to the path of self-knowledge through "inner observation." "Inner observation" is the slow verification of self-identity through endless experiences. In art, it manifests as rationally 梳理 the observed text and natural geological forms, reviewing information beyond their literary thought, splitting or blending the seen images to generate 全新的 "images of the heart" (心象). These images record the integrity, contemporaneity, and temporality of *Shan Shui*, ultimately transforming into an artistic field that resists grand narratives and the marginalization of archives.

3. The Logic of Dialoguing with the Mountain: Transcending Self and Reconstructing Wholeness

The logic of dialoguing with the mountain is rooted in a philosophy that transcends egocentrism. The mountain transcends itself, exists within the world, rather than clinging to an inner self. Genuine dialogue neither relies entirely on the mountain nor can it be completely detached from it. The spirit of cliff inscriptions further liberates people from egoism, opening them to the world, accepting what they encounter in life, thus forming an infinite world of relationships.

The definition of "Writing the Mountain" lies in not wanting to miss something essential, "returning the essential me to myself, it is also the process of me giving birth to myself." On a tech-

nical level, "Writing the Mountain" is a series of experiments with traditional materials and new paper supports. It uses text as a carrier to generate *Shan Shui* models, performs a reserved 置換 of "Regarding Blank as Black," where flowing ink forms natural geological textures under the superposition of complex materials, and then continuously compiles text and *Shan Shui* using the method of "Knowing the White, Guarding the Black" (知白守黑). This logic is not obscured by repetition or layering. On the contrary, it can generate ink saturation and deep spatial structures characterized by 两极思辨 (dialectical thinking) where traditional brush and ink cannot reach. The traditional culture implicit within these structures, while contrasting with the contemporaneity of ink, brings forth referential hints forgotten in the past or yet to come, ultimately offering a new integrity of *Shan Shui*.

Therefore, "Writing the Mountain" is not only an exploration of ink language but also an attitude towards a "view of life" (生命观). It is like the Confucian creed, running through an individual's life course: engraving the seals "Mountain Stone" (山石) and "Heavier than Gold, Jewels, and Jade" (重于金石珠玉) when "setting my mind on learning"; establishing a research direction when "taking my stand at thirty" with the "Returning to the Mountain" (回山) manuscript exhibition; and hoping to enter

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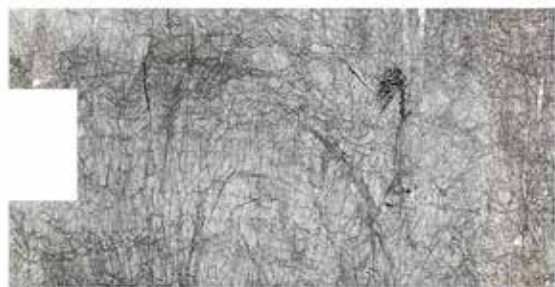
佳兒

從

From the Classic of
Mountains and Rivers to
the Philosophy of Life

莫堪安
Mo-kanan

山水經



到

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人生觀

深谷之上蒼松
見其息龍但看
龍包雪舞
龍起於深淵
仁士志



Fault - Self-Examination - Blue Ridge and Red Cliffs (青壁丹崖) in Viewing Oneself © Mo Kanan Studio



Fault - Self-Examination - High and Majestic in the work - Observing Oneself (觀己——崧高峻極) High and Majestic © Mo Kanan Studio



a state of "transcending worldly concerns" (超然物外) when "without perplexities at forty." It is a cognition of nature and all things, led by the consciousness of one's own life; it is the temporal concept of "later generations looking at the present age just as we look at past ages"; it is the slow and firm verification of self-identity through endless "inner observation."

Conclusion: Towards a Transmodern Shan Shui Civilization

In an age where AI technology increasingly deeply intervenes in and defines human existence, rediscovering the transmodern revelation of the Chinese Shan Shui spirit concerns not only the self-continuation of national culture but also the spiritual way out for humanity's shared future. The crisis we face is, in essence, a crisis of "meaning," a crisis of humanity losing its way within the vast material and symbolic systems it has created.

The *Shan Shui* spirit, with its profound recognition of "the unity of man and all things under heaven," offers us a worldview fundamentally different from the Western subject-object dichotomy and anthropocentrism. It teaches us reverence, harmony, and inward adjustment. This is not opposing technological progress but setting spiritual boundaries and a value compass for technology; it is not escaping modern society but finding a stable spiritual anchor for us in the torrent of modernity. Through contemporary artistic practices like "Writing the Moun-

tain," we see the possibility of transforming rich traditional resources into active cultural creation. Starting from personalized "inner observation" and through dialogue with the "literal landscape," it ultimately arrives at the reconstruction of a holistic cosmology. This enlightens us that cultural rejuvenation is not museum-style preservation but a continuous, vibrant creative transformation. It requires us to "absorb and import external theories while not forgetting the position of our own nation," to establish a creative tension of "being opposite yet complementary" between a global vision and local roots, between technological rationality and humanistic spirit, and between historical depth and contemporary problem consciousness.

Ultimately, what we seek is not merely an artistic style but a way of being, a mode of existence for settling down and fulfilling our destiny. Let the *Shan Shui* spirit, like the sword and jade of the ancients, in this transmodern era, become once again the symbol of our identity, the reminder of our character, and the constraint for our spirit, guiding us through the fog of technology back to that vast, profound, and warm "cultural hometown."

Mo Kanan, is a contemporary artist, a long-term researcher of the "Writing Mountains" project, mainly engaged in contemporary, mixed-media and local art practices.)



寫山與現代山水精神

論一：象境、罔境、禪境

1. 玄武、後山、青山
2. 青龍、左翼、左輔
3. 白虎、右翼、右弼
4. 朱雀、案山、前山

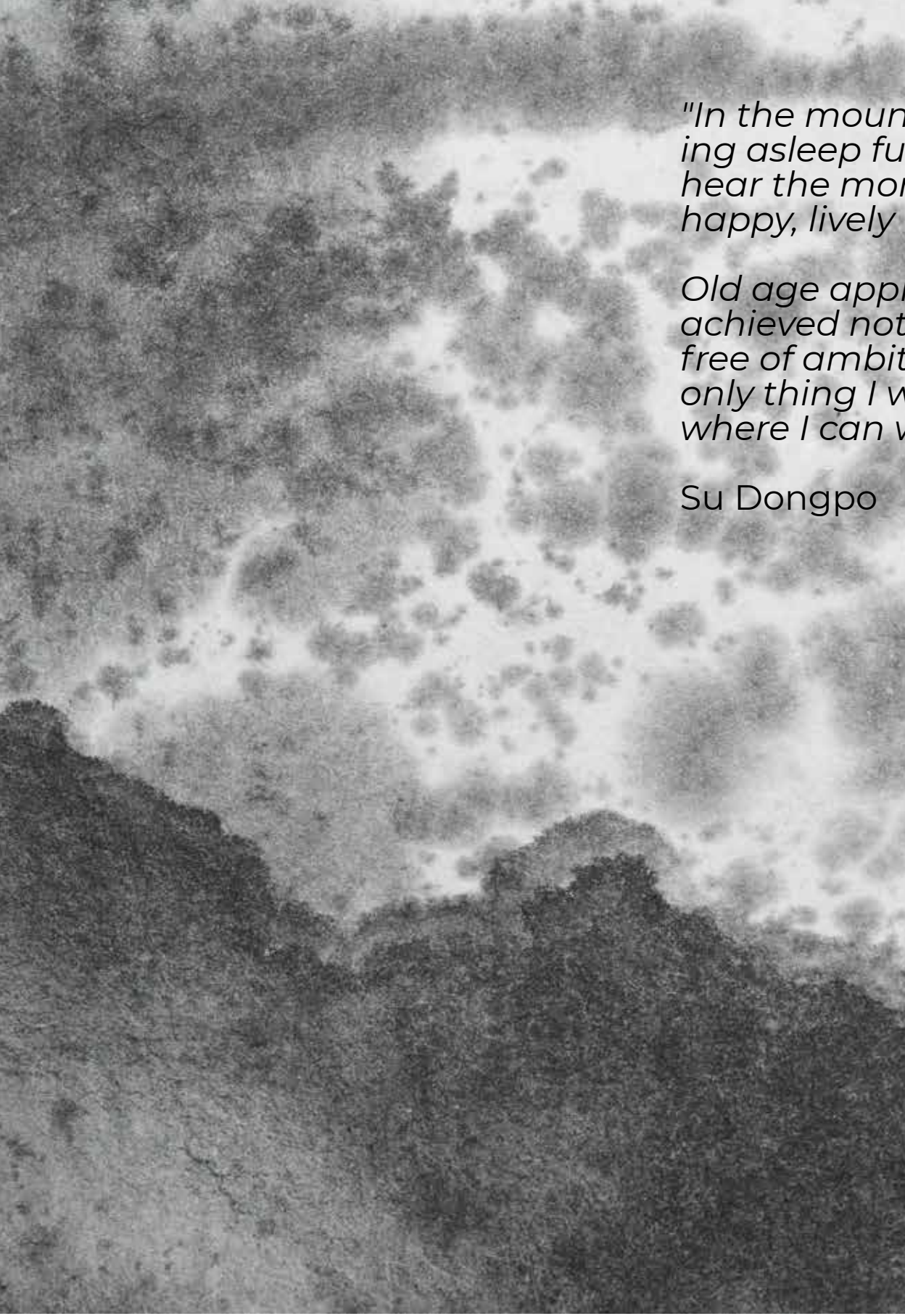


綫象山水，超以象外。

Fault Line - The Landscape of Words - Writing Mountains and the Modern Spirit of Landscape Art (寫山與現代山水精神) © MoKanan Studio

Fault - Self-Examination - Cracks and Isolation in the work (觀己——皴裂與孤峙) "Fault"

© Mo Kanan Studio

A black and white photograph of a mountain landscape. The foreground shows dark, silhouetted mountain peaks. The middle ground is filled with a dense layer of mist or low-hanging clouds, creating a soft, ethereal atmosphere. The background shows more distant, lighter mountain peaks rising above the mist. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

*"In the mountain
ing asleep full
hear the moon
happy, lively*

*Old age appro
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free of ambit
only thing I w
where I can v*

Su Dongpo



stains, when it rains, I bring wine, fall-
lly clothed as the evening clears. I don't
rning bells ring. In my dreams, I'm a
butterfly, my body weightless and free.

roaches, and I return home having
thing. All I desire is a field and a home,
tions—great men may laugh at me. The
wish for is the sandy path along the lake,
walk without stepping into mud."