

山水

SHANSHUI

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

Giacomo Bruni

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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
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位置不是先生樹後布地入於林此
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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
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清湘大嶽子極去午三月寫龍
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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
靈竇似茲濃雲
以運靈勾神非閑
苦勤村田阿那畔
惟老出耕耘

戊戌夏六月

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.



