

SHANSHUI PROJECTS: 2ND INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM

THE SHAPE OF WATER

ART AND ECOLOGY BETWEEN FLUIDITY AND FORM

山水

水之形

在流动与形态之间
的艺术与生态

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PROCEEDINGS OF SHANSHUI PROJECTS 2ND INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM
28 FEBRUARY 2026

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 **Akademie**
für west-östlichen Dialog der Kulturen e.V.

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PREFACE

If the mountain once stood as a monument to permanence, silence, and spiritual ascent, the waters that surround, carve, and sustain it tell a different story—one of movement, adaptation, and interconnection. At a time when the certainties of the Anthropocene give way to the unpredictability of ecological collapse, the Shanshui Projects' 2nd International Symposium, *The Shape of Water*, invites us to turn our gaze from the peaks to the rivers, from the solid to the fluid. Water, in its endless metamorphoses, becomes both metaphor and material for rethinking our place within the natural world.

Unlike the mountain's vertical defiance of the sky, water flows horizontally, eroding boundaries and dissolving hierarchies. It is the principle of life, the medium of memory, and the mirror of climatic turmoil. As glaciers retreat, seas rise, and droughts reshape landscapes, water confronts us with the urgency of ecological justice while offering a poetics of becoming—a reminder that form is never fixed, but perpetually in relation to force, pressure, and time.

This volume brings together multidisciplinary contributions that explore water not only as a subject of artistic and literary representation, but as a catalyst for ethical and ecological imagination. From the rhythms of tides to the architecture of rivers, from ancestral hydrologies to contemporary art practices, the essays and artworks gathered here trace the contours of a new aesthetic sensibility—one that embraces uncertainty, interdependence, and the wisdom of flow.

Organized by Shanshui Projects in collaboration with the College of Fine Arts of Huaqiao University and the Academy for West-Eastern Dialogue of Cultures (Akademie für west-östlichen Dialog der Kulturen), this second symposium continues our commitment to bridging cultures, disciplines, and ways of knowing. If the first symposium sought a poetics of silence in the mountain, this second edition asks: what might a poetics of fluidity teach us about survival, care, and co-creation?

Water does not speak in monologues; it murmurs, surges, and seeps. It carries voices across continents, mingling the local with the global, the past with the possible. In this spirit, we offer these proceedings as an invitation to listen—to the currents of rivers, the whispers of rain, and the quiet persistence of life in the margins. For in the shape of water, we may yet find the shape of a more responsive, more humble, and more relational future.

The Editors
Giacomo Bruni, Zuha Rasheed

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The Phenomenon of Unpainted Water in East Asian Painting

By; Thorsten Schirmer

Chinese philosophy ascribes special virtues to water in relation to mountains, which serve as a model for mankind. A famous quote from Kongzi reflects his view on this:

"The wise man finds joy in the water; the man of virtue finds joy in the mountains." (Lun Yu, Book 6, Verse 23).

Laozi goes one step further by praising the weak water compared to the rigid rock:

"In the whole world, there is nothing softer and weaker than water. And yet, in the way it afflicts the hard, nothing equals it. Nothing can change it. That the weak conquers the strong and the soft the hard, everyone on earth knows, but no one act in this way." (Daodejing, verse 78)

Water flows and with this property it stands for the eternal transformation of the whole universe. It strives into the depths and, in contrast to the rigid rock, does not insist on a rigid position. This is expressed in the East Asian concept of landscape (chin. *Shanshui*, jap. *Sansui* 山水), which is built by the polar elements of mountain and water. While the mountain or rock symbolizes the cosmic force Yang, water from the finest mist to the wide ocean symbolizes the cosmic force Yin. Following this ancient principle, traditional landscape painting in East Asia usually does not depict real sceneries, but symbolic landscapes of mountains and water.

While the painters create mountains and rocks by using structure-forming brush techniques (chin. *Cun* 皴), they often use a technique of "non-technique" for the depiction of water in all its manifestations:

the water remains unpainted. By defining the bare paper by the painted forms, it is possible to create an illusion of water surfaces and the atmospheric phenomena of water such as mist, fog or rain.

As an example, a work by Ni Zan 倪瓚 (1306-1374), one of the four masters of the Yuan dynasty, is cited here: It shows a river landscape with trees in the foreground and mountains on the other shore. The water surface has no waves or areas of colour. The meaning of the bare paper within the composition is defined only by the edges of the riverbank.

The Japanese painter Nagasawa Rosetsu 長沢芦雪 (1754 -1799) applies the same principle to the depiction of a waterfall, which also remains unpainted.

The forms of water in the atmosphere are also represented by emptiness, as we can see in the example of an anonymous Chinese landscape from the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279). In a rocky landscape sits a scholar with a servant. The central pictorial space is filled by dense fog, from which three servants approach on an mist hidden path in the upper half of the painting. The illusion of fog is created by the unpainted parts of the silk.

The principle of the unpainted water surface is even more abstracted in a Japanese landscape painting from the 16th century, which is attributed to the monk painter Sesson Shukei 雪村周繼 (ca.1504-ca.1590).

Under the full moon a rock shrouded in mist forms the backdrop for a lonely figure in a small boat. This detail alone creates the illusion of a water surface. No ho-

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江渚暮潮初落風林霜葉渾稀倚
杖柴門間窈懷人山色依稀至正癸
卯九月望日戲為
勝伯徵君寫此并賦小詩倪瓚

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Landscape in Mist with Scholar and Servants, anonymous, Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279), ink and light colors on silk, 23.7 x 26.4 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York





hizon or shoreline gives us a clear definition where the where water and sky meet. It is left to the viewer's imagination to fill the emptiness with content.

After all, the principle of unpainted water is even used in the depiction of fish, as the example of the Chinese painter Zhang Tongyu (born 1965) shows. On the otherwise unpainted paper it depicts a group of swimming carps. The movement of the fishes is so lively captured that no further execution is needed to create an illusion of water.

Countless other examples from all periods and styles of East Asian painting could be cited for this principle of representation. It is based on the East Asian philosophy of Daoism and Chan Buddhism which depict form and emptiness as an essential topic.

Water has the ability to take on any shape it encloses. Seen in this way, water seems formless. In being formless it takes on the counterpart to form. The actual counterpart to form, however, is emptiness, as Laozi explains:

"Thirty spokes hit the scar, the emptiness in between makes the wheel.

The potter shapes clay into pots and vases, the emptiness inside makes the vessel.

Windows and doors are broken into walls, the emptiness between makes the house.

The visible part of a work builds the form, but the non-visible makes up its essence."

(Daodejing, verse 11)

By appearing as a counterpart to form, water takes on the part of emptiness. The central mantra of the Heart Sutra, tell us:

"Form is nothing but emptiness, emptiness is nothing but form."

First of all, water is the manifestation of "form is nothing but emptiness". At the same time, however, the second part of the mantra is also realized in it: "Emptiness is nothing but form". Thus, the unpainted water is emptiness and form at the same time.



Waterfall, Nagasawa Rosetsu (1754 -1799), ink on paper, 137 x 53,7 cm, formerly Sakamoto Familiy Collection

Carp, Zhang Tongyu (born 1965), ink and light paint on paper, 131.5 x 65.8 cm, Neumann-Ogando Collection, Museum für Asiatische Kunst Berlin







Landscape in the Moonlight, Sesson Shukei (c.1504-ca.1590) attributed,
ink on paper, 22.9 x 33.0 cm, Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Death by Water: from Myth to the Real. T.S. Eliot and Bill Viola

By: Angelo Capasso

Water is generally considered a source of life. It satisfies some primal needs: thirst, cleanliness, and the desire for purity. The human body is composed of an average of 60-65% water; approximately 71% of the Earth's surface is covered by water from the oceans and seas. Talking about "death by water" might seem like an oxymoron, as water is a source of salvation, as taught by the ritual of baptism (which exists in different forms in almost every culture). "Death by water" is actually an oxymoron, as it is a myth of "death that heals", produces salvation. It belongs to an ancient myth of regeneration - the Fisher King - that from its origins became well known thanks to James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, universally considered the first example that shared elements of religious belief and scientific thought, discussing fertility rites, human sacrifice, the dying god, the scapegoat, and many other symbols whose influences extended into 20th-century culture. Frazer's core thesis posits that early human societies practiced the ritual killing of sacred kings or divine representatives who embodied the spirit of vegetation: the sacrifice, often occurring when the king's power waned, was meant to ensure the renewal of crops and life, symbolically enacting a cycle of death and rebirth. The original story of the Fisher King belongs to the Arthurian literary cycle, dating as far back as the 12th century, where he is the character who incarnates the guardian of the Holy Grail¹.

The story tells that the Fisher King was blighted by a wound that would not heal and, because of this injury, the land he ruled wilted into a wasteland. The King spends his time fishing in a river near his

castle of Corbenic. Many knights-errant come to the Fisher King to heal him, but this will be possible only for the chosen one destined to find the Grail. This story has become well known throughout the XIX century because it is the structure on which TS Eliot built a section of his poem *The Waste Land* (1922), a masterpiece of modernist poetry. Eliot composed the poem between December 1921 and January 1922 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he was hospitalized for mental instability. The poet sent the typescript to his friend and compatriot Ezra Pound, who also contributed to the revision of the text, so much so that Eliot dedicated the poem to him, calling Pound himself "Il miglior fabbro" (the best blacksmith), an expression taken from Dante Alighieri, who thus called the Provençal poet Arnaut Daniel in Canto XXVI of *Purgatorio*.

The Waste Land is divided into five parts: *The Burial of the Dead*, *A Game of Chess*, *The Fire Sermon*, *Death by Water*, and *What the Thunder Said*. It is a polyphonic composition characterized by a multitude of individual voices speaking in many different languages (Latin, Greek, German, French, Sanskrit) as well as numerous literary references (Dante, Shakespeare, Ovid, Homer, Baudelaire, the Bible, St Augustine, Hindu and Buddhist sacred texts, as well as the Wagnerian opera, and Arthurian legend surrounding the Holy Grail), where "death by water" is the main element. *Death by Water* is the shortest section of the poem, describing the aftermath of the drowning of the Phoenician sailor Phlebas: his corpse is still trapped in a whirlpool that serves as a metaphor for the cycle of life and death, and serves as a warning to pursue a meaningful life.

In the poem, Phlebas has been dead for

¹ The Holy Grail is traditionally the Christian relic identified with the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper or the one in which Joseph of Arimathea collected his blood. A central figure in Arthurian legends, it symbolizes a supreme, sacred, and difficult-to-achieve goal.

fifteen days ("a fortnight dead"), having forgotten earthly concerns like gain and loss, and his body is being stripped by the underwater currents. His figure represents "death by water", a ritual death that is not only a physical end, but also purification and regeneration, connecting to fertility myths and the Fisher King. In the *Golden Bough* Frazer provides an extended list of dying-and-reviving fertility gods (such as Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis) and magical rituals provided the scaffolding for the poem's theme of a broken world needing rejuvenation. The central figure of the *Waste Land* - a king rendered impotent who leaves his land sterile - is heavily influenced by the vegetation rites and mythologies discussed by Frazer. There are mythological figures, such as Tiresias, Tristan, and Isolde, and lines from poems, operas, and works of literature that span genres and cultures.

One main reference to western modern tradition for Eliot is that of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* quoted by the poet with the line "Those are pearls that were his eyes" (Act 1, Scene 2): it is a part of a song by the spirit Ariel to Ferdinand. With those words Shakespeare describes an imagined, magical transformation ("sea-change") of a drowned man's body, where his bones turn to coral and eyes to pearls. It is a poetic image of metamorphosis, suggesting that the dead are not just gone but are "transformed into something rich and strange".

"Death by water" can be considered the original myth for one of Bill Viola's most meaningful films: *The Passing* (1991). It is a film devoted to his mother's memory. As the film's title, *The Passing*, demonstrates, the film intends to stage a condition impossible for art, namely the passage: the transition between life and death. The famous phrase "he who is dead and he who sleeps is but an image" is part of Macbeth's soliloquy (Act II, Scene 2) after the assassination of King Duncan. It is an expression that reflects the concept that the dead and the sleepers are defenseless beings, whose condition can be compared to a fiction or an inanimate image. Viola's problem is to verify whether cinema can

produce that transition that painting and sculpture have not been able to stage because they are deprived of a quality that cinema has as its peculiarity: time. In painting, as in theater, one is either alive or dead. The transition, in different ways, either has occurred or it is a fiction. Viola's film is full of conditions of transition. From black to white, from youth to old age, from consciousness to the unconscious. Viola, placed at the center of this personal exploration of altered time and space, represents mortality in such forms as a glistening newborn baby, his deceased mother, and the artist himself, floating, submerged under water. Starkly yet poignantly rendered in black and white, *The Passing* reinforces the notion of a permeable conduit between reality and surreality. An irrepressible soundtrack of Viola's labored breathing in sleep and wakefulness serves to pull the viewer through an otherworldly topography.

The final scene is a bourgeois interior, a private house, which is flooded by a sudden flow of water that destroys the family picture. An unexpected wave of water submerges a domestic picture: It is an image that signals the exact moment of the mother's death. There is no other way for cinema to make this moment visible than through a symbolic image: water, the flow of life, which takes away the serenity of everyday life. The image, however, remains suspended, like the entire film, between dream and consciousness, between private and public history: from childhood to death. Viola uses grainy black and white to create an aesthetic reminiscent of an ultrasound or a night vision, juxtaposing desert landscapes with the fluidity of the water. The water is the final inevitable solution, but it still keeps the pure cleanness and sublime power which belong to the fertile rituals. The film, as is often the case with Viola's films, is also rich in symbolic elements. The recurring image of submersion symbolizes both claustrophobia and the dissolution of the self, a theme rooted in a near-drowning experience the artist had as a child. A haunting soundtrack of Viola's labored breath-

Bill Viola, *The Passing*, Videotape, black and white, mono sound, 54:22 minutes, 1991.







ing and children's laughter accentuates the physical weight of existence and the inexorable passage of time. Another film that had very strong references to water is in *The Reflecting Pool* (1977–1979), a video installation that has become a manifesto of his poetics. The film shows a man diving into a clear pool, but, at the moment of immersion, time stands still. His reflection in the water fragments, creating a series of images that evoke the transience of existence and the search for deeper meaning. *The Reflecting Pool* is not only a work of art, but an experience capable of capturing the essence of the human condition: the transition between states of being, the perception of reality and illusion, the connection between the individual and

the world around them. With *The Passing* Bill Viola moves his meditations on water to his personal biography, but still with a continuous reference to the outer world, the real. In *The Passing* the suspension we perceive is between the real and the dreamlike atmosphere, a condition very close to the conclusion of John Keats's great poem, *Ode to the Nightingale*: "Fled is that music, do I wake or sleep."



Manuscript of *Perceval ou Le Conte du Graal* by Chrétien de Troyes, BnF Français 12577, fol. 18v, 1330. (Perceval arrives at the Grail Castle to be greeted by the Fisher King)

A strange encounter on the riverbank: water as prison, threshold and bridge in Pu Songling's *Liaozhai zhiyi*

By: Alessandro Costanza

Introduction

《淮南子·原道》：「是故圣人将养其神，和弱其气，平夷其形，而与道沉浮俛仰。」

“Thus, the sage nurtures his spirit, harmonises and softens his *qi*, levels his form, and with the Dao sinks and rises, bends and lifts.”¹

In classical Chinese thought, water is often associated with adaptability, balance, and harmony with the Dao. The image of “sinking and rising” (*chenfu* 沉浮) evokes a fluid movement. To move with water is, in this sense, to participate in a broader cosmic (yet pre-established) order.

Yet in Pu Songling's (蒲松龄, 1640–1715) *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊斋志异, this fluidity is unsettled. Water becomes a fluid space of tension, suspension, and constraint. Rivers and lakes are not merely natural settings: they emerge as liminal spaces where the boundaries between the human and spiritual merge, and where encounters with the invisible become possible, where natural and supernatural meet.

The story of Wang Liulang 王六郎 included in the collection offers a particularly compelling example. Here, water is at once a site of connection and a form of confinement. The drowned spirit, namely Wang Liulang, lives in the river, he's not simply a ghost but is closely bound to the river, he inhabits a world that is both contiguous with and almost inaccessible to the human realm. Through his relationship with the fisherman Xu 许, the river becomes a space of exchange, where gift and obliga-

¹ *Huainanzi* 淮南子, “Yuandao” 原道, 1. For a complete annotated translation see John S. Major et al., *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early Han China* (Columbia University Press, 2010).

tion circulate, where human and spiritual meet. At the same time, however, this relationship reveals the ethical tension at the heart of the tale: the possibility of release is conditioned upon the death of another and also, most importantly, the accomplishment of humanity (*ren* 仁).

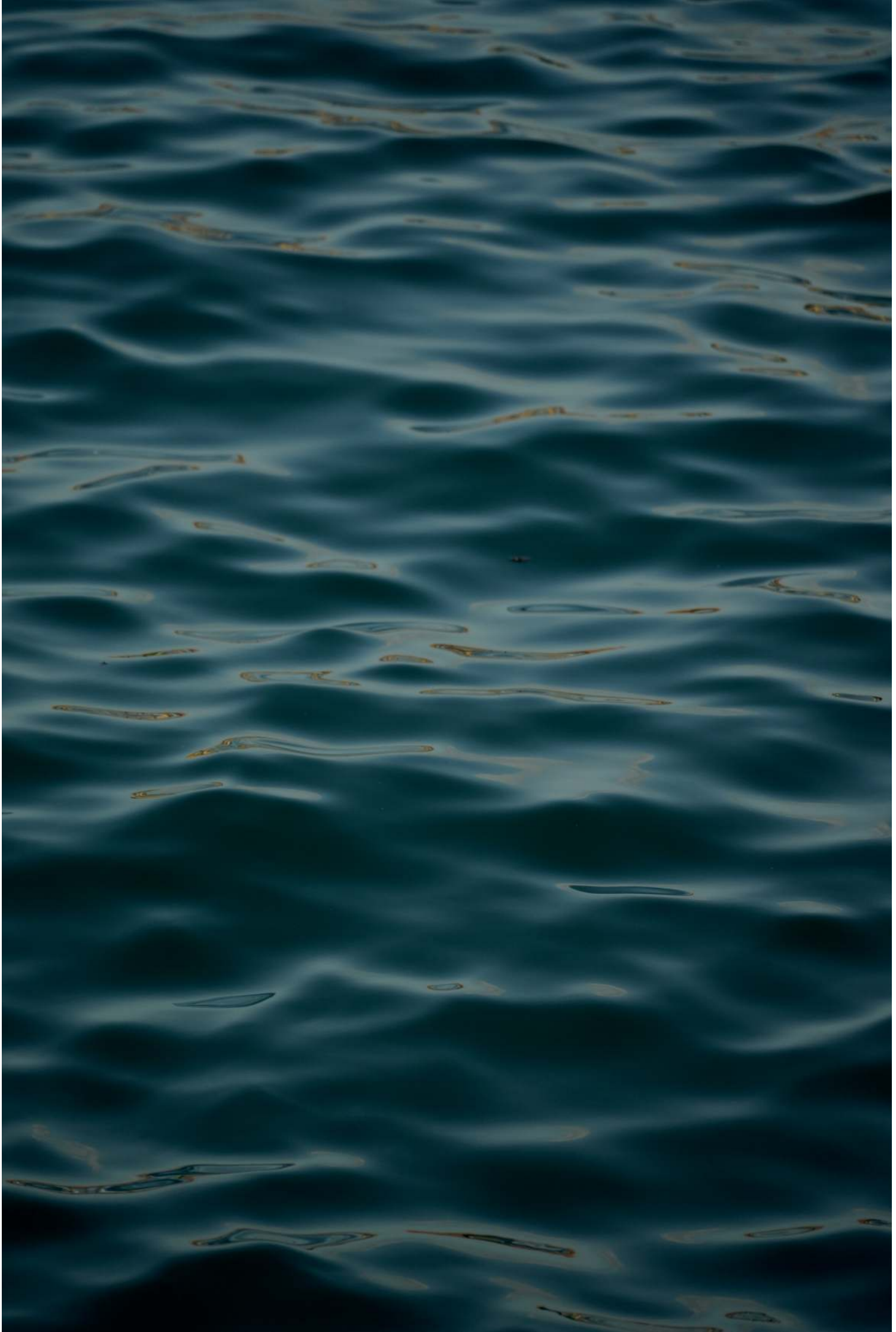
This article explores how water, in Wang Liulang's tale, functions simultaneously as prison, threshold and bridge. By examining selected passages from the text, it argues that the river is not simply a scenario for supernatural events, but an active medium that shapes relationships, moral choices, and forms of attachment. In this sense, water is not only a site of passage, but also a space in which humanity and spirituality emerge and at times even merge.

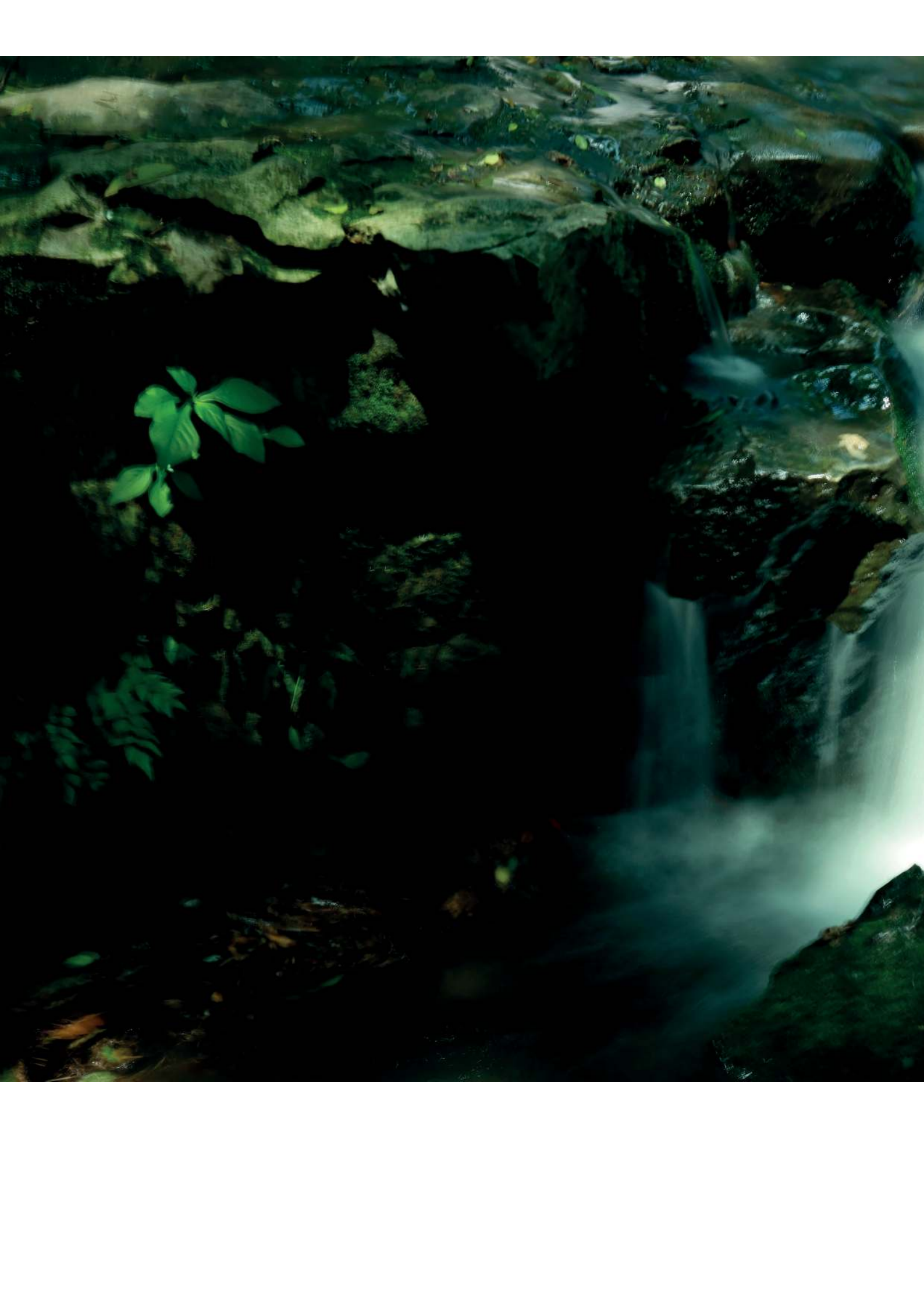
Water as prison

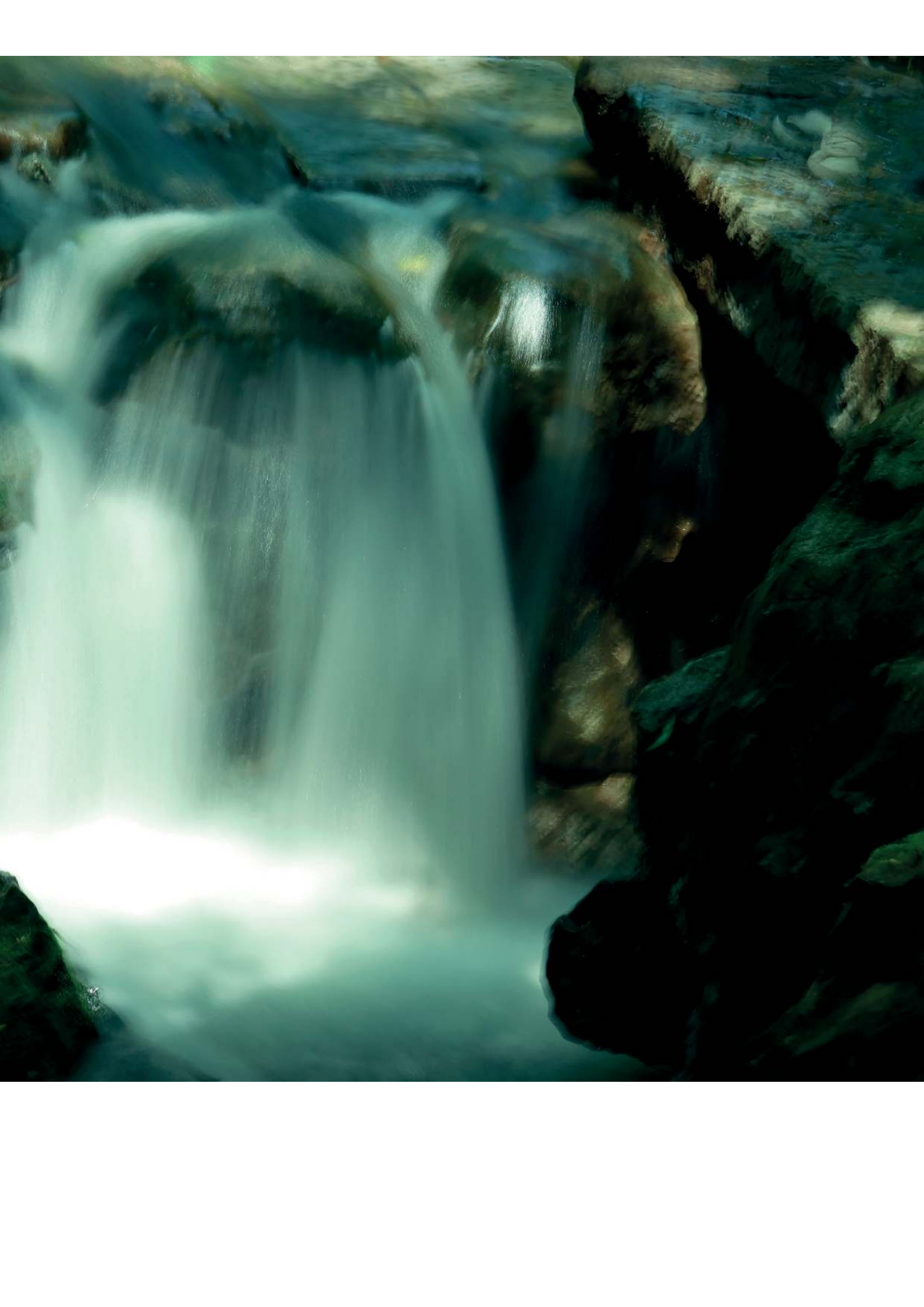
By the riverbank a fisherman by the name of Mister Xu gets in touch with the watery world², from the very first line we understand that mister Xu offers wine to the river spirits as he throws his net into the water to catch fishes in order to sell them at the market and provide for his family: this ritual offer puts him in a special relation with the river and with the spiritual forces that govern it.

Wang Liulang, one of the main characters in the story, is a spirit (*shen* 神) living in the river, he has no proper name, he's called the sixth son of Wang family, as if drowning into the river has stolen his identity, at least his social identity. We don't know where he comes from but the river is his home, his condemnation, he is closely

² “他人渔，迄无所获，而许独满筐”，“While others often caught few fish, he would fill his baskets with fish every day.” (Park 2024)







bound to the river and can't simply leave it. He's thirsty as all the drowned spirits are, they can't drink the water they live in. The environment resembles Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* where women are condemned to inhabit the lake in the form of swans, suspended between two natures, unable to return to their human world unless true love sets them free, or even Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia*, where the sinners are not able to drink until redemption, that never comes eventually. The parallel with Dante's *Inferno* is here both illuminating and instructive, precisely because it reveals, through contrast, the deeper philosophical stakes of Pu Songling's tale. In Dante's moral universe, the damned are condemned by the logic of *contrappasso*: the punishment mirrors the sin, binding the soul eternally to the cause that destroyed it in its life. Though the specific condition of the drowned in Dante does not refer directly to Wang Liulang's environment, the structural resonance is striking: Wang Liulang inhabits water yet cannot drink it. He is surrounded, immersed, imprisoned by the very element that took his life — and from which he is, paradoxically, excluded. Like Dante's damned, he dwells within his own negation.

Yet this is precisely where the two visions diverge. In Dante's *Inferno*, punishment is eternal: guilt is untransferable, and no virtue — neither human nor divine — can alter the sentence. The *contrappasso* is irreversible. In Pu Songling's river, by contrast, the logic of confinement is not moral but transactional: liberation is possible, but it requires a substitution, another soul must take one's place, or a humanisation. The exit door exists — and this is where the resemblance with Dante ends.

The fisherman's wine — poured as ritual offering into the river — does not merely quench a thirst that water cannot satisfy. It is the medium through which Wang

Liulang develops “humanity” (*ren* 仁), the Confucian virtue of benevolence and compassion. In Dante, no such transformation is possible — the damned remain fixed in their condition, unredeemed and unchanging. In Pu Songling, it is the capacity for moral feeling that ultimately moves the Jade Emperor and opens the way to freedom for Wang Liulang, as we will see later in the article. Where Dante's universe is governed by divine justice, Pu Songling's is animated by Confucian virtue: it is not judgement that saves, but humanity itself.

Water as threshold

As the story evolves, Pu Songling introduces a third character, we can observe that the river here constitutes a proper threshold between the visible and the invisible worlds connected through the gift. The new character, namely a woman with her son, is about to drown into the river and take the place of Wang Liulang to free him. But getting into the river world requires leaving everything and everybody, it is a full and proper commitment, the woman hears her baby crying at the riverbank as she gets into the river, and she is hesitant³, Mister Xu thinks about intervening and rescue the baby but eventually he decides not to interfere in the destiny. The woman can't leave her baby and eventually leave the riverbank and exit the scene.

The spirit bears compassion toward the woman, toward his new human friend, he has human feelings. This compassion makes the crossing of that boundary even more insuperable, as the watery prison re-

3 “妇沉浮者屡矣，忽淋淋攀岸以出，藉地少息，抱儿径去。当妇溺时，意良不忍，思欲奔救。转念是所以代六郎者，故止不救。” “At noon, a woman carrying a baby came to the riverbank and fell into the water. The baby was thrown onto the shore, crying and kicking. The woman struggled in the water several times but eventually crawled ashore drenched, rested for a while, then picked up the baby and left. When Xu saw the woman fall into the water, he felt sorry for her and wanted to rescue her, but he remembered that she was Liulang's replacement and dismissed the thought of saving her.” *The Annotated Strange Tales From A Chinese Studio*, Vol. 1: 1 of 12 (Unabridged Version, The Complete Translation of *Liaozhai zhiyi*), translated and edited by Park Jongho, 2024

quires a full commitment to it, it ignores human feelings, it ignores compassion, it ignores motherhood, it ignores social relations, it ignores the entire human realm. At the same time, it is exactly this compassion, this humanisation that will eventually lead to the spirit liberation and freedom. As we can read in the story, it is this “humanisation” that moves the Jade Emperor, that eventually promotes and rescues him from the river prison. In fact he has been appointed as the local god of Zhuangzhen in Zhaoyuan county, and their combined destiny (*yuan* 缘), that of the fisherman Xu and Wang Liulang, their humanised and benevolent hearts (*ren ren zhi xin* 仁人之心) will make their connection last even after the spirit leaves the river. One could note that a sense of Confucianism triumphs over everything here, the spirit not only gets released but also climbs the ladder of the “spiritual” world.

The distance between the human and spiritual world is evident but, being connected by water, it is not insurmountable.⁴ Wang Liulang leaves his village, his grieving wife and his ordinary life to pay visit to his spiritual friend, to follow his intertwined destiny, his intimate friend (*zhiyin* 知音).

Central to this threshold dynamic is the concept of intertwined destiny (*yuan* 缘). In classical Chinese thought, *yuan* denotes the invisible thread that binds two beings across time, space, and — as in Wang Liulang's case — across the boundary between different worlds. It is not merely coincidence, nor simple friendship: it is a form of cosmic predisposition, the sense that two souls were always meant to meet, regardless of the distance that separates them.

In the story, *yuan* operates quietly be-

neath the surface: the fisherman Xu does not choose Wang Liulang, he pours wine into the water as a ritual offering, without knowing who receives it. Wang Liulang does not choose Xu either: he simply recognises, in that gesture, something that resonates. And yet their bond deepens into what the text calls *zhiyin* — literally “one who knows your sound,” a soulmate in the most intimate sense. That two such different beings, one rooted in the human world of family and labour, the other suspended in a watery existence between life and death, should find in each other a *zhiyin*, speaks precisely to the power of *yuan*: it does not require sameness, it bridges difference.

Water, in this sense, is not only the physical threshold between their two worlds — it is also the medium through which *yuan* manifests. The river does not separate Xu and Wang Liulang: it is the very element that makes their encounter possible, the space where their intertwined destiny takes shape. The wine offered across the riverbank, the fish guided into the net, the long conversations by the water's edge — all of these are not accidental gestures but expressions of a bond that was, in some sense, already there, waiting to be recognised.

The water disappears toward the end of the story and the soul connection happens now through dreams. The spirit of Wang Liulang appears in the fisherman and the villagers' dreams, announcing a special visit from an old friend: once Mister Xu reaches the Zhaoyuan county everybody seems to know him already, he is astonished, he can't understand how could that be possible, this is where he understands that his old friend had informed his people of his arrival in advance. The fisherman is touched, moved and yet continues to make an offering at his altar, once again Mister Xu has nothing to offer but

⁴ “君正直为神，甚慰人心。但人神路隔，即不惮修阻” “You have acted righteously and become a god, which makes me very happy. However, the distance between humans and gods is vast. Even if I am not afraid of the distance.” (Park 2024)

wine, and Wang Liulang can't help to feel rejoiced. The once-river spirit, now god minister rewards him by relieving the fisherman from this hard activity: he would then go back to his wife with nothing in his hands but the end of all the family hardships and pains.

Water as bridge

It is probably worth noting that the fishing in this story is not a "neutral" nor a "human" activity: in order to succeed and catch fishes it needs a connection with the watery world, it requires a "spiritual" approval. The wine presented as a gift, poured into the water constitutes the initial connec-



tion between two distinct worlds. Wang Liulang appreciates the fisherman's act of charity and thanks him by governing and changing the stream of the river, and letting the fishes get finally into his net. The water here ceases to be unrestrained, and one could note that even the stream direction is controlled by the spirits living in the river. The wine, just like the river,

represents a bridge between two distinct worlds, those of Wang Liulang's spirit and the fisherman Mister Xu, it seems that the spirits cannot drink the water they live in and therefore are eager for wine, brought by the fisherman.

There is a scene in the story that at best represents the real connection between





these two worlds: the fisherman and Wang Liulang drinking together sitting by the riverbank, as if entering into a third dimension: the water here is not a threshold anymore, the prison barriers have been cut off, the water and the wine constitute both a bridge between the visible and the invisible, this is the bridge where the two characters are now sitting as if observing

their own lives from a higher perspective, witnessing their own lives from a distance, appreciating their special “human” connection and relation, and it is this humanisation that rescues the spirit as the story unfolds⁵: what does it mean to become human? The character *ren* (仁) might itself of-

5 “吾两人之缘未尽耶？”许感叹曰：“此仁人之心，可以通上帝矣”
“Your kind heart will surely move the Jade Emperor.” From then on, the two continued to drink and fish as usual.” (Park 2024)



fer an answer: graphically, it combines the element for "person" (人) with the number two (二), suggesting not solitude but relation, not immobility but movement toward the other. *Ren* is precisely what generates compassion — the capacity to find oneself in somebody else, to recognise in another's suffering a reflection of one's own. It is through this recognition that Wang Li-

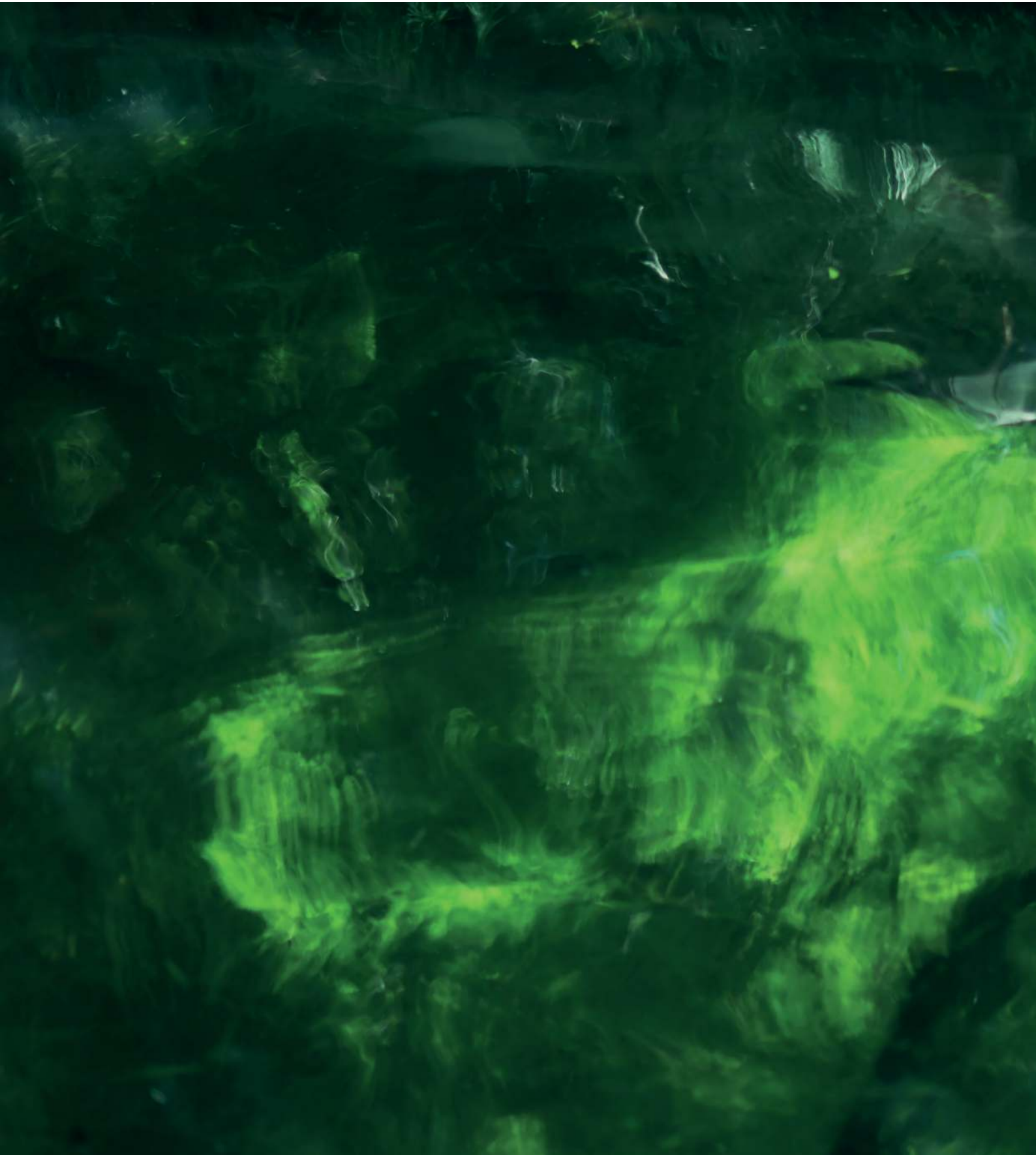
ulang's transformation becomes legible: the spirit does not simply acquire human feelings, he acquires the most distinctly human feeling of all.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one could ask what represents the river/water in the story, what

does it symbolise? Water identity in Wang Liulang's tale is very fluid, it separates first, it connects later, it frees and rescues at the end of the story, it is at the same time prison, bridge and threshold. It evolves and changes as the story evolves and unfolds. Water's shape and water's identity are modelled by the reader's imagination.

We can feel a sense of fragile balance in the story, and the water, just like the wine offered as a gift, connects the two world's riverbanks, this ritual offer makes the connection habitual, and not exceptional (*yi wei chang* 以为常). We can finally say that the water separates first, connects later, frees at the end. One can even note that



at the beginning of the story the human moves toward the spiritual, and the end it is the spiritual that moves instead towards the human, that happens through a special fluid watery connection between the visible and the invisible. The fisherman sitting by the riverbank is not external to water, he's deeply connected with it, just

like Wang Liulang, and it's exactly through their intertwined destiny and Dao (道) that this connection happens, survives and lasts, eternally.



The soul is like water – a visit to the “Garden of the Pavilion of Azure Waves” and other walks in Suzhou

By: Wulf Noll

Suzhou, city of gardens, canals, and small lakes... On the second day of the New Year, two gentlemen set off early in the morning on a long-distance bus. The bus crossed the large bridge over Hangzhou Bay, which connects Ningbo with Shanghai, but then continued on to Suzhou instead of heading towards Shanghai. They made good progress on the highway, which was quiet that day, and reached Suzhou after two and a half hours. Two gentlemen, two philosophers, friends of China and its gardens; the German Robert Marian worked at Ningbo University, the other, a Japanese man, Masahiro Ueda, was dean at a university in Okayama. Robert and Masahiro had been quite close friends for many years and shared worked on many projects together. Robert had booked the prestigious Garden Hotel, now privately owned, which had previously been a government guest house and before that a villa belonging to Mr. Jiang Jieshi, who had it built for his second wife. Judging by the villa, this woman must have been very beautiful... For more than half a century, the villa was used as a state guest house, hosting special guests such as Mr. Carter, Dr. Kissinger, Ms. Thatcher, Mr. Kaifu... and the Chinese leaders Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao...

Currently, private individuals from various countries and education-loving flâneurs are staying here; perhaps they are communing with the spirit of Madame... After checking in at the now considerably enlarged hotel grounds, Masahiro, who was more interested in the virtual world than the real one, shocked everyone with the question: "Are the birdsongs we hear authentic? Or are they artificially generated from loudspeakers?" Robert guessed they were real birds, but Masahiro remained

convinced that they were virtual birds. Simply listening to them did not clarify the matter. In any case, the birds chirped cheerfully at the Garden Hotel, and small fountains and water features sprang from the ponds.

Both flâneurs were interested in gardens from the Ming and Qing dynasties, for which Suzhou is still famous. The first garden they visited was located near their hotel. It was the “Garden of the Master of Nets.” The garden dates back to the 18th century. Its builder, a high-ranking official, was convinced of: cherished the elegance of life on the one hand and the tranquillity of the life of a fisherman who had cast his nets and was waiting for his catch on the other. The pavilions were grouped around the pond like nets. Anything could get caught in such “nets”: colourful birds, slender fish, beautiful women... One of the pavilions was called “Building of Gathering Elegance”, which contained classical paintings and fans with poems that suggested refined taste. It was as if one or more of the admired ladies might return from the afterlife at any moment to sing a sad and beautiful lament of lost love with a fan in their spiritualized hand.

But the aging official no longer thought about women, neither those in this world nor those in the next, but rather about what was ultimately more important: PEACE OF MIND. Apparently, the official had become a philosopher during his studies in the “Pavilion of Ten Thousand Books” and the “Pavilion of Osmanthus Blossoms.” The result of his reflections was recorded in calligraphic writing on a wooden tablet in a pavilion: “Tao is in harmony with emptiness/A state of emptiness is mentality.”



"The thoughtful civil servant," thought Dr. Marian, "had succeeded in combining TAO and ZEN into one concept and imagining the state of emptiness as a mentality. That was very philosophical."

Although Robert loved tranquillity, he was not yet ready for that. His thoughts suddenly wandered to his cheerful students, especially Lingling, whose name meant "Artful Leaf at Dawn." Robert Marian could no longer imagine his own mentality without these students... 'Beautiful Clouds' and 'Artful Leaf' would lend the pavilion a special charm, whether with their minds or their bodies. Instead of emptiness, Robert still preferred the fullness and sweet errors of life, which were superimposed on emptiness like the surface of a deep structure.

Around 150 gardens established Suzhou's reputation and gave the city a special

splendour. In the short time available, the gentlemen were only able to visit a few of the gardens. They walked to the gardens in the north, intending to visit the thousand-year-old *Shuang Ta* double pagoda on the way. Suzhou had these many gardens, but the city itself was by no means as outstandingly elegant or decorative as Hangzhou or Ningbo. Suzhou was a monotonous, large, and flat industrial city that would have looked rather dreary without the consolation of its gardens. The cityscape itself offered few sights worth seeing. Only the gardens and some of the canals were gems that gave the city its charm.

Finally, the gentlemen reached the twin pagodas dating back to the year 1000. This date raised great expectations. Robert Marian thought of the Japanese court lady



Shikibu Murasaki, who at that time had published the first major psychological novel, the “Genji Monogatari,” “The Tales of Prince Genji”. Everything that occurs twice in this world, such as twins, evokes expectations. The romantic philosopher Marian dreamed of young, self-confident, and playful twin sisters because of the charming right of confusion, but he could also dream of pagodas. Ancient double pagodas had an archaic charm. When the flâneurs reached their destination, however, they were met with a disappointing sight. The ruined pagodas rose up in a poorly maintained garden that seemed to have been forgotten by time. The towers, standing thirty meters apart, did not appear venerable, but fragile. They looked like dead pagodas. They could no longer be climbed because of the danger of collapse. It even seemed as if they could col-

lapse at any moment.

The old pagoda keeper himself looked fragile and had become similar to the towers. What pagoda pain! For a moment, Robert thought about calling the emergency doctor. The Japanese and the German man were the only visitors. Yes, only the two PHILOSOPHERS remained as LIVING PAGODAS, standing there next to each other, deep in thought. Each of these gentlemen was like a ‘pagoda’, a teaching building that had collapsed more or less elegantly several times, Masahiro Ueda with Heidegger and Robert Marian with Heidegger's successor Derrida. Philosophically speaking, this is called deconstruction, a philosophical method popular in the West.

Outwardly, however, the Japanese and German philosophers looked as if they had

been reinterpreted. They were dressed philosophically AND fashionably. That's not possible? Yes, it is. Masahiro strolled in a sublime dark suit by fashion designer and philosopher Yohji Yamamoto, while Robert Marian wore a long black flâneur coat from the house of designer and philosophizing dandy Karl Lagerfeld, reminiscent of Lord Byron. Tout va bien! It is worth noting that Mr Yamamoto and Mr Lagerfeld are admired more in France, Japan and China than in Germany.

Viewed with irony, as Heinrich Heine and Lu Xun like to do, one could call Mr. Ueda and Mr. Marian, who discussed garden art in Suzhou, “philosophical salon lions,” but actually “garden lions,” if this word formation has ever been used in relation to philosophers. Suffice it to say that the two ‘garden lions’ strolled through the famous ‘Lion Forest Garden’ (*Shizi Lin*), which con-

sisted of a large collection of porous boulders – formations made of pure limestone – that reminded philosophical colleagues of philosophizing lions. Such natural limestones, salvaged from various lakes, were very popular in China, although Robert Marian imagined how the lime trickled through the heads of many antiquated philosophers, or rather, lion heads.

The city museum was only a few steps away from the Lion Forest Garden, so the gentlemen headed there. They looked at traditional art objects, calligraphic works, and historical home furnishings. By the time the city lions left the museum, it had grown dark outside. In search of a good restaurant, or indeed any restaurant at all, the gentlemen walked along the multi-coloured illuminated city canal from the eastern part of the city to the western part without finding a single restaurant. When

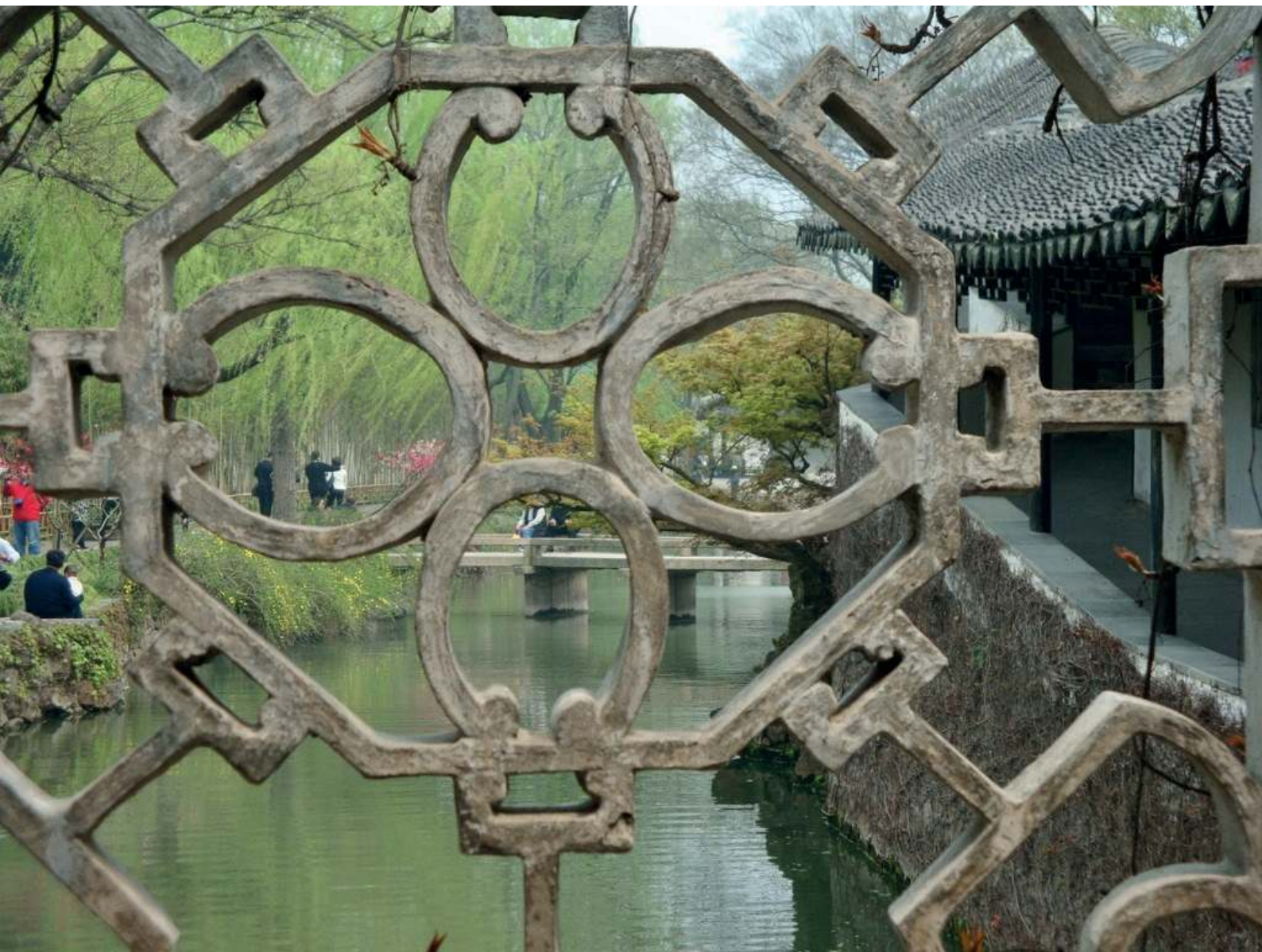


they had given up all hope, the strollers reached the bustling old town. Here they found all the restaurants they had been missing before. They were spoiled for choice and went to one of the restaurants that offered local cuisine and was well frequented. There, the gentlemen, in need of relaxation, enjoyed a leisurely dinner and thought about which gardens they wanted to visit the next day.

Slightly inspired by alcohol, the gentlemen enjoyed their nighttime stroll and, on their way back to the hotel, browsed in a few antique shops that were still open. Nothing unexpected happened; they didn't buy any antiques, not even carpets. Although new, unfamiliar cities are like labyrinths in which one can get lost, the philosophers did not get lost. That only happened on the hotel grounds, because

when the gentlemen entered the hotel grounds through the archway of the Garden Hotel, they did not notice that it was a different archway from the one they had passed through in daylight. Everything seemed to be as it had been in the morning, but nothing was where the philosophers expected it to be. The complex was as mysterious as it was alienating and full of riddles. A casual remark by a guest that the gentlemen were on the grounds of the Garden Hotel reassured them, but did not help.

In the entrance area of an illuminated hall, the gentlemen suddenly saw two graceful women in qipaos, as if made for aesthetically minded philosophers. As if in a trance, Masahiro and Robert walked towards the two beauties, who smiled graciously as they opened the doors and presumably





intended to lead them into the historic 'Lotus Pavilion' of Mr. Jiang Jieshi's villa for his second wife or concubine, although the gentlemen, tired, longed more for their quiet hotel room. Masahiro Ueda, whose mother was the daughter of a priest, simply considered the two apparitions in qipaos to be incarnated heavenly spirits. The heavenly spirits, that is, the women noticed that the gentlemen had lost their bearings on the grounds. One of the apparitions took pity on them. Masahiro later said that it must have been the goddess Guanyin herself who, after glancing at the room card, guided them through the garden to the entrance of the hotel wing they were looking for in the midnight New Year's cold, dressed in a light silk dress.

There, in the warm hall, the security of having arrived was reassuring, and another

surprise awaited them. The gentlemen stood in the foyer in front of an artificial pond, whose water splashed discreetly. On a small island in the middle of the tiny lake sat a young lady dressed in magnificent robes, playing mournful tunes on an old instrument, which prompted the gentlemen to greet the water nymph with a nod and find a comfortable seat in front of the island in the armchairs set up there. There they sat with a few other gentlemen, dreamily sipping their cocktails. They enjoyed their nightcap and gazed enraptured at the beautiful water nymph. The gentlemen followed their dreams. Masahiro thought of the witty symposium ladies who had listened to his lecture in Ningbo, Robert thought of 'Beautiful Clouds', 'Free Clouds', 'Men Surpass', of the 'Artful Leaf at Dawn', to which – to which – the dusk also suited. In the end, the doctors took



the beautiful water nymph and her instrument with them to their bedchamber as their dream...

It was still early in the morning, the birds were chirping. For Robert, they were natural birds, but Masahiro... The gentlemen listened to the chirping, then fell back asleep, even though they had planned to visit several gardens today, two of which were among the four most famous gardens in China: the “Garden of Linging” (*Liu Yuan*) and the “Garden of the Modest Official” (*Zhuosheng Yuan*). After visiting a wonderful but less famous garden, the two gentlemen entered the “Garden of Linging” after lunch, the first of the famous gardens. It dated back to the early 16th century. A long covered walkway led through the grounds, from which strollers could look out over hills, ponds, terraces, and pavilions. The walls of the walkway

featured calligraphy and stone carvings. This very garden was currently flooded with Japanese tour groups, which made it difficult to linger. The garden was overcrowded. Suddenly, Japanese could be heard spoken at every corner, because the Japanese love gardens and want to compare them – somewhat compulsively – with their own gardens.

And what about the “Garden of the Humble Administrator”? No, the administrator was neither simple-minded nor stupid. Nor was he humble. To come straight to the point: the garden was not humble either, as it was the largest and most elaborate of all the gardens in Suzhou. The generous official was named Wang Xianchen; he had the garden built between 1509 and 1513. He entrusted the planning and design of the garden to a skilled painter. Garden art in China means that nature, archi-

texture, and painting are combined in an aesthetic way. In modern terms, one could say that people have always intended to intervene in nature in a corrective manner with their gardens and to create something like a harmoniously coordinated 'Gesamtkunstwerk' (total work of art).

The garden consisted of three parts—the centre, the eastern section, and the western section. In all areas, there were charming ponds with water pavilions, but in the centre, the gentlemen saw a large lotus pond, on the banks of which stood the "Hall of Fragrance." Since it was early January, the beautiful lotus flowers were only visible in their withered form this time. Nevertheless, a delicate fragrance could be detected, but it came only from the perfume bottles of the elderly ladies. In the barren winter gardens, nature seemed to be pushed back, making the layout of the gardens all the more apparent. These gardens were reduced to the essentials, as the bonsai garden to the side always had been. Masahiro sank into contemplation there.

It was another garden that made the greatest impression on the gentlemen, the "Garden of the Pavilion of Azure Waves," a small, quiet garden filled with secrets. Robert was certain that this garden was his favourite. The "Garden of the Pavilion of Azure Waves" was located on a canal. Although the water was no longer azure blue but gray-brown, the reflections of sunlight still cast their magic on it. The sky was blue! Perhaps it was the sky that a small mountain with its pavilion stretched toward. The poetic garden seemed like a poem to both men; it had been created by a poet named Su Sunqin around 1044 during the Northern Song Dynasty. In contrast to the twin pagodas, which were in a state of disrepair, the garden had survived the passage of time particularly well. Masahiro and Robert read Su's verses on a plaque: "A

dark red lies on the woods, / At the same time, the sun's rays break through the elegant bamboo."

On the pavilion by the water, one could read: "We know that the soul is like water." Or, more succinctly: "The soul is like water."

What a powerful metaphor, enough to ponder for a year. "The soul is like water, the soul of a flâneur is like water," Robert Marian let the thought roll around on his tongue. He thought of the flow, the depth of the water, the rapid waves, and the change. He thought of the four Western and five Eastern elements.

Metal is the fifth element in China and it is associated with qualities or states such as maturity, contraction, detachment, sinking. But that didn't make Robert Marian a metaphysician; Masahiro wasn't one either. Sensualists at heart, the gentlemen admired some young Chinese women and couples in love because they were lovely to look at, floating on a pink cloud in the azure waves. And Robert Marian floated behind them on his 'beautiful cloud'.

That was in their imagination; in reality, the two worldly, materialistic but refined flâneurs strolled into a restaurant strengthened themselves with hot pot, which, however, required water in the form of broth—without soul. Robert had eaten hot pot many times before; it was "Beautiful Clouds" favourite dish. The dish was particularly good in Suzhou because it was based on the highly acclaimed red crabs from Tai Lake. After the gourmet flâneurs had cracked, slurped, and sucked the crabs, which was, in a sense, the first course, the broth was topped up with hot bouillon. As discerning gourmets, they put together the second course themselves with a selection of side dishes. Masahiro and Robert chose from what must have been a hundred possible variations:

fish cut into small portions, strips of beef, mushrooms, tofu, various vegetables, and glass noodles, which were cooked in the hot pot standing over a flame.

There was no denying that when you sat down with your partner or dear friends over a hot pot, then... then you had to agree with the other party that the hot pot and/or its broth also had a soul. What? Such a crude materialistic statement! Oh, come on! If you are trained to think and sublimate the characteristics of “crudely materialistic” a little, it becomes “subtle.” And ‘subtle’ soon becomes, as logically as it is compellingly, “fluid or ether,” in which the immortal poetic soul floats, whether in the broth or outside it.

In the late afternoon, after the gentlemen had returned to solid ground, tired from their visits to the gardens, Masahiro's infatuation with an old, human-powered rickshaw almost caused them to miss the last bus back to Ningbo. The philosopher's mistake was in assuming that everyone in a country as educated as China could read and write. The rickshaw driver they approached could not, but he did not let on. He was delighted to have the foreigners as passengers, who had handed him a brochure for the hotel. No problem, the rickshaw driver had sworn to take the gentlemen to their destination, but at some point he made it clear that he had driven far enough for his money and that the passengers should get out again. He had no idea where the hotel was or how to get there.

In rush hour traffic, no taxi stopped, so the gentlemen had to hurry to their hotel to pick up their luggage. They were able to get into a taxi in front of the posh hotel, but the question was whether the driver would arrive at the bus station on time. He tried to avoid the heavy traffic by taking a long detour around the city centre. But



luck was on Masahiro and Robert's side, and they arrived at the station five minutes before the last bus departed. Missing the bus would not have been a disaster, but Robert Marian's students would have had to wait in vain for their German teacher the next morning.



"Water, which extends everywhere and gives everything life without acting. That is the reason that when a gentleman sees a great river, he will always look upon it."

Mengzi





Traces of Rain - The Direct Approach in One Painting

By: Efstathia Milaraki

Each drop of rain is a unique micro cell of energy. Could fluidity itself reveal more about the creative process and bear new meanings for the creation in our times?

For a Chinese artist, or anyone who explores Chinese painting, water is the primary medium. As Ball mentions, the medium is the message, since with so fluid a substance can capture the energy/the vitality¹, the *qi*- the 1st principle of the six canon in Chinese painting- that gives life to the depicted theme.² However to truly understand how water operates as a spiritual and material carrier, it must be examined within the broader cosmological framework of elemental interactions. This necessity shifts our focus toward tension and balance between water and its primal opposite – fire.

The opposites, Fire and Water and the Way (Daoism)

Daoism and even earlier Chinese Philosophy could help us understand extremes in nature and how basic elements like water involved with weather phenomena and metaphysical expressions.

A balance of complementary cosmic opposite forces like yin and yang in China promoted universal harmony in the past. As yin and yang join, they form life. One interpretation identifies yin and yang with the states of water. Yin while in its highest form is freezing, Yang in its highest form is boiling. This interplay and the states of water vividly captured in the Chinese language itself. If we look at the characters for weather (*tianqi* 天气), it translates to “Heaven’s breath”. The first character *tian*

天 represents heaven (a man stretching up high with hands open) while the character for *qi* 气 signifies clouds in heaven. Even further back in the traditional character for *tianqi* 天氣, *qi* represents clouds in the upper part resulting from the lower part, where *mi* (rice) is cooking in a pot.³ Through these characters, we notice how the metaphysical blends with the practical in daily life. Instead of maintaining a strict dualism, however, some early philosophical texts shifted the focus toward a single, primary element to represent this cosmic energy. For instance, according to *Guanzi* 管子 (4th century BCE), only water has the fluidity of *qi*⁴:

Water is the blood and qi of the earth; it resembles what courses through the veins and arteries. Water is the potential for everything.

Yet looking at the historical development of these concepts, water’s significance was tightly bound to another primary source. Before the yin and yang dualism, around the end of the Warring States period there was a simpler distinction between the opposites, that of Fire and Water, which are featured among the Five Classical Chinese Elements along with Wood, Earth and Metal. Fire and water share fundamental similarities and were later linked with Yang representing fire and Yin water. Although these two elements are non-living entities, they are inherently characterized by continuous motion, being imbued with *qi* (the vital, animating force). Both ele-

³ Ball, *The Water Kingdom*, 77.

⁴ For a detailed philosophical analysis of the text linking fluidity of water to the movement of *qi*, see W. Allyn Rickett, *Guanzi: Political, Economic, and Philosophical Essays from Early China*, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 101; for a broader discussion on the concept of *qi* as cosmic and vital energy, see also Jana S. Rošker, “The Concept of Qi in Chinese Philosophy: A Vital Force of Cosmic and Human Breath,” in *Atmospheres of Breathing*, ed. Lenart Škof and Petri Berndtson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018), 127–140.

¹ Philip Ball, *The Water Kingdom: A Secret History of China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 267.

² Xie He, *The Record of the Classification of Old Painters*, see translation in Bush & Shih, 1985, 29.

ments show a distinct fluid nature and are vital for sustaining life, yet in their most extreme manifestations, they transform into the most destructive forces of nature. This shared energetic behavior is also reflected visually; a closer look at the Chinese characters for fire (*huo* 火) and water (*shui* 水) reveal an aesthetic similarity. As mentioned in the *Zhuangzi* (4th century BCE), when this foundational pair is linked, lightning is described as the mixture of water (yin) and fire (yang).

*When wood is rubbed against wood, it causes fire. When metal is held together with fire, then it flows. When yin and yang are mixed together, heaven and earth are startled; there is thunder and rumbling thereupon and fire in the middle of water.*⁵

This dualism extends far beyond the physical world, deeply permeating human life and social structures. We see that opposite forces attract each other, leading to creation or destruction in an ongoing spiral, much like life itself. Confucius and subsequent philosophers later developed these related principles further. As Allan states, these principles became 'applicable to human society in the behavior of water and other natural phenomena'.⁶ This perspective directly echoes the teachings of Laozi, the founding philosopher of Daoism, who recognized the deceptive power of water—a substance seemingly weak yet fundamentally unstoppable: of water.

*Water is not insubstantial; It is soft but it can strike down mountains and pierce rocks. Water creates structure; it is the nourishing ingredient of all that exists.*⁷

We sense how water acts as an intrinsic source of renewal. Because it is complete-

ly devoid of intention (*wuwei* 无为), it flows downward naturally – not because it is forced, but because it perfectly embodies the spontaneous order (*ziran* 自然) of the cosmos.

Prior to beginning the rain project, an unconventional question arose: how would water interact with other materials and human agents, yet retain its identity and remain the main theme? In painting water is commonly used to dilute paint, instead I tried to trace the water itself, understand its materiality and spiritual carrier and highlight it as a flowing pattern of the moment and place which was an essential experimentation for my artistic growth. Could interaction and collaboration with nature foster self-knowledge during the creative process? If this is beneficial for human exploration, how does it impact nature and what trace does it leave behind? Could this process ultimately elevate awareness and inspire more ecological choices in both art and daily life?

Part 1. Outdoor action - Non-action (*wuwei* 无为)

The painting *Rain* which I propose to reflect upon, belongs to a series created during my decade-long stay in China. Within this body of work, I focused primarily on spray paint, capturing the silhouettes of objects on canvas to create a black and white negative space reminiscent of old photography and its instantaneous speed. Following the outdoor creation, I returned to my studio to further process these ideas. Working rapidly outdoors allowed for a more direct, personal understanding that aligned with the dynamic rhythm of China, a defining characteristic of this artistic exploration.

Although the paintings in these series are neither directly related, nor visibly similar – given that each theme carries a distinct

5 Guo Qingfan, ed., *Zhuangzi jishi* (Taipei: Heluo tushu chubanshe, 1974), chap. "Wai Wu" (IX Shang, 26), 920.

6 Sarah Allan, *The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 61.

7 Laozi, *Daodejing*, chap. 78, quoted in Allan, *The Way of Water*, 61.

context and texture - the element of speed remained central. In the context of Daoist practice, this rapid execution in my earlier work was not an attempt to dominate the surface with human intent. Rather, the instantaneous speed of the spray paint functioned as a method of spontaneous responsiveness. This process forced the artistic ego to transcend calculated planning, intertwining the creative act with the immediate, unpredictable rhythm of the environment.⁸

Based on the foundation of spontaneous speed, the work *Rain* emerges to depict an almost celestial, orchestrated dance with nature that might seem like a rain ritual. While spraying with black paint, the water drops touching the Earth ultimately leaving a trace of the human and nature merging into one. The toxic medium of the spray was a deliberate choice, capable of gently touching the raindrops without interfering with natural laws, thereby leaving the least human mark possible. Expanding on my previous use of the stencil technique, the falling water droplets here serve as a dynamic living mask. As explored by Philip Ball,⁹ complex natural designs are often products of self-organization, emerging from simple, local physical interactions rather than a master plan. In *Rain* this self-creation of form manifests on the canvas surface: the raindrops do not merely block the pigment; their surface tension creates localized liquid barriers that physically repel the airborne spray. The pressurized mist settles and aggregates strictly along the boundaries of these moisture pools, allowing a patterned negative space to organize itself organically.

The challenging process of this outdoor ritual took place on the CAFA campus during summer, where the large-scale canvas

was laid flat on the ground and entirely surrendered to the elements. Through this horizontal orientation, the workspace physically conformed to water's natural tendency to seek the lowest path, establishing a site-specific realm of non-contention (*buzheng* 不争).¹⁰

As the Beijing downpour struck the horizontal surface, the falling rainwater collided and merged with the fresh spray paint, washing away calculated edges and leaving behind a chaotic, organic map of fluid marks (fig. 1). Such material responsiveness transformed the ground itself into a collaborative space where human mark-making and cosmic spontaneity (*ziran*) became completely indistinguishable.

A rapid tempo was unfolding from feeling deeply attuned to the downpour, which was faster than usual, throughout a painting process carried out under variable rain conditions that lasted a few hours. The raindrops constantly rushed me, guiding every movement with their coolness, reacting to the complementary heat of my body and activating all parts of it, in an effortless performance that consisted of an outdoor action with rain.

Can we really picture the complete process, including the preparation beforehand and everything in-between? Was it truly possible to achieve a state of *wuwei* (effortless action) during a heavy downpour? This pursuit may sound idealistic to many, but it approaches reality the moment the artist ceases to resist the chaotic momentum of the storm. In a heavy downpour, *wuwei* is not an experience of passive stillness; rather, it is a state of hyper-adaptive resonance.

As the raindrops rushed the body and

⁸ Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 200–215.

⁹ Philip Ball, *The Self-Made Tapestry: Pattern in Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1–10.

¹⁰ The concept of *buzheng* (non-contention) is a foundational Daoist virtue directly linked with the imagery of water, which naturally flows to the lowest places without conflict. See Laozi, *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, trans. D. C. Lau (London: Penguin Books, 1963), 64; see also Karyn Lai, *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 101–103.



Fig. 1. Process detail capturing the raw, unwashed paint surface immediately following exposure to rain.



Fig. 2. Process detail showing the unwashed paint surface.

the canvas with relentless speed, any attempt to intellectually plan the next mark was instantly subverted. The urgency of the weather conditions forced a transition from forced, intentional action (*youwei* 有为) to spontaneous, unhindered responsiveness (*ziran*). By matching the fast, unpredictable rhythm of the Beijing rain with the instantaneous speed of the spray paint, the creative act became entirely unself-conscious. In this sense, *wuwei* was achieved not through quiet isolation, but through a total, physical surrender to the environment, proving that the highest form of human agency is found when we allow ourselves to be moved by the world rather than attempting to dominate it.

Part 2. Indoor Process: Meditative Refinement

Following the intense outdoor performance, the canvas was brought into the controlled environment of the studio to begin a phase of slow processing. This transition represented a crucial shift from the dynamic, expansive energy of the storm to a state of meditative, inner refinement. Once the painting had completely dried,

the physical interaction with the canvas shifted from rapid spraying to meticulous care. At this stage, a detailed close-up reveals the temporal duration of the work, where the paint had been sprayed multiple times to capture the evolving, distinct states of the rainfall (fig. 2).The painted surface was gently washed with a sponge to remove excess paint, allowing the raw, organic traces left by the rain to finally appear clearly. During this phase, a fine Chinese brush was used, employing delicate touches to conceal a large black mark that had accidentally occurred in a central area due to a prior mishandling of the spray. (fig. 3)

What ultimately emerged on the canvas was the result of the initial half hour exposure, a period when the falling rain registered pure, ordered relationships. This prolonged environmental interaction left behind analogous patterns reminiscent of structures found throughout the cosmos, evoking the visual beauty of a starry night or a cracked soil of a dry pond. These organic formations not consciously drawn by human hand, were instead allowed to solidify as a permanent trace of the

Table.1: Materials used during the outdoor and indoor creative process.

Part 1: Outdoor action painting	Part 2: Indoor process
Materials	
Spray paint (lightness/speed)	Acrylic paint (black, white)
Protective gear (mask, goggles, gloves)	Sponge (excess paint removal)
Canvas	Chinese brush (minimal usage for concealment)
Masking paper (to block excess spray)	Chinese silk (as a layering element, organic glue)
Rainwater (environmental medium)	Frame assembly (wood, nails, organic glue)

Fig. 3. Process detail at a half-washed stage, capturing the partial removal of excess black paint.



storm's own rhythm. Washing the canvas reveals the underlying water formations of this complex tonal layering - which was created by spraying paint multiple times as raindrops fell-transforming the surface into a material *wuwei* testament. (fig. 4)

The next days, this dialogue between control and spontaneity was further developed through the creation of a simple wooden frame and the application of Chi-

nese silk (see Table 1). Positioned at a strict distance of a few centimeters from the canvas the silk layer served just enough to slightly blur the underlying image. This delicate textile layer acted as an intentional filter, veiling and softening the "roughness" of the outcome. Such a nuanced refinement, which unfolded over three days, introduced a softer, dimension to the painting. Through this structural layering, the final artwork began to resemble the



meticulous sensitivity of the traditional Chinese painting technique *gongbi* 工笔 — ultimately achieving a harmonious equilibrium that balanced the raw spontaneity of nature and the meditative composure of Chinese artistic tradition (fig. 5).

Reinterpreting *Gongbi* through Contem-

porary Eco-Philosophy

The artwork *Rain* challenges and expands the classical boundaries of the *gongbi* tradition by transferring the root of precision from human execution to natural processes. Historically, *gongbi* relies on rigid human control—where the artist applies ultra-fine contour lines and layer-by-layer pigment washes to achieve precise, realistic rendering. In this experimental ap-

proach, however, the rigour and delicate layer-by-layer complexity are not dictated by the artist's hand, but is instead generated by the chaotic, microscopic traces of the rainfall itself. By positioning a screen of Chinese silk directly over these raw, literal markings, the harsh atmospheric 'roughness' is optically softened into a subtle, serene composition. This unique arrangement upholds the soft, meditative, and sophisticated aesthetic features of traditional *gongbi*, yet achieves them through a contemporary, eco-philosophical subversion: human control yields to natural spontaneity (*wu wei*), redefining fine-line realism as a direct, unmediated depiction of ecological reality.

By reinterpreting the *gongbi* aesthetic, *Rain* provides a significant eco-philosophical response to the contemporary ecological crisis. Traditional Chinese mountain-and-water painting historically depicted nature as an idealized, timeless realm of cosmic harmony. However, in our era of heightened ecological instability, nature can no longer be viewed separate from human impact and environmental transformation. The 'roughness' captured on the raw canvas—imprinted by the actual rainfall of Beijing—carries traces of modern atmospheric pollution and ecological shifts.¹¹

Herein lies the critical contribution of the 'new *gongbi*' approach: instead of turning away from this ecological distress, the approach engages with it through the Daoist philosophy of *wuwei*. The act of layering Chinese silk over this fluid tracery does not merely mask the environmental roughness; it conceptually metabolizes it. The floating silk functions as a site of artistic and ecological healing, filtering the chaotic and toxic realities of our time into an everlasting moment of calmness and meditative beauty. Consequently, this

contemporary evolution of *gongbi* transcends passive representation. It becomes an active, creative ritual of ecological interconnectivity, proposing that through a harmonious, fluid surrender to nature's agency, humanity can find pathways toward holistic renewal and spiritual reconciliation with the Earth.

Ultimately, *Rain* demonstrates how allowing the formless, fluid nature of water to disrupt human-centered control can foster new formal and aesthetic dimensions for contemporary creation. By surrendering the raw canvas to environmental agency through *wuwei*, the artistic practice moves beyond passive documentation, turning the canvas into a live vessel of vital energy (*qi*) and ecological transformation. The final synthesis—where the ephemeral tracery of atmospheric pollution and ecological shifts is filtered through the serene structure of floating Chinese silk—establishes a profound reinterpretation of the contemporary *gongbi* aesthetic. In an era marked by heightened ecological vulnerability and fractured elemental interactions, this collaborative process offers a powerful model of creative resistance. It proposes that by attuning human mastery to a natural spontaneity, art can metabolize environmental crises, transforming localized climate realities into an everlasting space of meditative healing, cosmic interconnectivity, and systemic renewal.

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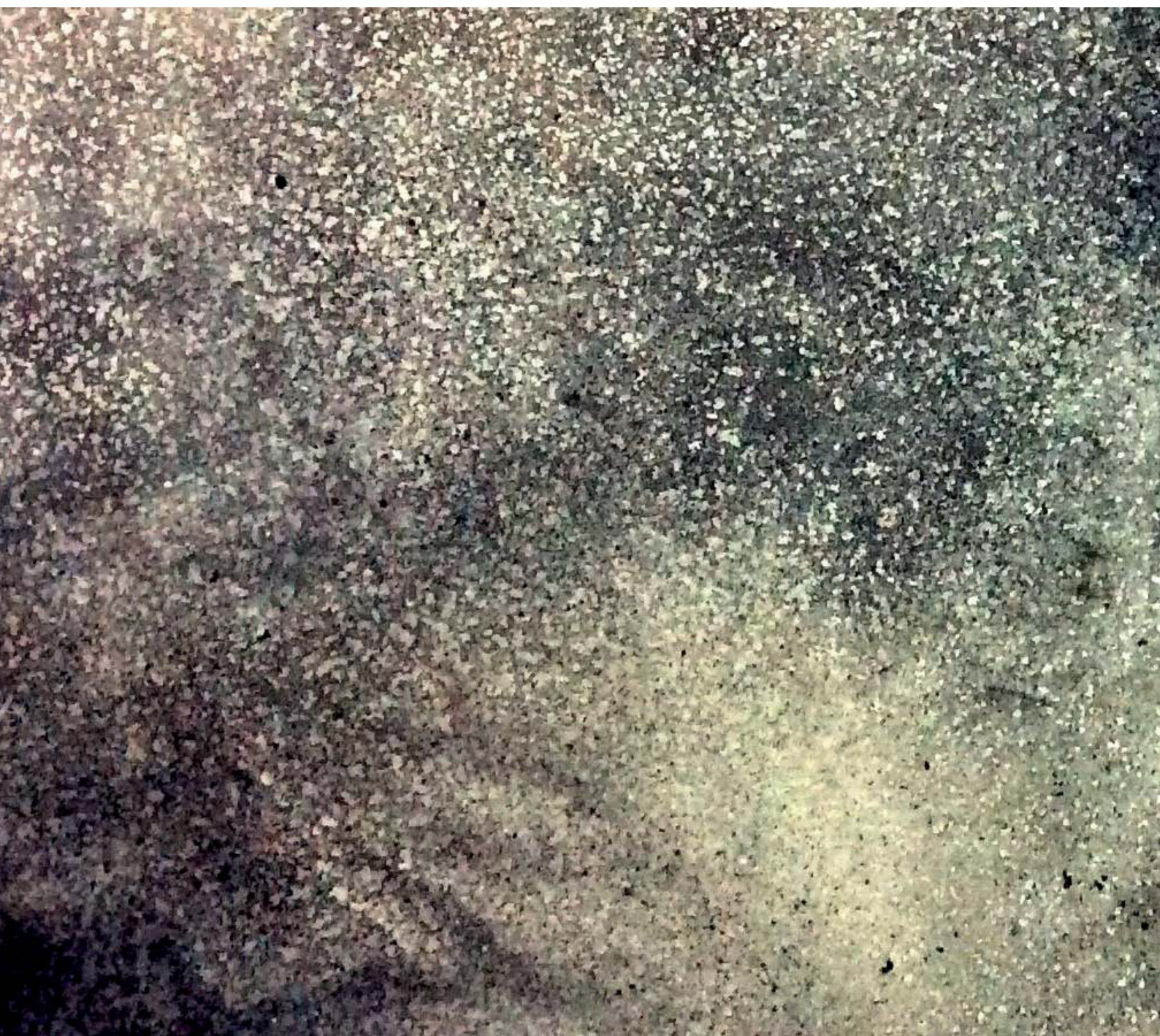


Fig. 5. Full view of *Rain* (2019), spray paint on canvas layered with Chinese silk, 131 x 151 cm. (Photograph by the author)



Water as the Spirit of the Natural Realm: Philosophy, Technique and Infinity in *Shanshui Hua*

By, Giacomo Bruni

Introduction

Within the vast panorama of Chinese civilisation, water does not emerge merely as one among many natural elements. Instead, it functions as an ontological, aesthetic and existential principle that permeates every sphere of knowledge, art and everyday life. It constitutes the indispensable bridge between the material and the spiritual dimensions, between concrete form and the immaterial infinite, acquiring symbolic and creative value that evolves profoundly across centuries, until it becomes an autonomous language within *shanshui hua* 山水画¹. Laozi's elevation of water to a tangible manifestation of the Dao in the *Daodejing* laid the foundations for a conception that transcends the mere physicality of the element, endowing it with metaphysical dignity destined to exert a deep influence on Chinese art. Precisely within this philosophical tradition, water gradually moves beyond its role as a simple medium for diluting ink, to transform into *Shuifa* 水法, the "method of water": a pictorial technique capable of expressing the deepest aesthetic foundations of Chinese mountain-and-water painting.

Within pictorial tradition, water followed a long and complex evolutionary path. It began as an auxiliary function for brush and ink, before establishing itself as an independent language, able to render the principles of emptiness and fullness, of continuous transformation, as well as painting's profound adherence to the Dao. For centuries, Chinese pictorial the-

ory concentrated its codification upon the two historical techniques of brush and ink *bimo* 笔墨, consigning the handling of water to implicit practice, handed down orally by masters without structured theoretical formalisation. It was only through the critical reflection of Huang Binhong 黄宾虹 (1865–1955), who affirmed its artistic indispensability, and the systematic theorisation of Wang Bomin 王伯敏 (1924–2013), that *Shuifa* attained equal standing with *Bifa* and *Mofa*, integrating in full right among the pillars of *shanshui hua*.

This contribution intends to analyse the philosophical and symbolic valence of water within traditional Chinese culture, its indissoluble bond with classical pictorial materials, the evolution and codification of *Shuifa*, as well as its decisive role in defining the unique identity of Chinese mountain-and-water painting. Such painting is capable of surpassing mere realistic representation to express the spiritual and infinite dimension of the Dao. This is not merely a study of technical pictorial execution procedures, but a reflection connecting artistic practice to the roots of Eastern thought. It demonstrates how water is not only a physical medium, but the key to understanding the Chinese conception of the natural scene as a place of encounter between human beings, nature and transcendence.

Water in Chinese Culture: Philosophy, Symbol and Spirit

Water marks the very origins of Chinese civilisation, inextricably bound to the vital cycles of the Yellow River and the Yangtze River, the foundational arteries of ancient agrarian society. From a natural element

¹ The term *shanshui hua* (mountain-and-water painting) is retained in transliteration. It constitutes one of the most significant genres of Chinese painting: although nature functions as its subject, as in Western landscape, it differs profoundly on formal, aesthetic and philosophical levels.

Attributed to Mu Xi 牧溪, *Eight Views of the Xiao-Xiang Rivers* 潇湘八景, 13th century, ink on paper.



essential for collective survival, it progressively evolves into a cultural symbol loaded with meanings, embodying wisdom, humility and flexible power — core values of Chinese ethics and aesthetics. All major systems of traditional thought developed their own interpretation of water, integrating it within doctrinal principles and making it an emblem of universal virtue and truth.

In Confucianism, water symbolises altruistic virtue. It nourishes every living being without ambition or competition, repre-

senting the perfect expression of benevolence and generosity that define the virtuous human being. Confucian thought observes water as a mirror of moral qualities: it flows without ever stopping, gives life to all creatures without seeking recognition, and in this way becomes a model for the ethical action of the individual, who must act for the common good while seeking no personal glory. In Chan (Zen) Buddhism, water represents the enlightened mind: pure, transparent and free from prejudice, able to reflect reality without distortion or attachment. Like water, the



Zen mind does not hold onto impressions from the external world; it receives them and lets them flow by, without fixating on transient forms and appearances.²

It is however within Daoism, and particularly in Laozi's 老子 *Daodejing* 道德经, that water receives its most authoritative and influential philosophical definition, destined to shape Chinese artistic aesthetics for centuries. The famous maxim stating that "the highest good is like water, which benefits all creatures without contending with them and dwells in places despised

poetic writing, whose great verse-makers offer some of its most memorable examples, celebrating rivers flowing endlessly toward the sea, aqueous mists wrapping mountain summits, and rains renewing the soil. They created images that combine the boundless vastness of nature and the temporal fragility of human existence. These poems depict water not only as an external natural scene, but as a mirror of the poet's soul: in the flowing river one recognises the passage of time; in the shifting mists one perceives humanity's inability to hold fast to worldly things.³ This dual nature of water — at once material and spiritual, concrete and symbolic, flexible and powerful — constitutes the basis of its artistic evolution. It would carry water from natural element and philosophical symbol to a pictorial language of infinity within *shanshui hua*.

Water and the Materials of Chinese Painting: an Indissoluble Bond

Chinese painting and calligraphy, rest on four iconic materials: paper, brush, ink and ink stone, the so called "The four treasures of the scholar's studio" (*wenfang sibao* 文房四宝). Yet none of these elements can express their full potential without the intervention of water: an invisible yet indispensable medium that integrates and animates the entire creative system. Water is not an additional or accessory material; it is the dynamic principle that activates the relationship between brush, ink and paper, transforming inert components into a unified and vital artistic language. As Gao

³ This lyrical and existential symbolism of water finds canonical expression in classical Chinese poetry, particularly in Tang-dynasty works. Li Bai's 李白 (701–762) famous poem *Jiang Jin Jiu* 《将进酒》 opens with the timeless river motif: 君不见黄河之水天上来, 奔流到海不复回 ("Do you not see the Yellow River come from the sky, rushing into the sea and never returning?"), embodying the inexorable flow of time and infinite natural movement. Conversely, Du Fu's 杜甫 (712–770) *Chun Ye Xi Yu* 《春夜喜雨》 articulates water's regenerative virtue: 随风潜入夜, 润物细无声 ("Stealing in with wind through the night, it quietly nourishes all living things"), illustrating rain's subtle, life-renewing power. Such poetic imagery, oscillating between natural vastness and human transience, established the foundational visual and spiritual lexicon later absorbed by *shanshui hua* aesthetics



縱馳天機
游魚

李苦禪
張雲



Shucheng 高树程 (18th century) writes: “To paint without water is like a boat stranded on the shore; one cannot row even a single stroke”.⁴

Traditional Chinese ink, composed of pine, oil or vegetable lacquer soot mixed with natural glue, exists in compact, dry form. It possesses no expressive potential before being ground with water on the ink stone. Water determines every tonal nuance, transforming the monochrome black of ink into an infinite spectrum of shades, classified by tradition as *mofen wuse* 墨分五色, the “five colours of ink”. From dense, dry ink to rich, medium, pale and transparent ink, down to the faint trace of pure water, every gradation is made possible by aqueous dilution. This aesthetic principle, a cornerstone of Chinese painting, affirms the superiority of simplicity: thanks to water, ink is able to evoke all the colours and atmospheres of nature without recourse to added pigments, materialising the ideal of the simple containing the complex.

The traditional brush also depends entirely upon water for the variety of its expressive effects. Different levels of water saturation at the brush tip define the quality of the stroke: a damp brush lays down soft, blended washes; a dry brush generates *kubi* 枯笔, “dry brush”, which animate lines and create meaningful empty spaces; a water saturated brush produces continuous, unbroken tonal transitions. In parallel, the type of paper interacts in a unique way with water: raw Xuan paper, highly absorbent, yields spontaneous, unrepeatable effects, whereas fully treated Xuan paper, non permeable, grants greater control over washes and layering. Chinese tradition has always defined ink painting as *shuimo* 水墨, an indivisible unity of water and ink, underlining that the two elements do not operate separately but in creative symbio-

sis. Water acts as a unifying thread harmonising brush, ink and paper, transforming distinct materials into a coherent expressive system capable of rendering not only natural forms but also their vital spirit.

It is no accident that, in the daily practice of the painter's studio, water preparation occupies a prominent place. Water quality, temperature and purity directly influence its reaction with ink and paper, just as ambient climate conditions affect water's behaviour. In this sense, water is not merely a liquid substance; it is an integral part of the creative process, a partner to the painter and a connection to the surrounding environment, rather than a mere auxiliary tool.

The Tradition of *Bifa* and *Mofa*: the Long Shadow of *Shuifa*

For much of the history of Chinese pictorial theory, *Bifa* 笔法 (the method of the brush) and *Mofa* 墨法 (the method of ink) were regarded as the sole pillars of shanshui hua. They were subject to systematic theoretical codification and continuous investigation by ancient masters. *Bifa* governs every aspect of the pictorial stroke: pressure, speed, direction and restraint of the brush, aiming to create lines endowed with *guqi* 骨气, structural vigour and inner spirit. Masters from Xie He 谢赫 (5th-6th century) to contemporary times composed treatises on brush rules, considering mastery of the brush the indispensable foundation of any worthy work, for a stroke lacking vigour renders a work soulless.

Mofa, by contrast, governs ink application: dilution, accumulation, washing, poured washes and controlled blotches, all techniques designed to create depth and volume using only ink's tonal range. As early as Jing Hao 荆浩 of the Five Dynasties,

⁴ Wang, Bomin (王伯敏). *Shanshuihua zongheng tan* 山水画纵横谈 [Reflections on Mountain-and-Water Painting]. Shandong meishu chubanshe, 1986.

in the *Bifa Ji* 笔法记, he distinguished between painters skilled in brush but not in ink, and vice versa, arguing that artistic perfection resides in the synthesis of the two techniques. Later masters such as Guo Xi 郭熙 (1023–c.1085), in *Linquan Gaozhi* 林泉高致, codified practices of ink layering and washing based on water, yet without granting the water element autonomous technical dignity.

As a consequence, *Shuifa* remained for centuries an implicit technique, practised masterfully by great painters, yet never formalised in theoretical treatises. This theoretical marginalisation has two deep rooted causes, both linked to the foundations of traditional aesthetics. On one hand, *Bifa* and *Mofa* are principally oriented toward the representation of concrete forms: mountains, rocks, trees and watercourses, tangible realities easily codified into precise rules. *Shuifa*, by contrast, operates upon the intangible dimension: mists, fogs, empty spaces and spiritual distances, elusive elements that resist rigid classification. On the other hand, the Daoist conception of *wuwei* values spontaneity and felicitous chance in creation: water generated effects are unrepeatable, dependent on the creative moment and the unpredictable interaction between water, ink and paper, making abstract theoretical codification difficult.

This absence of formalisation never diminished the central role of *Shuifa*. It allowed Chinese painting to move beyond mere realistic representation and become an expression of the spirit of the Dao. The theoretical turning point arrived with Huang Binhong, the great master of modern Chinese painting, who overturned the traditional hierarchy and rejected water's accessory status. In his writings, he firmly maintains that the method of ink cannot exhaust painting's potential, and must be complemented by an autonomous meth-

od of water, regarded as the vital spirit of pictorial creation, while brush and ink constitute its material form, he stated: "On the painting table stand a tray of water and a stick of ink: their reciprocal interplay constitutes the Ink Method. Yet each possesses its own distinctive qualities and can be exploited to its full potential. Therefore, alongside the Ink Method, there ought also to exist the Water Method. Within the craft of painting, the Water Method must be established and cannot be overlooked".⁵ Following him, his student, art historian and painter Wang Bomin completed the work of systematisation. He codified traditional *Shuifa* practices into a corpus of structured principles, finally elevating it to equal standing with *Bifa* and *Mofa*, and providing the theoretical foundations for modern understanding of this essential technique.

The Rules of Water: *Shuifa* as Codified Technique

Wang Bomin's systematisation of *Shuifa*, built upon Huang Binhong's insights and centuries old practices of ancient masters, does not consist of rigid norms. Instead it forms a system balancing technical control and spontaneity, uniting executive mastery and creative freedom. The technique comprises six fundamental methods that define water as regulator of brush and ink, permeating every phase of the pictorial process.

The first is *shui tiao mo* 水调墨, water modulating ink, a basic practice of Chinese painting executed before drawing marks. It does not refer to grinding ink on the ink stone, but to using water to vary the intensity, dryness and dampness of black ink. Without this aqueous modulation, tonal gradations cannot be achieved; this practice is indispensable for every painter. The second is *shui dai mo* 水带墨, water

⁵ Wang, Bomin. *Shanshuihua zongheng tan*.



carrying ink. The painter prepares a rinsed brush loaded with water, then dips it into ink; the brush's dampness distributes ink naturally across the paper. Huang Gongwang 黄公望 (1269–1354), in *Methods for Writing Mountains and Waters* (*Xie Shan-shui Jue*, 写山水诀), mentions the “water laden brush for depicting summer mountains before rain”. This method is also employed by Qi Baishi 齐白石 (1864–1957) for his famous shrimps, by Li Keran 李可染 (1907–1989) for oxen, and by Li Kuchan 李苦禅 (1899–1983), where the stroke immediately generates tonal variations across the surface.

The third is *shui po mo* 水破墨, water breaking ink. After laying down ink blotches, a wet brush is used to break them apart, producing aqueous halos. On sized paper this is also called “water clash”; on raw paper water spreads rapidly, spontaneously and freely. There exists the inverse variant, *mo po shui* 墨破水, ink breaking water: water is spread first, then ink is applied. Chromatic variants also exist, such as water breaking colour or colour breaking ink, which expand expressive possibilities.

The fourth is *zi shui* 渍水, staining through water infiltration, exploiting halos left by water on Xuan paper. The technique is ideal for distant, veiled natural scenes, snow on bamboo, achieving effects of appearance and disappearance characteristic of “mountains seen and not seen”.

The fifth is *po shui* 泼水, pouring water. Distinct from pouring ink or colour, it consists of pouring pure water onto the work when ink is eighty to ninety percent dry. Water re dilutes already deposited blotches, evoking mist and atmospheric humidity.⁶

The sixth is *pu shui* 辅水, spreading water, valued by Huang Binhong and applied to nearly finished works. A uniform layer of water — often the turbid water from the painting vessel — is spread with

⁶ Mi Fu 米芾 (1051–1107), Jiang Can 江参 (active c. 1090–1138), Gao Kegong 高彦敬 (1248–1310), Wang Meng 王蒙 (1308–1385), Shen Zhou 沈周 (1427–1509), Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521–1593), Zhu Da 朱耷 (1626–1705), Shitao 石涛 (1642 – c.1707), and Gong Xian 龚贤 (1618–1689) are among the painters who mastered this technique.

large brushes or dabbing tools, leaving untouched areas unmodified. The aim is to harmonise the composition, unify heterogeneous parts and grant cohesion to the whole. Yuan and Ming period artists had already utilised this practice, yet without giving it a specific name.

These six modes do not rigidly separate water and ink, but reveal that water use possesses its own rules. Such principles do not stifle creativity but orient it: *Shuifa* demands impeccable technical control, alongside the capacity to surrender to the spontaneity of Daoist *wuwei*, accepting the unique, unrepeatable effects of the interaction between water, ink and paper. Artistic perfection resides in the synthesis of discipline and freedom. The painter must not seek to dominate water completely, but to enter into dialogue with it, accepting spontaneous deviations that may enrich the work, while never entirely abandoning creative intention.

***Shuifa* as the Heart of *Shanshui Hua*: Beyond Material Representation**

Shanshui hua is not a mere copy of visible nature, but a spiritual dialogue between painter, human being and universe, a manifestation of the Dao in pictorial form. Its distinctive traits — the balance between emptiness and fullness, continuous transformation of forms, the transcendent dimension of the visible, human nature harmony, and detachment from realistic representation — find their complete realisation solely in *Shuifa*. If *Bifa* builds the structural skeleton of the work and *Mofa* defines its material substance and texture, *Shuifa* infuses it with vital spirit, transforming a material composition into a work endowed with soul and transcendence.

The principle of emptiness and fullness, a foundation of Chinese aesthetics, finds in water its exclusive instrument of reali-

sation. Tradition teaches that emptiness and fullness generate one another: painted forms such as mountains, trees and rivers acquire meaning only thanks to empty spaces — mists, skies and fogs — which are not vacuous voids but spaces full of imaginative potential. Through *Shuifa*, the painter washes out ink, wraps mountain summits in light mist, makes watercourses vanish into fog, creating those full emptiness spaces that embody Laozi's principle of *wu* 无, non being that contains being. As Liu Haisu 刘海粟 (1896–1994) underlines: “Water serves countless purposes and demands skilful variation. First and foremost, it modulates the relationship between void and solid. Within *shanshui hua*, between mountains and waters, mountains and trees, individual trees, as well as among mists and vapours, compositions ought not to be rendered too crowded or overly distinct. Spaces must be left for the viewer's imagination. With water, the vital energy-veins (*qimai* 气脉) of all pictorial elements are bound into a unified whole. Those ambiguous passages embody void within solid and solid within void: void and solid generate one another, reality and illusion interweave. Thus, though brush and ink may reach their limit, the wondrous realm remains inexhaustible, attaining a hazy, mist-shrouded state that defies easy description”.⁷ The spectator does not only see what is painted, but completes the vision through their own fantasy, filling the empty spaces in a process of spiritual participation that ranks among the most distinctive features of Chinese mountain-and-water painting.

The continuous transformation animating nature and the universe is rendered in painting by water's fluidity. Brush lines and ink blotches are fixed, defined forms, whereas *Shuifa* generates constant move-

⁷ Liu, Haisu (刘海粟). *Liuhaaisu tan yilu* 刘海粟谈艺录 [Notes on Art]. In Zhou, Jiyin (周积寅) (ed.), *Zhongguo lidai hualun* 中国历代画论 [A Compendium of Chinese Painting Theory]. Jiangsu meishu chubanshe, 2013, p. 501.

Attributed to Mi Fu 米芾, Yunshan tu 云山图 [Clouds and Mountains], Freer Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., ink on paper, 55.2 x 27.7 cm



寫畫九未落筆先以神會至落筆
時勿促迫勿急緩勿陡削勿散神勿
太舒務先精思天蒙山川步武林木
位置不具先生樹後布地入於林此
於地也以或襟含氣度不在山川林
木之內其精神駕馭於山川林木之
外隨筆一落隨意一發自成天蒙
處處通情處處醒透處處脫
塵而生活自脫天地牢籠之手歸
于自然矣 大嶽子江阻風題此
用筆有三操一操立二操側三操畫有主有側
有畫始三也在力在易三在變力過於畫則
神不易於筆則墨能變於画則奇此三格也變
於水運於墨三受於家水不變不醒墨不變不
透醒透不蒙則素墨勝也筆不華而實筆不
緩而力筆不過而得如筆大墨不老則正好下
手處不擅用筆言唯恐失之老實竟操筆
之人不背其失其力在中者力過于中則用
尖而不尖則力得矣用尖而識尖則面尖矣所
逸真州友人欲事筆索余再題



清湘大嶽子極去午三月寫龍
潭上觀桃花寫此

ment and change: aqueous dilutions create infinite tonal transitions between black and white; blotches expand spontaneously; mists appear and vanish across the paper, rendering the dynamism of living nature.

Thanks to *Shuifa*, *shanshui hua* realises the ideal of the transcendent realm of the visual, summarised in the principle *zhichi qianli* 咫尺千里: the capacity to evoke infinite distances within a limited support. This spiritual effect materialises in *Miyuan* 米远, the veiled, blurred distance, a non perspectival yet inner dimension that renders natural forms indefinite and open to infinity. Aqueous techniques of pouring, staining and washing produce precisely this calculated vagueness, which surpasses mere visual distance to open onto spiritual dimension. The Song dynasty masters Mi Fu and Mi Youren 米友仁 (1074–1153) exalted this potential, abandoning rigid outlines and traditional washes to paint Jiangnan mountains solely with water diluted ink. They created natural scenes where sky, water and mist merge into an undefined, boundless whole.

Ultimately, *Shuifa* realises human nature harmony, the ultimate aim of Daoist painting. Water, a manifestation of the Dao, teaches the painter the practice of *wuwei*: not to dominate nature and materials, but to conform to their spontaneity, letting the interaction of water, ink and paper generate authentic, natural forms. The emblematic example is the Tang dynasty master Wang Qia 王洽 (?–805), who painted in a state of free inspiration, pouring water and ink onto paper to create natural scenes that seemed to arise directly from nature rather than human intervention. If *Bifa* and *Mofa* demand the painter's voluntary control over matter⁸, *Shuifa* invites

detachment and trust in creative spontaneity, bringing art closer to the perfection of the Dao.

Precisely because of this spiritual nature, *Shuifa* enables *shanshui hua* to go beyond mere realistic representation of nature, adhering to the principle that painting does not copy the forms of things but expresses their spiritual essence. *Bifa* and *Mofa* define the material forms of mountains and rivers, while *Shuifa* evokes their profound spirit, the invisible atmospheres constituting the soul of the natural scene. As Huang Binhong maintained, *Bifa* and *Mofa* are techniques of form, whereas *Shuifa* is the technique of essence, the only one capable of elevating painting from material representation to spiritual expression.

This hierarchy of values is confirmed in Xie He's *Six Principles of Painting*, a foundational text of Chinese pictorial theory. The first principle, *Qiyun shengdong* 气韵生动 ("spiritual resonance and vital energy"), the ultimate goal of every work of art, cannot be achieved by brush and ink alone, which are bound to formal representation. It is *Shuifa* that infuses *qi*, the vital breath, into painted forms, animating them and bringing them to life. Shi Tao's famous statement that: "Without transformation through water, there is no awakening",⁹ corresponds to Xie He's principle of living rhythm, demonstrating that water is the spiritual motor of all Chinese painting.

Conclusion

Water represents the red thread uniting Laoist philosophy, traditional Chinese culture and the art of *shanshui hua*. It evolves from a metaphysical symbol of the Dao into an essential creative medium, and further into an autonomous, spiritual language of natural scene painting. In an-

8 *Xuanhe huapu* 宣和画谱 [Xuanhe Catalogue of Paintings]. In Chen, Chuanxi (陈传席) (ed.), *Zhongguo shanshuihua shi* 中国山水画史 [The History of Chinese Landscape Painting]. Jiangsu meishu chubanshe, 1988.

9 Colophon on *Yunshan tu zhou* 云山图轴 [Clouds and Mountains Hanging Scroll], Palace Museum, Beijing, paper, ink and colour, 45.1 × 30.8 cm, 1702.

cient culture it embodies humility, flexibility and infinity; in pictorial practice it activates the potential of brush and ink, making possible the infinite gradations of Chinese ink; in modern artistic theory, thanks to the codification of Huang Binhong and Wang Bomin, it gains equal dignity with *Bifa* and *Mofa*, revealing itself as the spiritual heart of *shan-shui hua*.

Having overcome centuries of theoretical marginalisation, *Shuifa* today stands as a distinctive element of Chinese mountain-and-water painting, capable of expressing its deepest aesthetic principles: the balance of emptiness and fullness, the dynamism of natural transformation, the transcendence of the visible, and harmony with the Dao. While brush and ink techniques define the work's material dimension, *Shuifa* reveals its spiritual essence, materialising the Chinese ideal of the simple containing complexity, of flexibility holding power, and of emptiness generating fullness.

As the Qing period theorist Zhang Shi 张式 observed: "The method of ink resides in the use of water: ink serves as form, water as vital-qi. When qi circulates, form comes alive. The ancients spoke of "water-and-ink" as a pair, and this holds profound truth".¹⁰ *Shuifa* is therefore not merely a pictorial technique, but a genuine way of seeing the world inherited from Laoist philosophy: the capacity to discern the infinite within the finite, spirit within matter, the Dao within nature. It is this unique vision that renders *shanshui hua* an extraordinary and universal art, able to evoke the immensity of the universe within the limited space of a support, surpassing the boundaries of realistic representation to embrace the eternal dimension of spirit.

The study of *Shuifa* is not only an exercise in art history, but also a key to understanding Eastern aesthetic sensibility, which does not separate art from philosophy and existential vision. In this sense, water becomes the bridge between the thinker's ideas and the painter's hand: what Laozi described in philosophical text manifests materially on Xuan paper, through dilutions, mists, halos and washes generated by the method of water. In this way, mountain-and-water painting is no longer merely a representation of mountains and rivers, but a true spiritual practice, in which the painter seeks to align with the Dao through artistic action.

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¹⁰ Zhang, Shi (张式). *Hua tan* 画谭 [*Discourses on Painting*]. In Zhou, Jiyin (周积寅) (ed.), *Zhongguo lidai hualun* 中国历代画论 [*A Compendium of Chinese Painting Theory*]. Jiangsu meishu chubanshe, 2013, p. 500.

克恭為
孟載畫雨山面畫竟雨如澍快事也

畫竟雨如澍房山
自所云展仍對佳
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苦勤村田阿那畔
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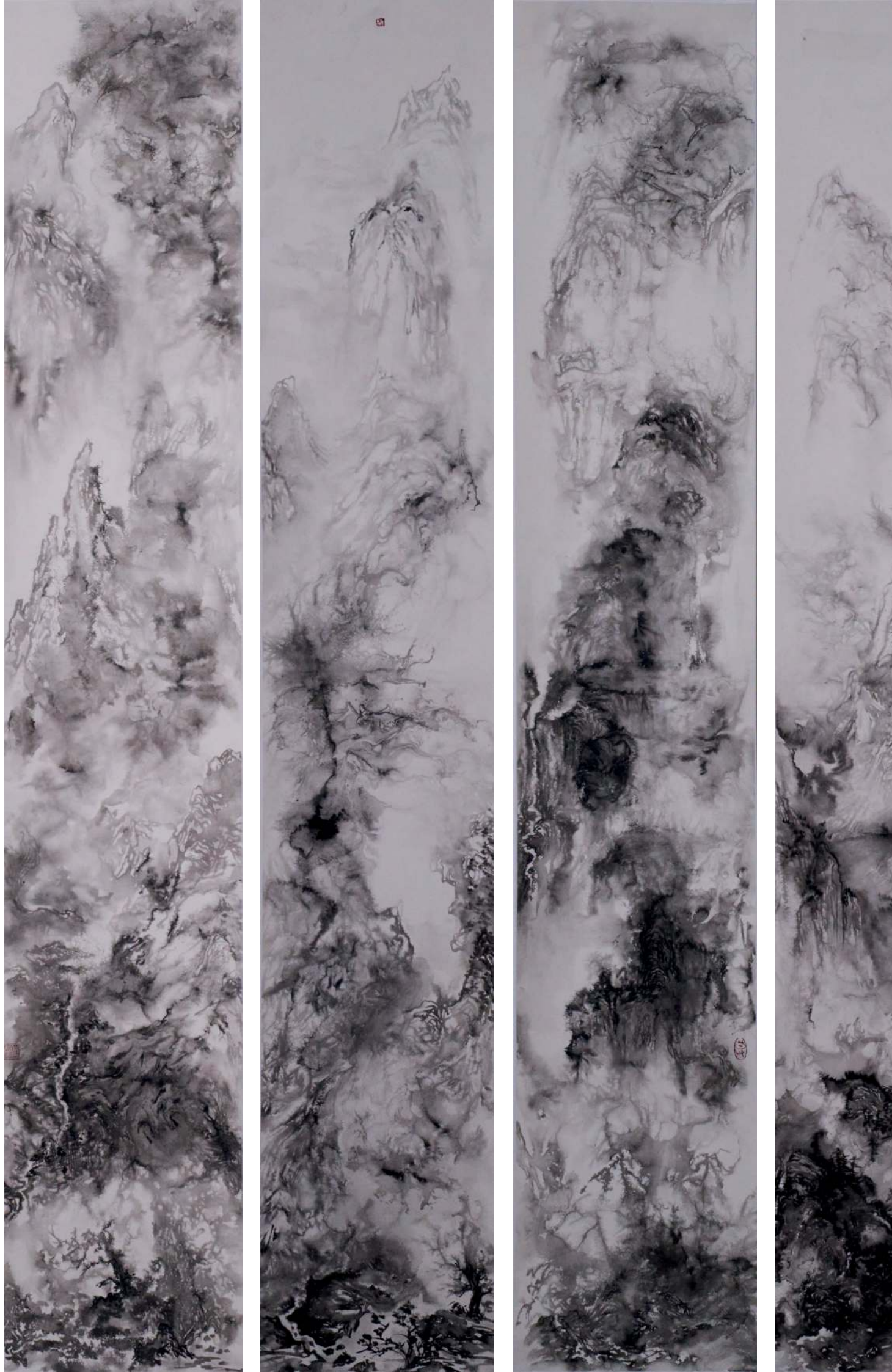
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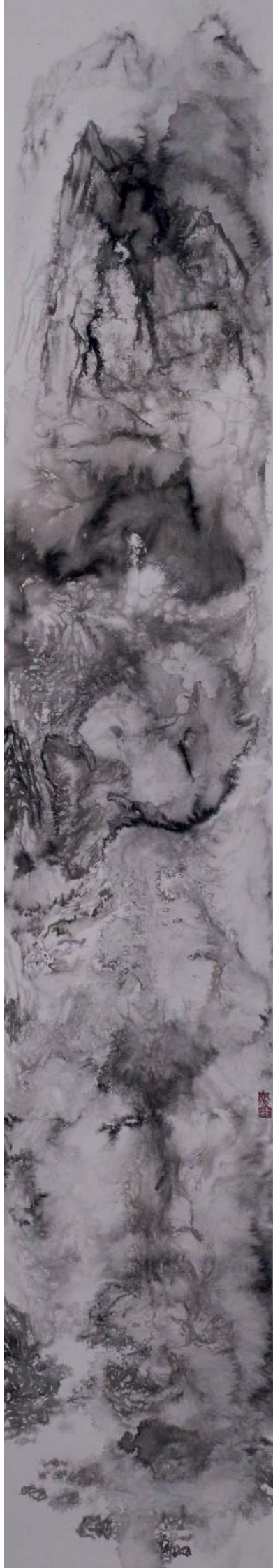
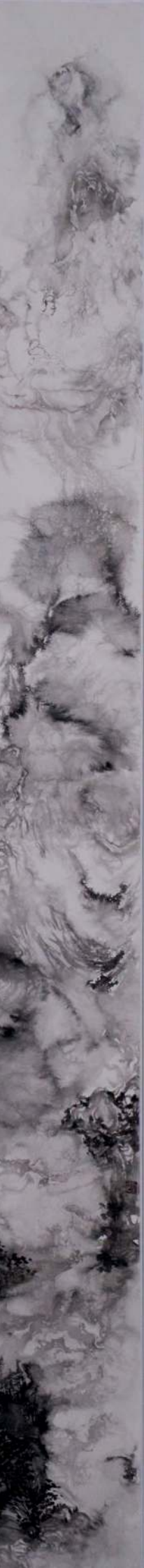
高克恭



Gao Kegong 高克恭, Yushan tu 雨山图 [Rainy Mountains], Yuan Dynasty, National Palace Museum, Taipei, ink on paper, 122.1 x 81.1 cm.

Giacomo Bruni 贾客暮, *Shui zhi xing* 水之形 [Shape of Water], ink on paper, seven-panel polyptych, each panel 180 × 30 cm.





The Form of Water: from the pictorial representation of surface waves to the cymascope

By: Aurora Vivenzio

Water emits vibrations, visible on its surface, which respond to its collision with other elements of the natural landscape it shares. Since ancient times, these forms have been a subject of study not only for physics and chemistry in their geometric configurations but also for pictorial representation. When comparing Egyptian frescoes up to Western Impressionist painting, and early Chinese representations and *Shanshui* painting, the form of water, much like perspective vision, takes on ever-different meanings in representation, accounting for ecological, visual, and cultural conditions. Water, therefore, like its representations over time, has assumed the visual container that has repre-

sented it. Contemporary art, thanks to its interdisciplinary capacity to mix art, physics, chemistry, and music, has given rise to audiovisual installations that combine the sounds and forms of water in digital animations or media images.

Since the Neolithic period, in both Asia and the West, artists have used graphic-geometric forms to capture the changing appearance of water. In this archaic phase, the aquatic element – depicted as a river or sea wave – predominantly served an ornamental function, complementing the realistic description of the scene. This is evidenced by the recurring motifs on Cretan *pithoi*, where water appears as



a magical-decorative element, as well as in pre-Han Chinese brocades, where the depiction of water aimed to capture its essential form through a graphic-geometric synthesis. In these primitive cultures, water is not yet an autonomous subject, but a backdrop that enriches the ceramic or textile surface with symbolic meaning.

It is from the Han Dynasty in China and the late Western Middle Ages that water begins to assume a more complex function, becoming a distinctly temporal, spatial-symbolic, and narrative element. In the work of the Chinese painter Gu Kaizhi 顾恺之 (348–409), famous for his narrative scrolls, water is no longer a mere ornament but a device that marks the flow of time and connects the different scenes of the story. In the famous work *Luoshen fu tu juan* 洛神赋图卷 [*Scroll of the Ode to*

the Luo River Goddess], water becomes charged with aesthetic and moral qualities, becoming a vehicle for a charm that intertwines spirituality and religiosity. Furthermore, it marks the progression of the narration, as well as the different scene changes and the transformation of the main character (fig. 1).

In the West, however, the medieval shift attributes a radically different value to water. It takes on a symbolic-religious character linked to purification. An example is Giotto's *Baptism of Christ* (Scrovegni Chapel, fresco, 200x185 cm, fig. 2), where the waters of the Jordan River touch Christ's body with transparency. Giotto abandons the mystical dissolution of the body in water in favor of simple and incisive descriptive lines, which give the element a new corporeality and realism; Christ's body does





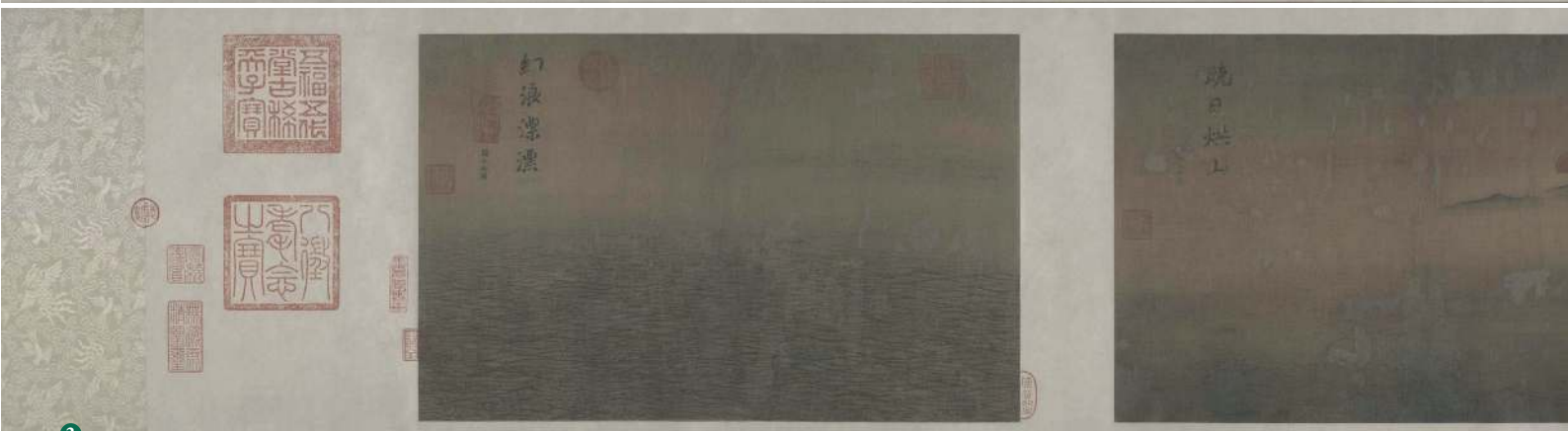


not dissolve, but fades, almost blurred, in a play of transparencies that emphasizes the purifying act and at the same time symbolizes the dual identity of Christ, flesh and spirit. A subtle interplay between the tangible (the bright body) and the intangible (the discolored body).

The comparison between the two traditions reveals a profound ontological divergence. In Chinese art, water serves as a narrative medium that removes the event from a defined historical location, projecting it into a dreamlike and suspended dimension, without a clearly demarcated space. In Gu Kaizhi's scrolls, water is an element of continuity that accompanies human events, living alongside the earthly world and creating a story that unfolds parallel to human fears and passions.

Conversely, in the Latin Middle Ages, water predominantly assumes a purifying value, becoming a memory of primordial worlds. In Christian baptism, water is not a companion to earthly events, but an instrument of redemption that colors and transfigures the body of the baptized. As the English artists Stoica and Corder observe, this chromatic fiction in ancient art – this capacity to “make appear” without being mere appearance – responds to a profound ontological question: while the East seeks in water a bridge to the sensible world, the Christian West sees in it a threshold towards the afterlife.

It is, however, with the Song Dynasty that the representation of water reaches one of its absolute peaks in the Chinese tradition. Ma Yuan 马远 (1140–1225), in the famous cycle *Twelve Views of Water*, 水图, (fig. 3), revolutionizes traditional *shanshui* painting by adopting innovative technical devices: the compositional void in the upper part of the scroll, the poetic accompaniment, and the rule of three distances. Ma Yuan does not limit himself to reproducing



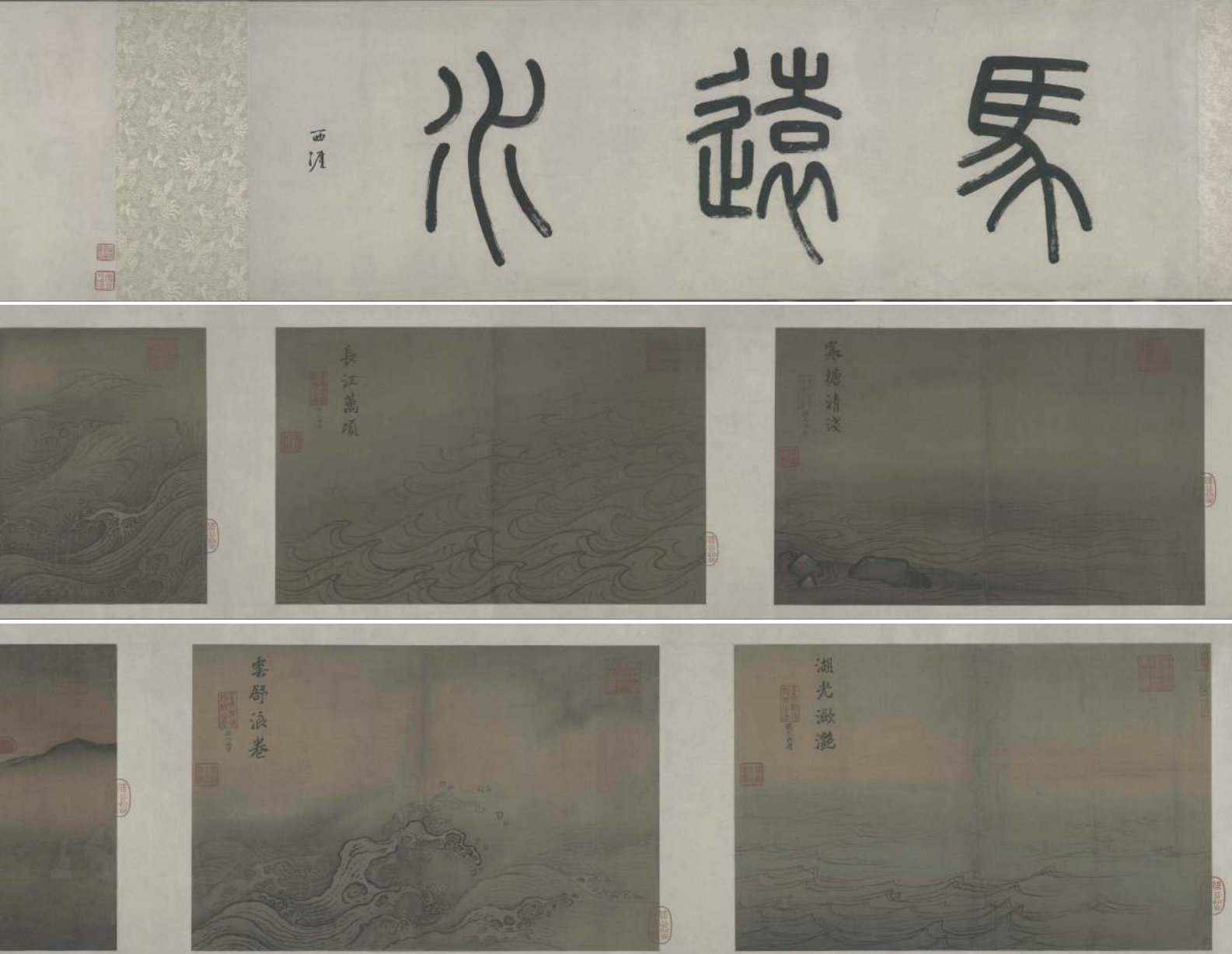
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water as a naturalistic element; he renders its sensitive manifestation, contextualizing and temporalizing it at the same time, until it transforms into a memory of lived experience.

Through the technique of the brush following the bone structure (*gufa yongbi* 骨法用笔), the artist traces the water's surface with uniform, fine, and decorative strokes, yet pervaded by an intrinsic energy. In the individual sheets of the cycle, such as *Rising Waves* or *Clear Waters of the Winter Pond* 《层波叠浪》 (section 3) 《寒塘清浅》 (section 4), Ma Yuan skillfully balances the density and lightness of the line to render the transparency, power, or stillness of the water. The result is a suspension of both time and space: the waves do not refer to a specific place, but to twelve different modes of being, representing both

the natural world and the inner universe of memory. Furthermore, the choice of the scroll is not accidental: it tells a story that unfolds over time, but does so in a fragmented and ephemeral manner, like the very transparent nature of water.

In stark contrast to Ma Yuan's poetics, Leonardo da Vinci's hydrodynamic studies (fig.4) testify to a radically different approach to the liquid element. Leonardo abandons the narrative and memorial dimensions to embrace scientific and mechanical investigation. His annotations, characterized by incisive and concise lines, render the perpetual motion of water, its receding and oscillating, it's flowing in channels or rippling on the surface. With ink, Leonardo captures the time and incessant movement of this element, isolating it from the personal context to study it



as a dynamic object, subject to the laws of physics and mechanics.

While Ma Yuan represents the “accents” of water in their poetic pregnancy, Leonardo breaks down its structure, moving from the optical dimension to the physical and metaphysical. In his manuscripts, water is no longer a vehicle of memory, but a pure object of knowledge, an element that reveals its vital qualities only through experimental observation and graphic rendering.

Ma Yuan's legacy is reinterpreted and amplified by Song Mingyuan 宋明远 (1938–), who undertakes a decisive evolution: from the aesthetics of the great terrestrial civilization to the status of maritime civilization. Under his brush, the sea is no longer a simple horizontal extension of the in-

finite but becomes a vehicle for a concept akin to the Western sublime, conveying the idea of depth, mystery, and grandeur (fig. 5).

Inspired by the Italian Renaissance, Song Mingyuan introduces a third dimension – the temporal one – which places the sea in a vital and eternal flow. His representations, enriched by volume, light, and shadow, are no longer simple lines, but bodies of water that resonate with modern science, capable of expressing power and movement.

In contemporary art, water makes the definitive leap: from narrative backdrop it becomes a sensory protagonist, at the center of immersive and spiritual experiences. The video medium, in particular, introduces what we might call a “fourth dimen-

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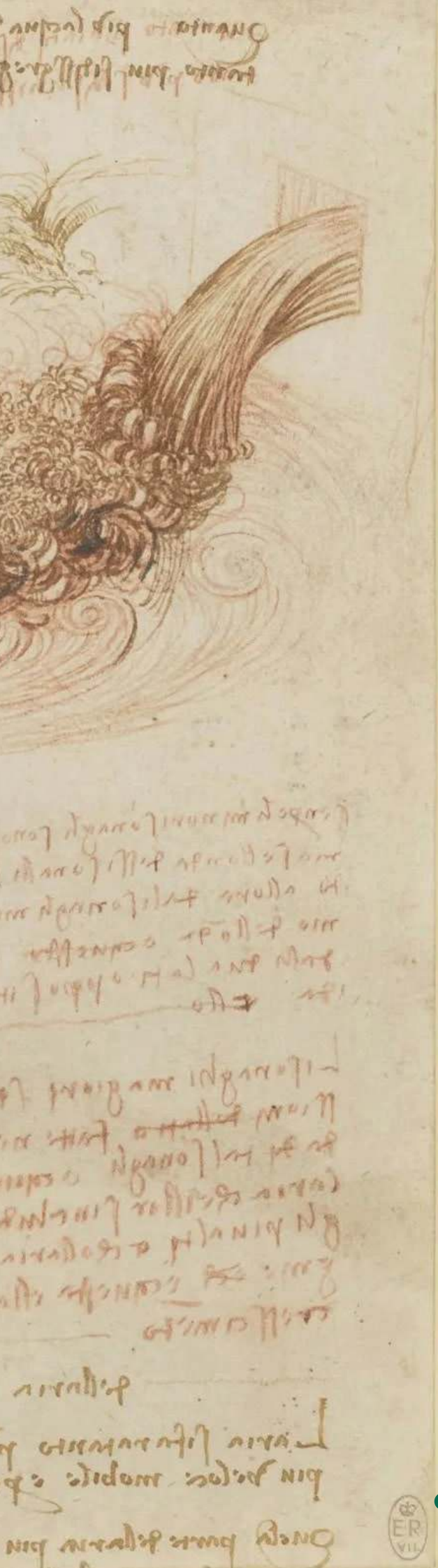


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Leonardo da Vinci, *Studies of Water*, c. 1508-1513, Royal Collection, Windsor Castle, pen and ink on paper

sion” – time within time – which painting and photography had only attempted to suggest.

An exemplary case is the Chinese visual artist Chen Qi 陈琦 (1963–), who in his water-printed woodblock print *2012 Generation and Diffusion*, 2012生成与弥散 – a 56-meter work composed of 240 matrices – the work features seemingly endless waves rendered across its vast surface, generating an immersive perceptual experience for the viewer (fig. 6).

The theme of choice – between oblivion and rebirth – finds one of its most profound interpreters in the American artist Bill Viola. In *Ocean Without a Shore* (2007), presented at the 52nd Venice Biennale, water falls like rain, offering subjects who cross this veil the possibility of returning to life. The faces, initially blurred and discolored, become sharp and gain color, revealing awareness of their being through expressions of dismay and terror. Water thus becomes a metaphysical boundary: crossing it means rediscovering existence, while remaining on the surface corresponds to a different poetic choice, that of modifying the ecosystem by leaving perishable traces.

The performative dimension of the relationship with water is explored by Zhang Huan 张洵 (1965–) in *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond* (1997) (fig.7). In this performance, forty workers immerse themselves half-naked in a lake, physically raising its level with their bodily presence. The action demonstrates that the only authentic way to connect with nature is to let oneself be influenced by it on one's own body. However, every human intervention modifies the natural course of things, leaving ephemeral traces that, precisely in their fragility, reverberate collectively in existence.

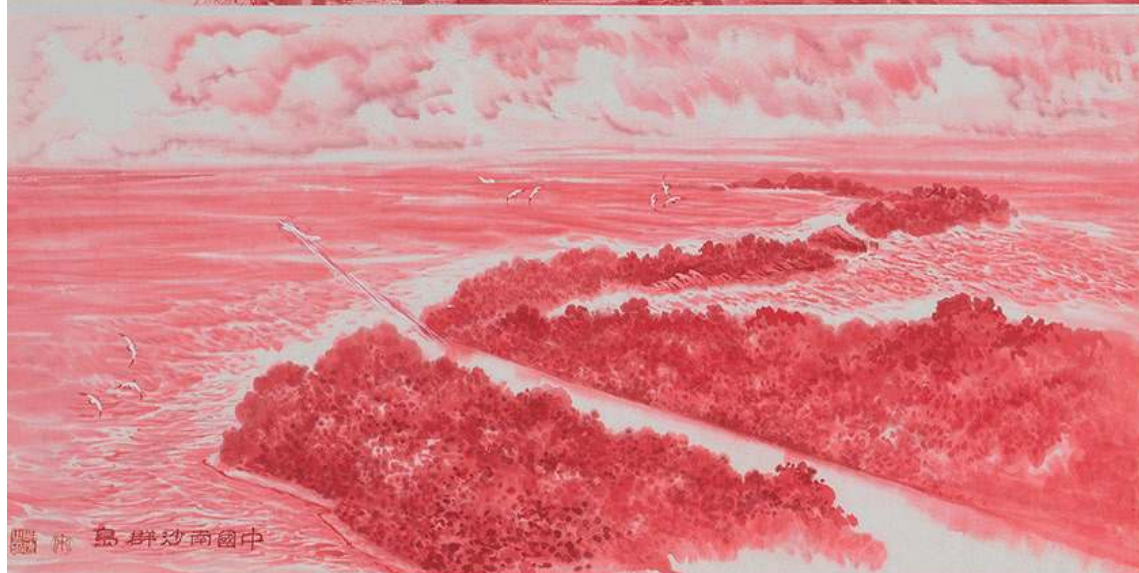
取得了举世瞩目的伟大成就。今天的人民海军正以全新的姿态屹立于世界的东方。

敬录习近平主席二〇一八年四月十二日在南海海训海上阅兵时的讲话

戊戌夏月余时建於北京



中國南海群島



中國南海群島



戊戌夏月
余时建
於北京

向海图强

在中国共产党坚强领导下，人民海军一路劈波斩浪，纵横万里海疆，勇闯远涉大洋，大踏步赶上时代发展潮流。



中國台灣島



中國釣魚島



The human will to control and modify nature, to enclose it in artificial spaces, is at the center of the work of the young Italian artist Pino Pascali. In *32 Cubic Meters of Water* (1967) (fig.8), the artist uses thirty galvanized aluminum tanks to contain 2,400 liters of re-colored water; similarly, in *River with Triple Mouth*, rectangular tanks full of water and surfaces covered with earth create an intimate and personal dialogue with the liquid element. Water, enclosed in square or rectangular forms, becomes a mirror of Western man seeking answers about himself and the world. This gesture evokes a long cultural lineage that from Ulysses' journey reaches Caravaggio's *Narcissus*, up to the notion of liquid society theorized by Zygmunt Bauman.

Water configures itself as a transparent flesh, a mirror of the invisible world that surrounds us and of human memory. Always present and ever-changing, water shows itself as an autonomous and active presence, capable of embodying both oblivion and the passage to the other metaphysical shore. Its representation – from Neolithic ornament to digital installations, from Ma Yuan's masterful line to Leonardo's scientific studies – traverses the centuries without ever entirely abandoning the human present, revealing in turn its nature as a narrative medium, scientific subject, sensory protagonist, and finally mirror of consciousness. In the dialectic between East and West, water confirms itself as the symbolic place where poetry and physics, memory and oblivion, life and its transfiguration meet.



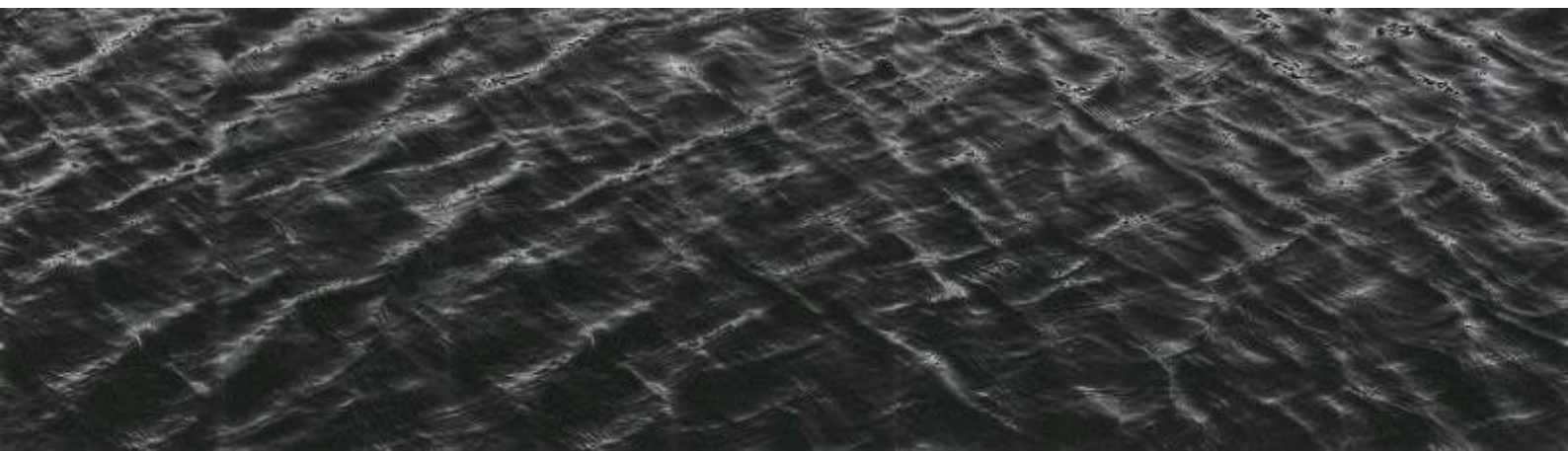
Zhang Huan 张洵, *To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond* (1997)

Chen Qi 陈琦



7). Video of the Performance, Beijing, China

i, 2012 *Shengcheng yu Misan* 2012生成与弥散 [2012 Generation and Diffusion], 2018, water-printed woodblock, 380 × 5600 cm



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