Chinese Art: The Story of Haze (Part One)

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Chinese art discovered haze three times—in the 5th, 12th and 20th centuries, respectively—for different reasons. Each time it was a revolution and a marked departure from the entrenched practice, thereby blazing new paths in Chinese art. The first instance was inspired, in part, by a proverbial 'Shadow Image'. Accounts of a 'Shadow Cave' in the region of Nagarahara (west of present-day Jalalabad, Afghanistan) reached China around 400 CE. The cave lore has it that the Buddha Shakyamuni, having subjugated a poisonous dragon, leapt into the grotto wall and stayed there as a Shadow Image, visible only from a distance. The Shadow Cave fired the Chinese imagination, attracting a succession of Chinese monk-pilgrims from the 5th to the 7th century. An eminent monk named Huiyuan (334–416) even built a replica cave on Mt Lu (in today's Jiangxi province) with its own Shadow Image—a painted icon—inside. Although the painting is no longer extant, its properties can be inferred from eulogies to it composed by Huiyuan and his community. It exhibited notable formal qualities, such as chiaroscuro.

Much was invested by Huiyuan and his coterie in indistinct optical and atmospheric qualities such as 'darkness', 'dimness', 'obscurity' and 'void' to offset the luminous forms of 'manifestations'. These qualities were thoroughly alien and refreshing to Chinese pictorial sensibility, long accustomed to drawn contours. Now, hazy treatment began to soften the hard contours. The new-found interest was a marked departure from traditional Chinese surface-oriented, curvilinear painting. Cave paintings at Dunhuang (in today's Gansu province) of the 5th to 7th century, precisely the time frame when the Chinese interest in the Shadow Cave was at its height, corroborate this new visual interest in haze registered in the writings of Huiyuan and his circles (Fig. 1).

The second surge of interest in haze occurred around the 11th and 12th centuries. In contrast to the first wave, which swept through cave shrines, this time the revolution occurred in a different medium: that of portable paintings. While the history of Chinese art can be traced to millennia BCE, the medium of brush-and-ink painting mounted on paper or silk scrolls, fans or album leaves holds pride of place, and is now often readily recognized as the quintessence of 'Chinese art'. Its long history notwithstanding, it was not until the period spanning roughly the 10th to 14th century that the portable format bearing brush-and-ink painting largely came into its own as a full-fledged medium. Nearly all potential formal properties were explored in this period. Artists of subsequent periods essentially worked within the parameters hitherto defined.

Several factors contributed to the formation of the medium. The emergence of landscape as a self-sufficient genre in the 10th and 11th centuries was a decisive turning point. The art of painting, long regarded as the domain of artisanal practice, changed complexion when literary elites co-opted it as an expressive means for cultural pursuits of self-cultivation or as a material token that facilitated in-group communication and exchanges. Paper was used as an increasingly favoured medium for painting, and painters fully explored its absorbent properties to accommodate 'ink plays' and other visual effects.

The dynamics of line-and-wash, or more

Fig. 1 Buddhas of the past, present and future
West wall, Mogao Cave 254, Dunhuang, Gansu province, China
Late 5th century
Mural painting
(Image courtesy of Dunhuang Research Academy)

precisely, brush-and-ink became an issue in the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127). Landscape theorists of the time spoke of 'brush' and 'ink' as distinct categories of formal qualities (Guo, 2009, p. 501; Jing, 2009, p. 6). Here 'brush' (*bi*) means the linear tracings of the ink-loaded and wrist-controlled brush tip, the movement of which articulates the contours of depicted images; it also encompasses the texturing strokes (*cun*) applied in areas circumscribed by brushed contour lines to render complexions, volume and substance. 'Ink' (*mo*), by contrast, refers to expansive, amorphous and contourless water-diluted washes used to lend tonalities and resonance to a painting. It is typically employed to depict the moods and shades of mist, clouds, and haze at dawn and dusk.

Three regional traditions dominated landscape painting in the 11th century: the northwest tradition, best represented by Fan Kuan (act. 990–1020) (Fig. 2); the east coast tradition, following the style of Li Cheng (919–67) (Fig. 3); and the southeast (lower Yangzi river valley) tradition, presaged by Dong Yuan (934–62) and Juran (act. 10th century) and rediscovered and hyped in the 11th century. Of the three, the latter two traditions displayed a distinct interest in haze effects. While no extant work can be securely attributed to Li Cheng, Dong Yuan or Juran, 11th century written accounts testify to this pictorial tendency. By the second half of the 11th century, this interest had grown considerably. To Guo Xi (*c.* 1020–*c.* 1090), a painter from the Central Plain who served as artist-in-residence under Emperor Shenzong (r. 1068–85), there could be no such thing as a fixed landscape; rather, he saw a landscape as definable only by its variations, contingent upon particular moments in a season or a day, and upon weather conditions (Guo, 2009, p. 498). Landscapists began to observe the changing aspects of nature and to capture the perceptual effects accordingly.

The increasing interest in haze effects in the 11th century hastened the trend toward monochrome-ink landscape. This trend ought to be seen against the backdrop of the rise of landscape in general, whose harbinger appeared in the 8th century. The dominant mode then was the colourist blue-and-green or gold-and-green landscape (Fig. 4). The operative colours were mineral and vegetable pigments: azurite blue, malachite green, umber and so on. The 'golden' effect was created through the use of the vegetable colour rattan yellow. The colourist effect of the 8th century landscape registers a cultural preoccupation with a heightened experience of transcendent

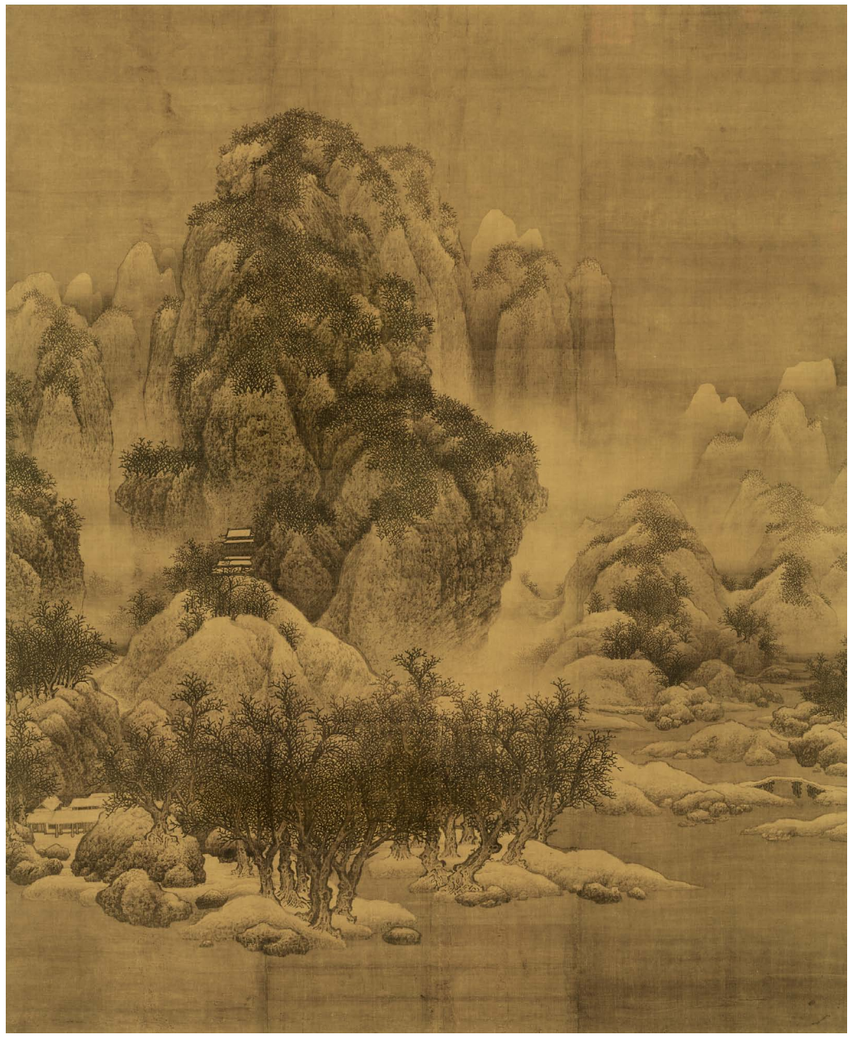

Fig. 2 *Cold Grove in Snow*
By Fan Kuan (act. 990–1020)
Hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk, 193.5 x 160.3 cm
Tianjin Museum

Fig. 3 *A Solitary Temple Amid Clearing Peaks*
Attributed by The Nelson-Aktins Museum of Art to Li Cheng (919–67), Northern Song dynasty (960–1127); dated by the present author to the mid-11th century, in the style of Li Cheng
Hanging scroll, ink and slight colour on silk, 111.8 x 55.9 cm
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri
Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust (47-71)
(Image courtesy of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art)

existence. The aspiration to attain the imaginary land of the immortals in Tang dynasty (618–907) times did not amount to rejection of earthly life; rather, it was a sublimated reflection of the aristocratic taste for material opulence in times of prosperity. The blue-and-green landscape born of this cultural milieu bears all the imprints of the cultural pursuit of sensorial stimuli, an interest epitomized by the refinement of minerals to produce life-prolonging elixirs. The transcendent landscape was thus conceived as a fantastic and otherworldly realm. Continuous lines with the effect of hard-etched tracings define fantastic rockeries. Azurite blue and malachite green cover the linear-circumscribed surfaces. Clouds integral to this transcendent landscape are not the nebulous affairs we see in later works; instead, they are made up of hard-edged, curvilinear patterns (Fig. 5).

The Song (960–1279) landscape assumed a radically different complexion. Broader access to upward social mobility through imperial recruitment examinations had done much to level the ground for aspiring degree candidates from all walks of life, including those of humble origins. The new elite class abhorred the jaded aristocratic taste of the previous ages. Outgrowing the palate for the uniform landscapes of opulence, they preferred a landscape of personal visions and subjective moods. It comes as no surprise that painters in the second half of the 11th century, such as Guo Xi, compared landscape to the human body, feelings and states of mind: 'A mountain has water as blood, foliage as hair, haze and clouds as its spirit and character' (ibid., p. 499; translation from Bush and Shih, 1985, p. 167).

Paradoxically, a confluence of seemingly conflicting trends and impulses spurred the growing pictorial interest in haze. On the one hand, the increasing empirical-mindedness fostered observational interest and naturalist sensibility. On the other hand, the introspective literary culture shaped a more subjective and interiorized mode of viewing the world, and the artistic means of registering that subjectivity. Song Di, a seasoned 11th century painter, instructed another painter regarding ways of picturing landscapes; his advice epitomizes the interest in the art of observation at the time: 'You should first look for a damaged wall, and then stretch plain silk against it. Gaze at it day and night. When you have looked for a sufficient length of time, you will see through the silk the high and low parts,

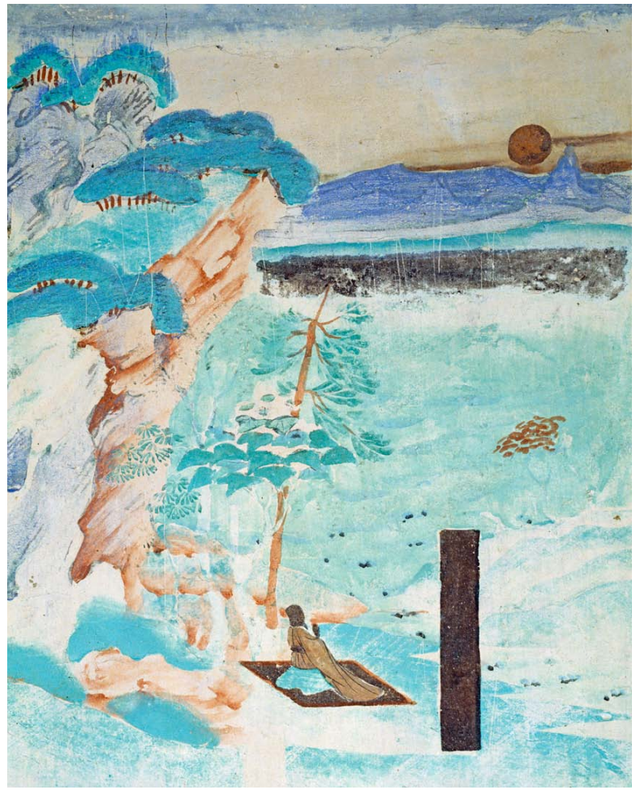

Fig. 4 Transformation tableau based on the *Visualization Sutra* (detail)
North wall, Mogao Cave 320, Dunhuang, Gansu province, China
8th century
Mural painting
(Image courtesy of Dunhuang Research Academy)

Fig. 5 Landscape
North wall, Tomb of Han Xiu (672–740), Xi'an, Shaanxi province, China
Circa 740
Mural painting

or curves and angles, on the surface of the wall, which will take on the appearance of landscape. As you hold this in your mind and your eyes consider it, the high parts will become mountains and the low parts, water; crevices will become valleys and cracks, torrents; the prominent parts will seem to be the foreground and the obscure, the distance. As your spirit leads and your imagination constructs, you will see *indistinctly* the images of human beings, birds, grasses, and trees, flying or moving about. Once they are complete in your eyes, then follow your imagination to command your brush' (Shen, 2016, p. 365; translation from Bush and Shih, 1985, p. 122). The tenor of the instruction is a combination of observation-derived empiricism and imaginative subjective construction.

The artistic investment in haze also reflects the deepening of literary culture in the 11th century. The area south of the Yangzi river, the land of the Southern Tang (937–76), which the Song conquered, had been a wellspring of sophisticated literary refinement for some time. The cultural reorientation under the Northern Song, in the form of downplaying military or martial swagger in favour of civility, led to a 'southern turn'. The reputation of 10th century

Fig. 6 *Winter Night Landscape*
By Li Gongnian (act. early 12th century), *c.* 1120
Hanging scroll, ink and light colours
on silk, painting: 129.6 x 48.3 cm
Princeton University Art Museum
Gift of DuBois Schanck Morris, Class of 1893 (y1946-191)
(Photograph: Bruce M. White)
(Image © Princeton University Art Museum/Art Resource, NY)

painters such as Dong Yuan and Juran, whose names had remained relatively obscure in the first half of the 11th century, soared in the second half. The hazy landscapes inspired by the humid and mellow southern environs became a viable model that commanded a wide following (Fig. 6). As noted by Shen Kuo (1031–95), Dong's landscapes were too cursory for close viewing; their forms emerged only if seen from afar. They typically featured 'distant views with autumnal mists' or evening scenes with villages 'half-obscured in the deep distance' (Shen, 2016, p. 375; translation from Bush and Shih, 1985, p. 119).

The increased interest in haze led to the currency of the misty and dreamy Xiao-and-Xiang-river scenes in the Song (Fig. 7). Inspired by the lore of Qu Yuan (*c.* 340–278 BCE), one of the earliest known southern poets, and the melancholy Song-of-the-South verse associated with his name, the imaginary topography of the Xiao and Xiang rivers evokes the landscape of the humid south, suffused with sorrowful emotive tonality and tenebrous subjective mood à la mode of the Song-of-the-South verse. This accounts for the gloom of the Xiao-Xiang landscape. Most of the eight set scenes are rain-drenched, overcast or dim-dusk views. The popularity of this misty landscape was such that painters vied with one another to make the already hazy scenes even hazier. Even Deng Shun (act. 1127–67), a critic who normally appreciated the poetic overtones of the Xiao-Xiang landscape, complained: '[These evening scenes] are hard to figure out. It is impossible to paint the bell sound, to begin with. And to show the Xiao-Xiang [riverscape] at night! And then to add rain on top of that! What can one see?' (Deng, 2009, p. 716; translation by the author). While no firmly datable 11th century Xiao-Xiang landscape paintings are extant, surviving 12th century works testify to the trend. Although brushed lines still articulate the landscape forms and figures, massive spreads of ink washes in various shades and tonalities pervade the composition, to the extent that they threaten to overwhelm and obscure all the brush-articulated forms.

The much-touted 'Mi-style landscape' epitomizes this larger trend. Traditional art historical accounts commonly lionize and credit Mi Fu (1051–1107) and Mi Youren (1074–1151), father and son, with being innovative trailblazers who inaugurated the 'ink play' tradition of rendering hazy cloudy-mountain landscapes. No credible painting by Mi Fu has survived, but extant paintings by Mi Youren present

Fig. 7 *Eight Views of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers* (detail)
By Wang Hong (act. *c.* 1131–*c.* 1161), *c.* 1150
Pair of handscrolls, ink and light colours on silk, each section: 23.4 x 90.7 cm (approx.)
Princeton University Art Museum
Edward L. Elliott Family Collection, Museum purchase, Fowler McCormick, Class of 1921, Fund (y1984-14 a–b)
(Photograph: Bruce M. White)
(Image © Princeton University Art Museum/Art Resource, NY)

cloudy landscapes almost devoid of any brushed contour lines (Fig. 8). Shades of ink, highlighted by dots, spell out vague forms of gentle, cone-shaped hills eroded by unpainted blank passages that suggest clouds, mist and vapour. In his inscription on his painting *Cloudy Mountains and Ink Play* (in the Palace Museum, Beijing; see Zhou and Wang, 2002, p. 470), Mi, or whoever painted in the name of Mi, calls these instances of 'ink play' (Bian, 2009, p. 999). The edginess of the Mi cloudy landscape was deliberate mutiny against the well-wrought professionalism and artisanal practice of painting that had prevailed up to the 11th century. Correct modelling of forms, careful handling of details, fixation on verisimilitude and so on were seen as signs of a deadening craftsmanship that stifled individual creativity. In fact, many 11th century literary elites had voiced discontent over what they saw as the impoverishment of

Fig. 8 *Cloudy Mountains*
By Mi Youren (1074–1151)
Handscroll, ink on paper,
image: 27.6 x 57 cm
The Metropolitan
Museum of Art, New York
Ex coll. C. C. Wang Family,
Purchase, Gift of J. Pierpont
Morgan, by exchange, 1973
(1973.121.1)

Fig. 9 *Spring Cloud and Haze at Dawn*
By Gao Kegong (1248–1310)
Hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper, 138.1 x 58.5 cm
Palace Museum, Beijing

the art of painting through mindless professional craftsmanship. Mi Fu's freakishness epitomized this growing literary-elitist discontent. Renouncing the technical requirements of traditional painting practice, Mi Fu used 'twists of paper, sugarcane husks, and lotus pods' for his ink effect (Zhao, 1984). While this practice is clearly idiosyncratic it signals the larger trend sketched above, and the cloudy landscapes executed through such unconventional means were in synergy with the aforementioned practices of observing the protrusions and crevices of a damaged wall through plain silk, picturing the gloomy Xiao-and-Xiang river scenes and so forth.

The Mi-style cloudy landscape has ever since been regarded as a landmark in the history of Chinese painting. In the 17th century, theorists touted the two Mi as major instigators of the literati painting tradition. The praise was premised on literary-elitist self-cultivation and deliberate amateurism that thrived on deskilling and renouncing professional fastidiousness and artisanal polish. This familiar account obscures the fact that the Mi-style cloudy landscape was in fact part of a bigger trend in the 12th century. Professional painters also participated in this trend, and its revival in the 13th and 14th centuries was largely due to the innovation of an influential Mongol elitist patron named Gao Kegong (1248–1310), who both practised and modified this subgenre (Fig. 9). Moreover, the literati theory does not quite explain a curious contradiction, namely, that the cloudy landscape ink play, which reached its most abandoned excess in the second half of the 13th century, was both touted by later critics as a precursor of literati practice and frowned upon as an aberration of literati taste. The Xiao-Xiang landscapes painted by Muqi Fachang (1210?–69?) and Yujian Ruofen (act. late 13th century) fully live up to the literary sense of 'ink play'. They are dramatically abbreviated ink passages vaguely suggesting landscape forms. The bravura of wilfully splashed and flung ink provoked ire in Tang Hou, a 14th century literatus: 'The recent painter Muqi, the monk Fachang, made ink plays (which are) coarse and ugly, and without ancient method' (Tang, 2009, p. 901; translation by the author).

The pendulum of taste swung again in the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), when Chinese literary elites became introspective and reflective about the morals of the latest dynastic fall. They abhorred the cavalier flung-ink excess and stylistic frivolity of 'recent' generations and pursued an alternative aesthetic in the name of 'ancient flavour'. However, while the 'antiquity' they aspired to theoretically stretched all the way to pre-Tang and Tang times, in reality it was Northern Song precedents that were the available models. Yet the Yuan literati were selective in terms of aesthetic preference even when it came to the Northern Song legacy. They singled out primacy of brush line, one of the dominant characteristics of Northern Song painting, rather than the prevalence of washes, an aspect that had run wild in the Southern Song (1127–1279)—the ink-play 'recentism' that they despised (Lu, 2012, pp. 215–18). Works by Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322), Huang Gongwang (1269–1354) and Ni Zan (1301–74) best exemplify the Yuan landscape aesthetic (Fig. 10). Using dry and centre-brushed strokes, the Yuan literati perfected the brush-centric mode of painting. Ink washes, with the rare exception of Wu Zhen (1280–1354) and Fang Congyi (1302–93), were used sparingly, if at all. Thus, critics of subsequent centuries speak of Song-and-Yuan opposition in selective and grossly overgeneralized terms. The wash-centric Song—or to be more precise, Southern Song—is pitched against the brush-centric Yuan; the freewheeling insouciance of the 'Song' (i.e., Southern Song) is opposed to the austerity and reticence of the Yuan.

This opposition is overly simplistic in view of historical reality, but the uncluttered paradigm formulated as such is a convenient framework for subsequent ages. A neat opposition, Mi vs Ni, could thus be posited as representing two distinct exemplary stylistic models. The 'Mi' mode (Song) is a handy shorthand reference for the wash-centric method, while the 'Ni' mode (Yuan) epitomizes the dry, brush-centric mode.

Both Mi and Ni became a matter of contention for late Ming dynasty (1368–1644) theorists and artists, whose master narrative of Chinese art is still with us. It is pointless to recapitulate the deeply flawed and often misleading art historical storyline constructed by Dong Qichang (1555–1636) and his south-of-Yangzi circle. Suffice it to say that in Dong's scheme, which pitches literati against professionals over centuries, the foremost great masters populating the lineage of literati include both Mi and Ni. Dong's own painting practice also shows his alignment with both landscape models, although he did discriminate between the two modes. While his embrace of the Ni model was total and wholehearted, he was ambivalent about the Mi model while theoretically

Fig. 10 *Wind among the Trees on the Riverbank*
By Ni Zan (1301–74), 1363
Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 59.1 x 31.1 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Bequest of John M. Crawford, Jr., 1988 (1989.363.39)

Fig. 11 *Mountains in Rain* (detail)
By Li Liufang (1575–1629), 1623
Handscroll, ink on paper, 29.2 x 144.6 cm
Anhui Provincial Museum
(Image courtesy of Anhui Provincial Museum)

touting it. If not handled well, he warned, its debonair tendency could get out of hand (Dong, 2009, p. 1018).

Yet, the wash-centric Mi style spoke to the rampant 'intuitive individualism' of the late Ming. The libertine attitude, cultivation of individual freedom and hedonistic insouciance of the time found expression in the liberal washes, and thus the Mi-style wash-centric mode saw a revival, exemplified especially by Li Liufang's (1575–1629) cavalier works (Fig. 11). Meanwhile, the elitist valorization of Yuan painting reached its zenith, making the dry-brushed Ni model the unrivalled aesthetic standard and exemplar of good taste. The two models—the wash-centric Mi model (see Fig. 8) and the dry-brushed Ni model (see Fig. 10)—coexisted without posing problems of choice for the Ming painters. They spoke to different needs. It was only in the early Qing dynasty (1644–1911) that allegiance to one mode or the other became more suggestive of a particular stance.

For many early Qing artists in the wake of the traumatic dynastic change, it was challenging and problematic to find a fitting pitch for depicting the mood of the time. Ni and Mi were two viable formal models. The late Ming valorization of Ni-style landscape as the ultimate exemplar of good taste ensured its continuation as the prevalent formal model in the early Qing. In the hands of painters such as the monk Hongren (1610–63), the sparse compositions created through the taut, formal economy of dry-brushed linear brevity convey a deep sense of austerity and reticence (Fig. 12). Their stoicism certainly amounts to a fitting portrayal of the current mood. Some, however, found this dry-brush minimalism wanting. The drastic dynastic change created an urgent need for expressive venting. New energy was invested in the time-honoured conceit of poetry as 'voiced picture' and painting as 'muted poetry' (Frankel, 1957), except that painting now aspired toward a state of poetic voice. To Yun Shouping (1633–90), for instance, the art of painting was about capturing 'the howling amidst old trees against a bleak sky' (Yun, 1987, p. 48; translation by the author). It was not uncommon for a painter to base his composition on a song.

This provides an explanation for the complaints by some early Qing artists about the Ni-style landscape model and its 17th century derivatives. It was seen as too muted—lacking in the expressive voice these early Qing artists desired. The backlash against the Ni model gathered momentum. Wang Duo (1592–1652) categorically dismissed it: 'Though with pale flavour, the likes of Ni Yunlin [Ni Zan] suffer from dryness and drabness, much like a frail, sick man about to breathe his last. It is said to possess some lithe ease and [adorable] fragility. This is just too much' (Wang, 2009, p. 431; translation by the author).

For some early Qing painters, therefore, the problem with the Ni landscape model was its 'deadening stillness' (Qian Dong's [1752–?] colophon on a painting by Hongren; Wu, 1985, p. 222). While the sparse landscape delineated by abbreviated dry-brushed contours may have mirrored the Ming loyalists' eremitic tendencies in the face of the bleak and depressing early Qing political landscape, its downside was just as apparent. It did not lend itself as a cathartic channel for the venting of pent-up frustration and bitterness. In short, it did not have a voice. The early Qing artists needed a more forthcoming and expressive visual idiom.

This is where the Mi-style wash-centrism came into its own. Its fluid ink washes are melodious, and heavier in their tonal effects. However, much as it was consistently exalted, the Mi-style model was also fraught with risks for the 17th century painters. The hallmarks of the Mi cloudscape are easily recognizable: contourless forms, liberal ink washes and so on. They were also easily imitable: the casual, quick and effusive application of ink washes instantly creates a Mi, or quasi-Mi, cloudscape effect. Much as Dong Qichang, the late Ming arbiter of taste, exalted

Fig. 12 *The Coming of Autumn*
By Hongren (1610–63), 1658–61
Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 122.2 x 62.9 cm
Honolulu Museum of Art
Gift of the Wilhelmina Tenney
Memorial Collection, 1955 (2045.1)
(Image courtesy of Honolulu Museum of Art)

the Mi model and practised the Mi style, he was wary of its potential travesty for fear of 'lapsing into casual frivolity' (Dong, 2009, p. 1018; translation by the author).

The polarizing political climate of the Ming–Qing transition made an individual's subscription to a particular stylistic model a contentious issue. Stylistic choices in the late Ming carried no grave consequences; personal temperament predisposed one to identify with a certain received model, either Ni or Mi. However, much was at stake with the choice of stylistic profile in the early Qing.

According to the historian Frederic Wakeman, two character types became distinct in the early Qing: the 'Romantics' and the 'Stoics'. The 'Romantics' were by temperament 'generous, bold, and expressive'. Exemplary 'Romantics', such as Qian Qianyi (1582–1664) and Wu Weiye (1609–71), were among the most celebrated poets of the age. Both served the Southern Ming Nanjing regime (1644–45) (the remainder of the Ming regime set up in southern China after the Manchu captured the north) and went on to become 'twice-serving' officials in the Qing government, even though they were deeply conflicted. By contrast, 'Stoics' possessed 'intransigent integrity'. They were inclined toward controlling and regulating excessive emotions. With a strong conviction of rational order and responsibility, they were committed to public duties. Exemplary 'Stoics', such as Chen Zilong (1608–47), Gu Yanwu (1613–82) and Wan Shouqi (1603–52), all turned out to be uncompromising Ming loyalists (Wakeman, 1984). To a large extent, the 'Romantics' had a spiritual affinity with the wash-centricism of the Mi model, while the 'Stoics' were aligned with the sparse and dry Ni model.

We can thus sense the Romantics' dilemma in their choice of stylistic model in the early Qing. Those who had succumbed to the lure of the romantic abandon of the Mi model in the late Ming simply recanted their former proclivity after the dynastic change. The morning-after sobering up led to a critical rejection of this stylistic flamboyance as unfitting for a graver time. The Stoics had their problem as well. The 'deadening stillness' of the dry-brushed, sparse Ni model failed to speak to the urgent need to express 'the howling amidst old trees against a bleak sky'. So neither the Mi nor the Ni model quite answered the early Qing need. The Ni model was too muted; the Mi model, too insouciant. The challenge for the artists of the time was, therefore, how to have both stoic gravitas and expressive forthrightness? How to both sulk and sing?

Gong Xian (1618–89) provided a solution by having it both ways (Fig. 13). He compensates for the Ni-style sparseness with Mi-style heaviness. Conversely, he treats the Mi tonality in the manner of the Ni dryness. His 'wash' has no use for the moisture expected of ink washes; instead, it is a palimpsest of layers of dry-brushed dark tones. The formal device thus provides a perfect solution to the dilemma outlined above: namely, to find a way to both sulk and sing. The posturing and semblance of wash carry the force of release, flow and resonance, thereby feeding the impression of the quality of singing. However, as soon as the 'wash' posturing signals melodies, the singing impulse is kept in check. The drying-up of the 'wash' forestalls the overflow, levity and profligacy, and adds gravitas to the picture. The total effect is therefore one of release and check, singing and its suppression.

In broad historical perspective, Gong's heavily inked landscape points to the roads not taken. It suggests, first of all, affinity with chiaroscuro. European prints brought by Jesuits commanded attention in 17th century China. But if Gong was taking a leaf out of the European book he did not acknowledge it, as he was primarily interested in fashioning a *distinct* visual language that spoke to the cultural dynamics of his time. The Mi cloudscape was his professed source of inspiration—but he actually turned the model on its head. Instead of haze and mist, Gong's palimpsest of ink layers showcases illuminated areas of pristine white, accented by the surrounding black mass. The effect, as Gong states, is of moonlit luminance, the lingering sound of bells and chimes from distant Buddhist monasteries (Liu, 2003, p. 154), the hard-won lull after a stormy spell. Neither European influence nor the Mi-style tradition fully explains Gong's landscape, though they may have informed it. Gong's language of ink grew out of the early Qing turmoil. The chastening black-and-white contrast evokes the precious stillness in the imaginary soundscape. It is a formal stance that transcends the circumstances and age. Gong Xian was so ahead of his time that his contemporaries hardly understood him. It was not until the late 19th and early 20th centuries that he was rediscovered. His visual idiom was embraced by 20th century Chinese painters, foremost among them Huang Binhong (1865–1955). To some extent, Gong Xian both summed up a swath of the history of painting before him and anticipated what would occur in centuries to come.

Fig. 13 *Lone Tree in a Mountainous Lake*
By Gong Xian (1618–89), 1671
Album leaf, ink and watercolour on paper, 24.4 x 45.1 cm
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri
Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust (60-36/10)
(Image courtesy of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art)

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