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**The Poetic Dance of Lines: A Brief
Encounter with Wu Guanzhong's
Expressive Ink Art**

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By: Shuo Sue Hua

In a seminal paper, Martin J. Powers argues that the Chinese literati intellectuals have always found a way to construct the discernibly unique visual narratives to represent their national and cultural identity. Ink art is one powerful instrument for such sustenance of self-identification.¹ Wu Guanzhong (1919-2010) is a preeminent 20th-century Chinese painter. From 1937 to 1942, he studied Western oil painting and Chinese style painting in the Hangzhou Academy of Art under Chinese art masters Lin Fengmian (1900-1991) and Pan Tianshou (1897-1971).² In 1947, he won a government scholarship to study at l'Ecole nationale supérieure des Beaux-arts, where the painter received training in both classical and contemporary arts in Paris, France. When studying in France, Wu immersed himself in the paintings from the period of European high modernism. The richness and freedom of expression in modern western paintings had widened his horizon of appreciating art and honed his painting skills.³

1 Martin J. Powers, The Cultural Politics of the Brushstroke, in *The Art Bulletin* 95/2 (2013), 312-327.

2 Zhijian Qian, Towards a Sinicized Modernism: *The Artistic Practice of Lin Fengmian in Wartime China, 1937-1949* (PhD diss., New York University, 2014); Wu Guanzhong, In memory of my teacher Lin Fengmian, in *Literature and Art Studies* 4 (1979), 71.

3 The European painters include Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), Eugène Henri Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), Henri Émile Benoît Matisse (1869-1954), Pablo Ruiz Picasso (1881-1973), Amedeo Clemente Modigliani (1884-1920), Georges Braque (1882-1963) and Maurice Utrillo (1883-1955). See Wu Guanzhong, Again on Shitao's Comments on Painting, in *Art Research* (no. 1: 1997): 43.

After returning to China, Wu taught at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1951. He was criticized for being too "modern" in an environment where the preference for social realist style prevailed and dominated. Because of the artist's incompatibility with the mainstream visual trend at the academy, he was transferred to teach at the Tsinghua University in 1953 and the Beijing Normal College and College of Arts and Crafts since 1956. During the first half of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1977), Wu was sent to the countryside, and did not have the luxury to paint in a studio.⁴ In 1973, he was recalled to Beijing and resumed painting. While working on multiple commissioned projects for hotels, the painter was accused as a "bourgeois" painter. At this juncture he shifted away from Western-style oil paintings to work mainly in the Chinese medium.⁵

Wu Guanzhong's exuberant ink and color paintings display coalescence of Western and oriental visual languages. The artist's distinctive personal style leads to a new genre of Chinese ink painting.⁶ Since the late 1970s, the artist held successful solo exhibitions in China, increasing his popularity within the nation. Following a series

4 Wu Guanzhong, Cold Winter, Sweltering Summer, Earth, in *Collected Writings of Wu Guanzhong* 1 (Beijing: Tuanjie Chubanshe, 2008), 40-42.

5 For discussion on Wu Guanzhong's artistic development in response to the cultural politics in China, see Wenwen Liu, *Modernity Through Syncretism and Eclecticism: Wu Guanzhong's Artistic Practice in the Cultural and Political Environment of the PRC, 1949-1989* (PhD diss., Victoria University of Wellington, 2019).

6 Wenwen Liu, *Modernity Through Syncretism and Eclecticism*, 15-16.



of exhibitions in Asia, America, and Europe starting from the mid-1980s, Wu became known internationally. A recipient of the award of Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres from the French Ministry of Culture, he was the first living Chinese painter to hold a one-man show at the British Museum.⁷

An important part of the 20th-centu-

7 Michael Sullivan, *Modern Chinese Art: The Khoan and Michael Sullivan Collection* (Ashmolean Museum, 2001), 134.

ry Chinese art history had to do with its art in response to Western art, and scholars have pointedly discerned the cultural differences in conceptualizing the abstract quality in pictorial languages.⁸ When comparing Wu with the abstract painters in the West, art historian Fong Wen commented that “most modern Chinese painters have refrained from experimenting

8 A classical study is: Mayching Kao, *China's Response to the West in Art, 1898-1937* (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1972).



Clouds and snow 《云与雪》, ink on paper ,132x66, 1990

with non-objective art.”⁹ The artist was conscious of the gazes landed at him from the West:

Each time I paint I imagine two men looking [at me] from behind: one is a fellow townsman [from China], the other

*is an art expert from the West. Are my paintings capable of moving both audiences? It is really difficult. I spent my entire life struggling with it.*¹⁰

Like many of his artist peers in China, Wu learned about Western art and theories through lenses filtered with Chinese terminology and concepts, for instance, by equating realism with *xieshi*, and

10 Wu Guanzhong, Fifty Years of Painting, in *Collected Writings of Wu Guanzhong* 1, 159.

9 Wen C. Fong, *Between Two Cultures: Late-Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Chinese Paintings from the Robert H. Ellsworth Collection* (Metropolitan Museum of Art: 2001), 254; David Clarke, *Modern Chinese Art* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 46-47.



abstraction with *xieyi*. A distinguishable feature of his ink paintings has to do with the insistence on connecting abstraction with the forms of concrete phenomena, rendering presentations of poetic dreamscapes.¹¹ His favourite metaphor is to consider painting as a kite with a string that connects to life

experiences, human emotions, and the karma of the world.¹² To him, non-objective abstraction in art is like a kite with a broken string, and the attempt at a hybrid style was to engender a pictorial language that is deeply historical in form while absorbing elements from the post-impressionists.¹³

11 Artistic Concepts of Wu Guanzhong's Paintings Dance out from the Frames, News.gov.HK, accessed 13 April 2020. (<https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/201111/10/P2011111100395.htm>)

12 Michael Chen, Wu Guanzhong – a Kite with an Unbroken String, 19-20.

13 Wu Guanzhong, *The Eyes of Painting*, 128.

Seeking for the common ground of employing abstraction for artistic expression in both Western modernism and classical Chinese painting, Wu's approach to abstraction called the attention of the scholars trained in the West to an illuminating discussion on the cultural differences in the pictorial narratives of modern abstraction between Western and Chinese paintings.¹⁴ With an understanding of both the Chinese

14 Wenwen Liu, *Modernity Through Syncretism and Eclecticism*, 144-158.

and Western sides of this issue, Michael Sullivan did not hesitate to show sympathy for Wu:

To Wu Guanzhong, abstraction means abstracting the "essence" of the form. To him, the greatest Chinese abstract painter is Bada Shanren. He is able to convey his disquiet and his sorrow through the play of black against white, and through the movement of his lines, and through figurative forms he pursues flux and transi-



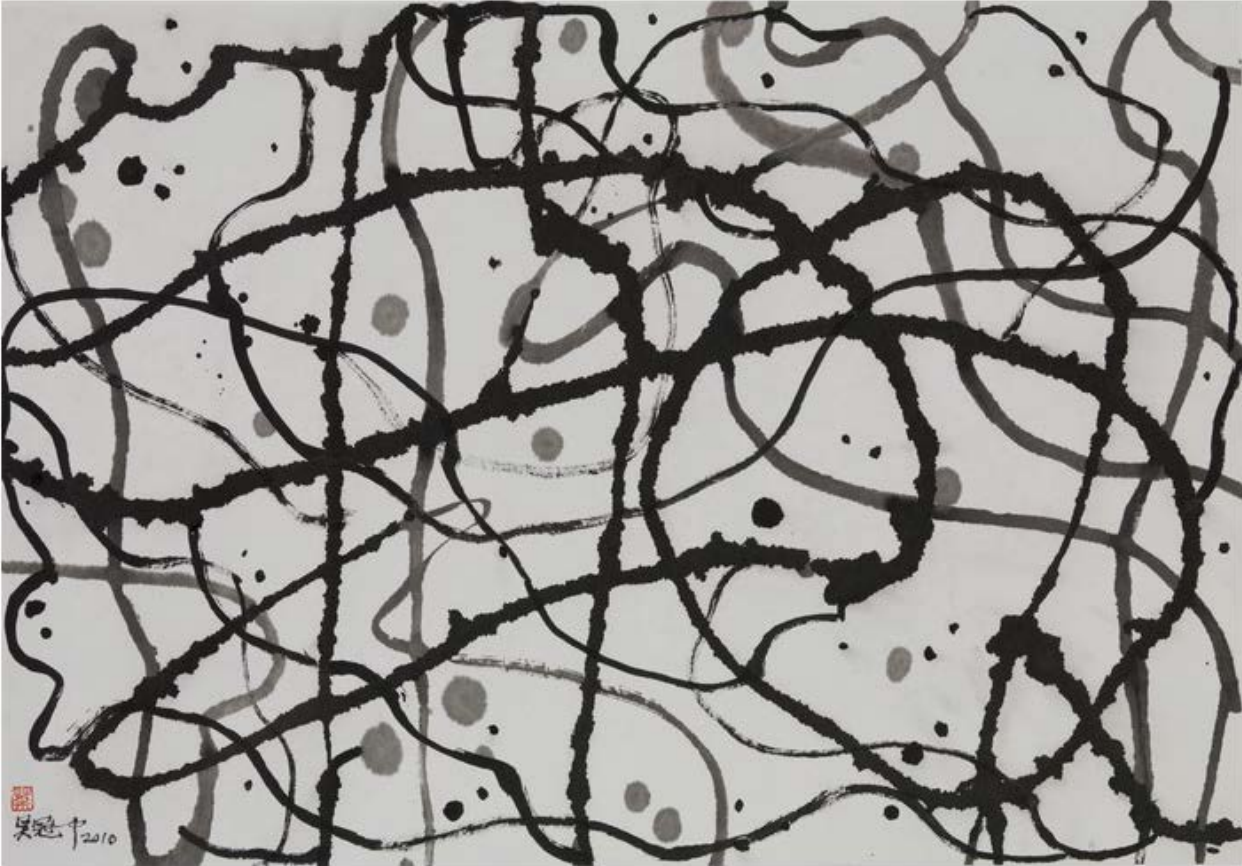
ence. His rocks are top-heavy, looking as though they are about to fall and tumble. His trees are rootless, looking as though they are about to take flight. All these contribute to a feeling of dreamlike unreality in his painting.¹⁵ This, Wu Guanzhong calls abstraction. Since Chinese artists have always held that the forms of nature are the visible manifestations of a reality that lies behind the images, why diminish the force and meaning of the forms in

15 Peter C. Sturman, *Wu Guanzhong and The Task of Painting a New China*, 38-39.

the painting by removing all connections with nature? Why, in Wu Guanzhong's metaphor, cut the kite string?¹⁶

16 Wu Guanzhong, in continuous exchanges of thoughts with Michael Sullivan, was aware of the cross-cultural difference in understanding abstract aesthetics. As he writes in 1983: "Professor Sullivan recently wrote to me, saying that [my] abstract painting is different from [the Western notion of] nonobjective art...to me forms and phenomena must come from life with no exception..." See Wu Guanzhong, *Kite with Unbroken String*, in Ruixian Chen ed., *Collection of Wu Guanzhong's Writings* (Beijing: Bafang Wenhua Chubanshe, 1992), 19.





Another stream of analysis of Wu's artworks drew a linkage between Wu and the leading American painter Paul Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), taking the curatorial writing for Wu's retrospective exhibition in 1987 for example:

Take, for example, 'Lion Grove Garden, Suzhou' (1983, cat. No 56). One sees in it a profusion of meandering lines and splashing colors that outlined the artificial rock arrangement and the trees in a typical Suzhou garden. To an art critic, the lines and splashes may call to mind the drip paintings by Jackson Pollock. Yet when asked, he claimed he had never seen a Pollock painting prior to this work. Indeed, the brushstrokes in 'lion grove' are probably more akin in spirit to those by the Qing painter, Ba Da, whom he admires. Like Ba Da, the lines in Wu's

*painting no longer just describe the apparent, they reveal the state of mind of the artist. In Chinese painting Wu has found an expressive vehicle for his art. Since 1980, he has worked extensively in this medium.*¹⁷

Although the painter claimed to have not seen Pollock's paintings, comparative studies of Wu and American abstract expressionist painters offer a meaningful way to interpret his art and ideas.¹⁸ Peter C. Sturman suggests that Wu's artistic conception which treats form and concept as the key components of a painting is however fundamentally different from

17 Michael Chen, *Wu Guanzhong – a Kite with an Unbroken String*, 4.

18 It is not new to find scholars taking transcultural approaches for the study of 20th-century modern art, oftentimes cross-referencing and comparing paintings between Chinese paintings and Western art. For instance, Sherman Lee, the first to write

that of Pollock's.¹⁹ Art historian Richard Barnhart made a similar remark: "One of his [Wu Guanzhong's] most recent works created at the time of my writing this essay (October 1988) is a huge mural for the Beijing hotel, the largest painting he has ever done. The old pine trees he has painted, called "Pure, Strange, Old, and Weird," will remind some of Jackson Pollock, but it is clear that the writhing, liquid, flowing line and splashed dots of this exuberant creation have their roots far back in the seventeenth-century individualists, and somehow, in the artists of Paris who have been absorbed into the mind of Wu Guanzhong."²⁰

With knowledge in modern European

a Ph.D. dissertation on 20th-century American watercolor paintings, cross-referenced American watercolor paintings against Chinese ink paintings. See Sherman E. Lee, *A Critical Survey of American Watercolor Painting* (PhD diss., Western Reserve University, 1941).
 19 Peter C. Sturman, *Wu Guanzhong and the Task of Painting a New China*, 43.
 20 Richard Barnhart, *The Odyssey of Wu Guanzhong*, 17.

and traditional Chinese painting techniques, Wu was attentively looking for pictorial languages suitable for capturing modern urban living experience in Asia's frontier cities. It was not fortuitous that the artist discovered a subtle resemblance between Hong Kong scenery and Paris on the canvases of French painters. He understands that the aesthetic system rooted in another clime (for example the Jiangnan area in China) is inadequate for the Hong Kong images. His Jiangnan-themed paintings are characterized by contrasts of black and white colours and sharply defined clusters of geometrical shapes including rectangles, shallow cubes, verticals and horizontals. Later in the writing the traveling artist compares what he observes, the unfamiliar, with what he knows.

The traditional brushwork (bi mo) [for Chinese style landscape paintings], for example, marking ink dots with the center tip or slanted tip of the brush to paint the moss, is not right for portraying







the Hong Kong landscape. Neither how Monet painted the [Parisian] boulevard nor the way Albert Marquet depicted the port scene is appropriate for this oriental metropolis. The narrow, densely populated old Hong Kong streets are similar to the modest alleys painted by Maurice Utrillo, however without the sense of melancholia. The modern architecture [in Hong Kong] features straight-line, a magnificent arc, smooth surface, busy

streets and pointed rooftops. It reminds me of the orchestra, the dragon tiger gate (long hu men) and the prose in its loosely defined structure. It should be entirely up to the artist to weave the brightly-colored vista that he/she sees himself/herself.²¹

In the 1990s, traveling to Hong Kong has ratified Wu Guanzhong's more im-
21 Wu Guanzhong, *Wo Fu Dan Qing: Wu Guanzhong Zi Zhuan* (Painting and My Life: Autobiography of Wu Guanzhong) (Hong Kong: Joint Publish-



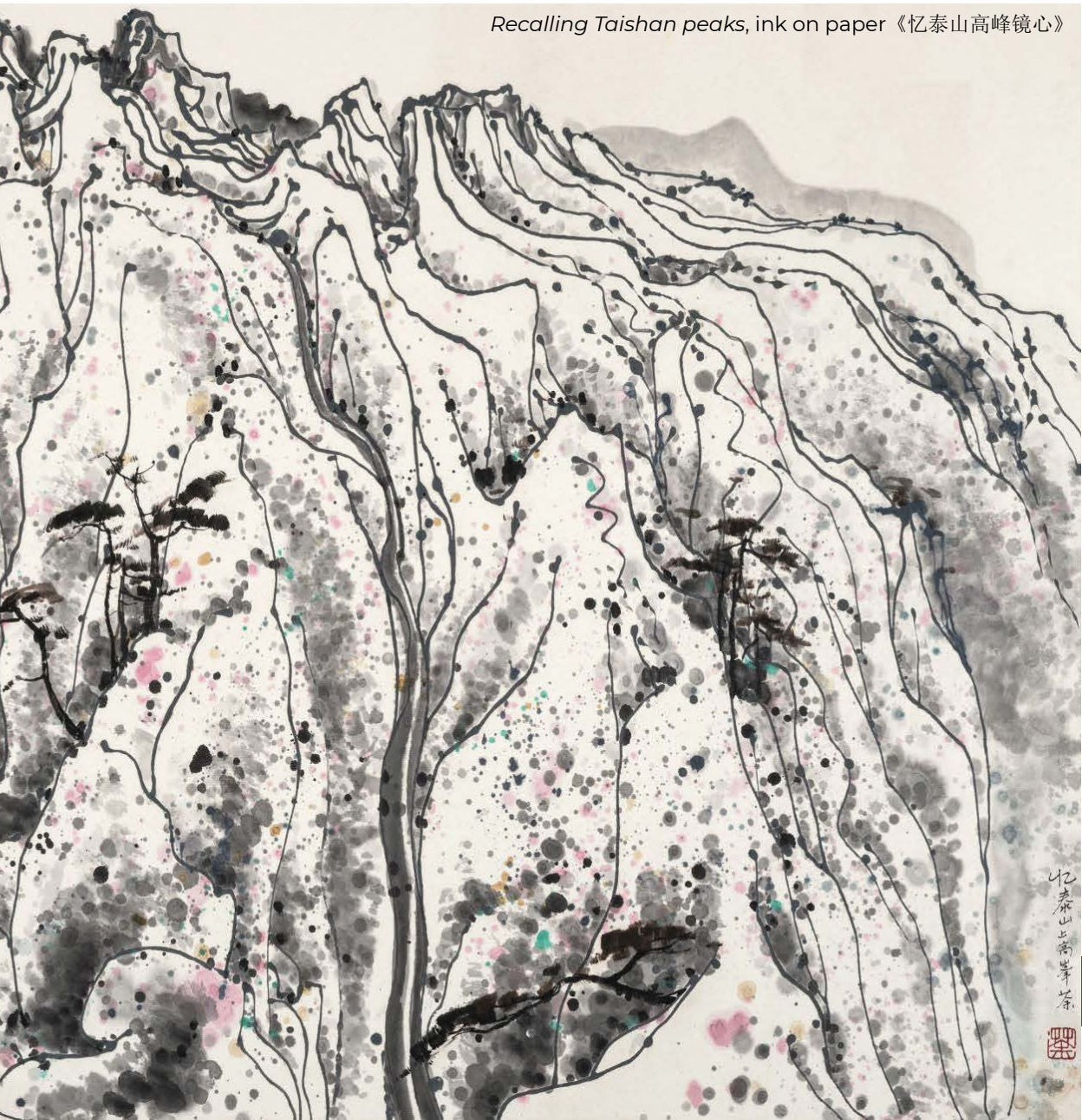
aginative reworking of Hong Kong cityscape, with a more daringly abstract and less documentary approach. Deliberately avoiding the predominance of gray tones, in *City Night* (1997), Wu uses the artifice of intense, pervasive black tonalities to evoke the sensuous exuberance and eternal loneliness born out of the city's nightlife he had seen and remembered. Hundreds of pairs of

ing (Hong Kong) Company Limited, 2005): 70-71.

black and white shuttle across the dimming air to take the shape of variable grids, like a densely woven net. The lucidly colorful paint, splashed embellish the overwhelming gloom, exposing the imagined truth by pulling the viewer into an imagined reality of the bustling, populated streets, observing as the dazzling neon light traversing the dark background.²²

22 Chinese art historian Chen Chiyu suggests that

Recalling Taishan peaks, ink on paper 《忆泰山高峰镜心》





The painter needs not to specify location, but rather, he uses color, facture and rectilinear grid of intersecting, mellifluous lines to abstract the image. Concrete objects are leached out, and flatness and aesthetically controlled

Wu Guanzhong uses colors to compose abstract patterns which give new life to the city's architecture. See Chiyu Chen, "The Combination of Chinese and Western Influences on Chinese Modern Ink Painting with Lin Fengmian, Zhang Ding and Wu Guanzhong as Examples," *Art of the Orient*, no. 2 (2013):165-188.

unity of rectangle, square and circles emphasize the modernizing version of the city view. It hardly matters whether the painting clandestinely inscribes the memory of the painter's trip or encounters in Hong Kong or a hypothetical one that resulted from imagination with the pictorial ambition to reject an empirically grounded approach.

Hong Kong-based art historian David Clarke once suggests: "The notion of



Hong Kong as the place where “East meets West” is an enormously widespread cliché, and one which manages to deny any separate identity to the colony, to reduce it to a “gateway” or “bridge” through or over which Chinese and Western influences pass.²³ In this respect Wu Guanzhong seems to share a common dilemma faced with his Hong Kong peers. They opted for neutralizing

²³ David Clarke, “Between East and West: Negotiations with Tradition and Modernity in Hong Kong

or muting the identity issue of Hong Kong, placing it to the background to give place for reconciling Chineseness and modernity in their art. As the painter tacitly oscillated between the Chinese cultural root and a quest for modernity, he effaced in his works the material and social depreciation of the city’s colonial history. At the critical time of the trans-

Art,” in David Clarke, *Art and Place: Essays on Art from a Hong Kong Perspective* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1996): 73.





fer of sovereignty over Hong Kong, he consciously avoided the issue of regional geopolitics and international politics over the control of Hong Kong, albeit proud of the fruitful achievement of the city's economic development.

In the pictorial conception of Wu Guanzhong's abstract Hong Kong paintings, colored blocks seem to symbolize the artist's emotional content in response to the glamor of the motley crew of high-rise mansions and their human dwellers. It is the confluence of dreams and real-life encounters that motivate viewers to perceive, assess, visualize and invent their own interpretations of these works.²⁴ Wu writes that he has been pursuing the expansive, desolate, grand and profound realm, amplified with hopes for mankind, the multitude of happenings and emotions.²⁵

Dr. Shuo (Sue) Hua is a Hong Kong-based researcher of East Asian visual art. She is Assistant Curator at the University of Hong Kong, University Museum and Art Gallery. She is interested in studying modern and contemporary Chinese art in a cross-cultural setting and from socio-cultural and economic perspectives

24 Michael Sullivan comments that Wu is able to "convey his disquiet and his sorrow through the play of black against white, and through the movements of his lines... Through figurative forms he pursues flux and transience. His rocks are top-heavy, looking as though they are about to fall and tumble. His trees are rootless, looking as though they are about to take flight... All these contribute to a feeling of dreamlike unreality in his painting." See Michael Sullivan, "Wu Guanzhong: Reflections on His Life, Thought and Art," in Lucy Lim, ed., *Wu Guanzhong: A Contemporary Chinese Artist* (San Francisco, CA: Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco, 1989).

25 See Wu Guanzhong, "Time Immemorial (Hong-huang)," in Wu Guanzhong, *Collected Writings of Wu Guanzhong* vol. 2 (Wu Guanzhong Wencong) (Beijing: Tuanjie Chubanshe, 2008):3.