

**“HIGH THE MOUNTAIN, LONG THE RIVER”:
CHINESE LANDSCAPE PAINTING AND ITS
AFTERLIFE IN THE SHORT ANIMATION FILM
FEELING FROM MOUNTAIN AND WATER (1988)**

YUXIN CHEN

B.A. Candidate in Art History
Columbia University, Class of 2023

Introduction

The *Spring and Autumn Annals of Mr. Lü* (*Lüshi Chunqiu* 吕氏春秋), a Chinese encyclopedic text from the Qin dynasty, recorded a story between the musician Boya and his friend Ziqi. Boya was a master of *guqin*, a seven-string traditional Chinese instrument. Whenever Boya tried to translate the mountains into his music, his friend could comprehend their formidable height from the tunes. Whenever he thought of the flowing water as he played, his friend, too, recognized the torrential momentum.¹ The names Boya and Ziqi thus became metaphors for the resonance between two noble souls.

More than two millennia after the Qin-dynasty anecdote, a modern-day animation reenacted the theme of transcendental human connections, along with the elements of towering mountains, flowing rivers, and the sonorous timbre of the *guqin* strings. Produced in 1988 by the Shanghai Animation Film Studio, the nineteen-minute short film is called *Shanshui qing* 山水情, known in English as *Feeling from Mountain and Water*. The story centers on an elderly *guqin* player who falls ill during a journey and gets rescued by a young girl. The girl brings him to her hut and tends to him. To show his gratitude, the old man takes the girl in as his protégé and teaches her music lessons. When he has to leave after his recovery, the girl plays a beautiful *guqin* tune that evokes the memory amidst mountains and rivers that the two have shared.

Since its release, *Feeling from Mountain and Water* has received acclaim for presenting the traditional landscape paintings in motion and for making the landscape come alive. Not only is the story set in a world of landscape with misty peaks and cascading streams, but the film also draws much of its formal attributes from the traditional ink-wash landscape art. Although the long history of the Chinese ink wash landscape has been the subject of many studies, little has been said about the transference of its aesthetic effect to a cinematic format. In this paper, I seek to identify the stylistic roots of *Feeling from Mountain and Water* in the lineage of Chinese landscape art. I will examine how the film medium made explicit what had been implicit in a static landscape painting, both through its technical innovation and limits.

¹ Lü Buwei, “吕氏春秋” [The Spring and Autumn Annals of Mr. Lü], Chinese Text Project, accessed December 20, 2021, <https://ctext.org/lv-shi-chun-qiu/zhs>.

Additionally, I wish to shed light on the specific sociopolitical climate in which the film was produced and responded to.

Revival or Return? Finding Artistic Roots

The stylistic ties between *Feeling from Mountain and Water* and traditional landscape paintings have become the film's defining characteristic. However, the specific strand of landscape paintings by which the film is influenced remains underexamined. As early as the scene in which the girl returns home by boat (Fig. 1), *Feeling from Mountain and Water* has aligned itself with the visual style of sparse composition and loose brushstrokes. Most of the elements in the shot gravitate to the left half, leaving an unadorned expanse on the right. Hasty, freehand strokes set up the structure of the hut as well as the bamboo grove. The rest of the scenic subjects—from the riverbank, the distant mountain range, to the rock formation in the leftmost foreground—are formed by watery ink wash, instead of being carefully modeled into cragged, tactile surfaces.



Fig. 1. Still from *Feeling from Mountain and Water* (03:27). Directed by Te Wei 特偉. Shanghai Animation Film Studio, 1988.

Following the footsteps of the girl, the shot zooms in to the entrance of the hut (Fig. 2). Here, the free-flowing nature of the ink wash has been emphasized. On the thatched roof, patches of ink seep across the original contours of the house, smudging the windows and the door. One can even see the creases on the paper as the diluted ink soaks through its fiber. The hut itself threatens to come apart at any moment, as the lines are haphazard and the perspective appears slightly awkward. It is almost as if the scene is drenched in carefree dizziness.



Fig. 2. Still from *Feeling from Mountain and Water* (03:51). Directed by Te Wei 特偉. Shanghai Animation Film Studio, 1988.

The visual traits of this sequence bring to mind the works of the early Qing painter Shitao 石濤 (1642–1707). Shitao was born amidst the turbulent transition from the Ming to the Qing dynasty, the latter of which led by Manchu conquerors. A descendant of the family of Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (1368–1399), the first emperor of Ming, Shitao had to spend his early years in Buddhist monasteries to evade Manchu persecution. Growing up, he had been a tireless traveler and prolific painter. His artistic career was defined by his rebellious spirit—he signed his paintings with over thirty different names.² When his contemporaries were consumed by the doctrine of “imitating the ancients,” Shitao revolted against such homogeneity and championed the return to selfhood.³ In his *Huayu lu* 畫語錄, an essay on the theory of painting, Shitao reminded his readers that there exists a self—the creative expression unique to the artist—besides the ancient models, and that “[one] cannot stick the whiskers of the ancients on [one’s] face.”⁴ His art, therefore, is fueled by radical individualism, sometimes presenting itself as a disconcerting oscillation “from the posed and meticulous to the crude and brutal.”⁵

Of these two ends on Shitao’s stylistic spectrum, the film’s style is closer to the latter. The general setting of the waterside cottage scene echoes Shitao’s smaller, more

² “Shitao or Shih-T’ao; original name: Zhu Ruoji (Chu Juo-ji); monk’s names: Yuan-ji (Yuan-chi), Daoji (Tao-chi),” *Benezit Dictionary of Artists*, last modified November 11, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/benz/9780199773787.article.B00046718>.

³ Lin Yu-tang, *The Chinese Theory of Art: Translations from the Masters of Chinese Art* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1967), 137.

⁴ Lin, *The Chinese Theory of Art*, 143.

⁵ “Shitao or Shih-T’ao,” *Benezit Dictionary of Artists*.

casual works, notably Leaf B in his *Landscapes* album 尋僊山水圖冊 (ca. 1690s; Fig. 3). In the album leaf, the composition is sparse. Some dashes of light blue color constitute the faraway mountains, seemingly shrouded by clouds and mist. Amidst the rocky terrain, the small courtyard is sketched with very simple lines and a disregard of perspective. The leftmost shack appears to rest on a tilted ground plane different from the rest of the architecture. The blueness of its curtains overflows, smeared onto its white façade.



Fig. 3. *Landscapes* (leaf b). By Shitao (1642–1707), ink and color on paper. 8 1/4 × 12 3/8 in. (21 × 31.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Such visual affinity with the cottage scene is further strengthened by the leaf's inscription. In a semi-cursive script, Shitao inscribed 知音者誰, literally translated as, “who really understands my music?”⁶ Though the leaf does not feature any figure, one might readily conjure up the image of Shitao sitting in his waterside retreat Dadi Tang 大滌堂⁷ and playing music to a like-minded audience, which is not unlike the old master in *Feeling from Mountain and Water* who is strumming his *guzhen* when the young girl returns. Moreover, the inscription makes reference to the story of Boya and Ziqi. The word 知音者, or “the one who understands my music,” finds its etymological roots in the Qin-dynasty legend.⁸ In this case, while the film is linked stylistically to the

⁶ “Landscapes ca. 1690s,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed December 17, 2021, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/49179>.

⁷ Ling Lizhong, “石壽何時始用“大滌子”之號” [When Did Shitao Start Using the Title “Dadizi?”], Macau Museum of Art, accessed December 20, 2021, https://www.mam.gov.mo/MAM_WS/ShowFile.aspx?p=mam2013/pdf_theses/635592521071675.pdf.

⁸ Lü, “The Spring and Autumn Annals of Mr. Lü.”

works of Shitao, both Shitao and the filmmakers look back to a story from the more distant past, in which profound human connections were built on the *guqin* music.

That *Feeling from Mountain and Water* draws inspiration from Shitao's paintings is more than a subjective assumption; the connection is sustained by recorded artistic lineage. A late bloomer on the art scene, Hangzhou-based artist Zhuo Hejun 卓鹤君 (1943–) did not get admitted to the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts until he was thirty-six years old; six years after his graduation, he was in charge of the background design in the production of *Feeling from Mountain and Water*. During his time at the Academy, he studied under Lu Yanshao 陆俨少 (1909–1993), one of the few surviving traditional-style landscape painters in the 1980s.⁹ Among the artists that inspired Lu Yanshao, Shitao had been the most prominent. In 1962, Lu produced a hundred-leaf landscape album, one of the major projects of his career, and it was said to be “clearly influenced by Shitao.”¹⁰ Moreover, Lu spoke highly of Shitao's innovation that broke the early-Qing artistic stagnancy, and he advised the young artists to feel free to study Shitao's style, as long as they do not engage in mindless imitation.¹¹ This suggestion itself resonates well with Shitao's insistence on an artist's individuality.

Thus, if Shitao can be likened to a pebble that agitated the still pond water of the late seventeenth-century art scene, *Feeling from Mountain and Water* is on the outermost ring of ripples. When producing the film, the artists did not willfully retrieve Shitao's aesthetic among a cabinet of obsolete antiques and summoned it back to life. On the contrary, the artistic lineage is an unbroken—though not easily detectable—continuum, even when the medium shifted from papers and textiles to layers of celluloid and rolls of film.

From the Paper to the Silver Screen

Adapting Chinese ink wash painting to animation was no small feat. In a 2007 documentary, *The Lost Magic of the Shanghai Art Studios*, Wan Laiming 萬籟鳴 (1900–1997), one of the Wan Brothers who pioneered the Chinese animation industry, stated that the animators needed to focus on the essentials, without wasting time on the details. Since the traditional animation was filmed image by image, he noted that “if you add a single button to a jacket, you have to add it to 100,000 or 200,000 drawings.” In this regard, the “too refined paintings in ancient China” would be unfit for animation adaptation.¹² Therefore, the visual adjacency to Shitao-like simplicity not only results from the design artist's training; it is also a technical necessity.

⁹ Chen Weihe. “Lu Yanshao [Lu Yen-shao; ming Di; zi Wanruo],” *Grove Art Online*, published January 30, 2002, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T097498>.

¹⁰ Julia Frances Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 302, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.09169>.

¹¹ Lu Yanshao, “山水画刍议” [On Landscape Paintings], *Chinese Artists in Painting and Calligraphy*, no.1 (2016): 46.

¹² *The Lost Magic of the Shanghai Art Studios*, directed by Marie-Claire Quiquemelle (Filmmakers Library, 2007), 00:13:30, <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/the-lost-magic-of-the-shanghai-art-studios>.

A visual clue to more technical details of the film's production is the difference in brushwork texture and ink wash effect between figural and landscape scenes. As the story progresses, the setting opens up from an intimate cottage scene to the wider world, as if following the footsteps of a gradually recovering old musician. The growing prominence of the background—from the modest interior of the hut, the willow-lined embankment, to the lofty peaks and precipitous cliff—seems also to mirror the young girl's improving *guqin* skills that ultimately reach a new height. However, a visual discrepancy emerges in this final stage.

At around 14:13 of the film, the frame moves upwards from the bottom of a cliff, showing the girl on top (Fig. 4). Here, the brushstrokes that constitute the craggy terrain remain watery, but one can still sense the friction between the brush and the expanse of paper. The darker wash on the top of the cliff transitions naturally to the lighter tone farther down—one might even be able to discern the exact point where the brush pushes against the paper and the ink begins to soak through. Though minuscule, the strokes that sketch out the girl's figure share the overall roughness of the landscape.



Fig. 4. Still from *Feeling from Mountain and Water* (14:13). Directed by Te Wei 特偉. Shanghai Animation Film Studio, 1988.

Immediately after the extreme long shot, the close-up of the girl appears to have a different texture (Fig. 5). The lines are fairly clean, and each stroke glides across the white background without breaking or halting in the middle. The gradation of ink wash seems awry. In the girl's hair, where darker strokes overlap with a patch of lighter ink wash, the dark ink does not contaminate the lighter shade and the lighter wash does not muddle the smooth strokes (Fig. 6). It is almost as if the different layers of ink are insulated from each other, an effect not seen in traditional ink-wash paintings.



Fig. 5. Still from *Feeling from Mountain and Water* (14:20). Directed by Te Wei 特偉. Shanghai Animation Film Studio, 1988.



Fig. 6. Detail of Fig. 5.

Granted, the discrepancies mentioned are subtle, but the respective technical processes of the two shots are drastically different. In the production of *Feeling from Mountain and Water*, animators worked with both paper-based design drafts and cel, transparent celluloid sheets used in traditional animation. For the still landscapes, together with a handful of figural scenes in which the characters are static and less prominent, the animators directly photographed the hand-drawn design drafts done on *xuan* paper. As for the scenes with significant movement, such as the close-up of the girl playing *guqin* on a cliff, animators had to go through a process called *bimo fenjie* 笔墨分解, or the dissection of brushwork. Since celluloid cannot absorb ink, to recreate the subtle gradations of blackness, animators needed to dissect the original drafts into isolated strokes and different shades of ink wash, then redraw each onto a separate layer of cel.¹³

¹³ Fu Guangchao, “解密水墨动画《山水情》” [Decoding Ink-wash Animation *Feeling from Mountain and Water*], *Bilibili Animation Column*, October 25, 2020, <https://www.bilibili.com/read/cv8089095>.

The girl's hair, for instance, is broken down into at least three layers—the contours, the lighter patch of ink, and the dark strokes that emphasize her thickest locks of hair (Fig. 6). These three layers are then stacked together. The awkwardness in the ink gradation, therefore, was due to the restraints of this technical process, since ink on different cels cannot interact. This process needed to be repeated hundreds of times, each time with slight variations, such as a dip of the girl's chin or a tilt of her head. When all of the assembled plates were photographed and edited together, the figure appeared to be in motion, moving her head to the rhythm of the music.

Ultimately, the animators' goal was to recreate the tactile engagement between the fibers of brush and paper, to simulate the unrefined and even slightly uncontrolled quality of ink, on the uncooperative surface of the cel. Herein lies the paradox: the visual traits of paper-based ink-wash paintings, like the movement of the brush or the flow of the ink, bring viewers' attention to the ink-and-paper medium itself; however, animators must divert the viewers' attention from the actual medium, to make them feel as if they have encountered an animated world on a scroll of paper, instead of some sheets of cel.

The ink wash effect in a traditional landscape painting is both designed and spontaneous, depending on both the artist's command of the brush and the patterns of ink's free dilation. Due to the smooth, water-repellant nature of celluloid, the film could not perfectly reproduce the latter. From a different perspective, such imperfections could remind the viewers of what they might have taken for granted when looking at a landscape painting, namely, the spontaneous effects that operate beyond the artist's hand.

Aside from the photographs on the design drafts on paper and the animation sequence made with celluloid sheets, *Feeling from Mountain and Water* features a third component, an ingenious design that conceals, in a literal sense, the artist's hand. In the imaginary realm evoked by the girl's music, mountains grow out of the pristine white background and flocks of dark clouds materialize before a rainstorm (Fig. 7). The ink is flowing and expanding right before the viewers' eyes. These two sequences were in fact filmed when the artist was in action. A pane of glass was propped up and the paper was spread out on one side. While the artist splashed the ink onto paper, a camera set captured the whole process on the other side of the glass pane, so that the traces of ink are visible to the viewers without them seeing the artist's hand.¹⁴ The slight trembles of the frame as the shot pans leftward were probably caused by the limited equipment that the Studio's photographers worked with. When compared with a contemporaneous animation, *The Little Mermaid* (1989) produced by the Walt Disney studio, *Feeling from Mountain and Water* had only a fraction of Disney's money and manpower. Disney set up an entire satellite animation facility in Lake Buena Vista,

¹⁴ Ibid.

Florida, so that it could provide ink and paint support to *The Little Mermaid*.¹⁵ The Shanghai Animation Film Studio, however, had to cope with a skeleton staff, the termination of state funding, and, consequently, the lack of proper filming equipment. Someone must have crouched under the slope of the glass with a hand-held camera and edged toward their left to keep up with the artist's action.

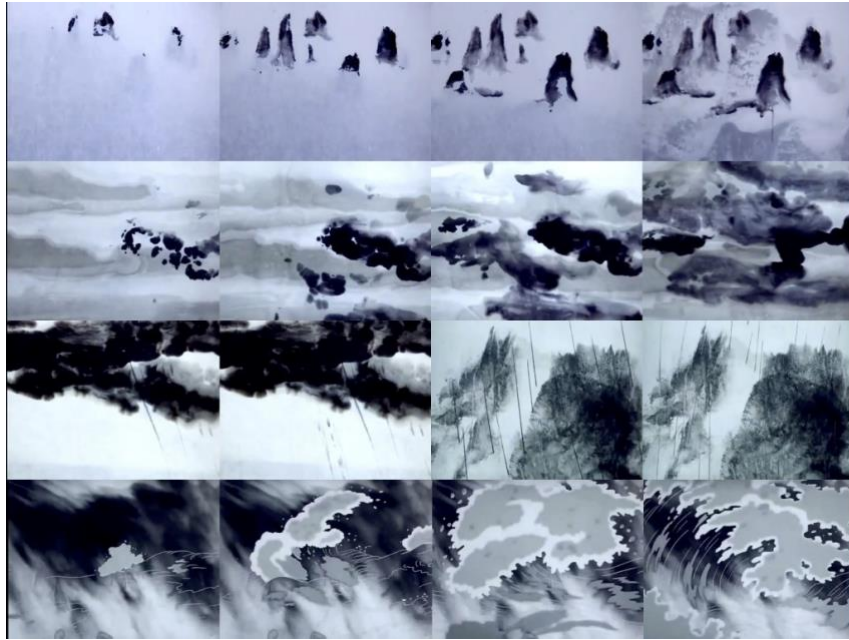


Fig. 7. Stills from *Feeling from Mountain and Water*. Directed by Te Wei 特偉. Shanghai Animation Film Studio, 1988.

Though only a few seconds long, these two sequences manage to exploit the potential of the film medium, a time-based art form. In the case of *Feeling from Mountain and Water*, its cinematic format allows it to bring to the foreground what has been implicit in the still landscape paintings. When encountering traditional landscape paintings, viewers could only see the finished effect, whether the traces of the brush's movement or the specific gradations within patches of ink. The live process of the painting's creation—how the brush was wielded and how the ink flowed—remained invisible to those unfamiliar with the practice of ink painting, until it was filmed by the innovative production team of *Feeling from Mountain and Water*. If previous experience with artistic practices used to be the prerequisite for appreciating the otherwise invisible subtleties, the film effectively eliminates such prerequisites, promising everyone the full experience.

Feeling from Mountain and Water revealing a previously unseen process finds resonance in the well-known scholarship by German philosopher Walter Benjamin. In his seminal essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,”

¹⁵ Roger Moore, “After the Magic,” *The Orlando Sentinel*, June 20, 2004, <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/os-xpm-2004-06-20-0406180524-story.html>.

Benjamin discusses how the film revealed the “hidden details in familiar objects.”¹⁶ He wrote, “we are familiar with the movement of picking up a cigarette lighter or a spoon, but know almost nothing of what really goes on between hand and metal,” while the film camera can make such “optical unconscious” accessible.¹⁷ Granted, the animation is outside the purview of the Benjamin essay, but this specific section still rings true in the context of *Feeling from Mountain and Water*. Just as people cannot see “what really goes on” between the hand and the spoon without the assistance of a film camera, so too viewers in front of a finished painting cannot see “what really goes on” between the ink and the paper, until the animators shed light on the process with their work.

Moreover, following Benjamin’s argument, when a traditional landscape painting is adapted into animation, it can accommodate simultaneous viewing and provide “an object of simultaneous collective reception.”¹⁸ Even if the viewers do not own a landscape handscroll for private enjoyment, they nevertheless can immerse themselves in the world of landscape, watching the film together with friends and family. From the mid-fifteenth century onward, a great number of literati painters and audiences had participated in the production and circulation of landscape paintings, thereby distancing the genre from those without much knowledge of the literati culture.¹⁹ *Feeling from Mountain and Water* opens up the category of landscape to a new audience, much wider than the genre’s former patrons and connoisseurs. Those without the financial means or social connections to access the original landscape paintings can nevertheless appreciate their beauty on screen at an affordable price. To some extent, Benjamin’s goal for films to carry inherent revolutionary potential can be applied to the 1988 ink-wash animation as well.

Resounding Echoes in the Political Realm

It is tempting to label *Feeling from Mountain and Water* as politically democratizing, an art production for the masses. However, the relationship between this 1988 film—along with the Chinese landscape paintings in general—and the political climate of twentieth-century China is more complicated than that. Tracing the Shanghai Animation Film Studio’s development since its founding years, one would find that the attitude of China’s central leadership to the Studio’s production has undergone many changes. As early as the establishment of the Studio, the groundwork for this film’s aesthetic had already been laid. However, sandwiched between the Cultural Revolution and the Market Reforms, the film could not have happened any earlier, nor could it happen any later. In this section, I intend to make visible these

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, 3: 1935–1938* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 117.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 116.

¹⁹ Shih Shou-chien, *山鳴谷應：中國山水畫和觀眾的歷史* [Mountains Resounded, Valleys Echoed: A History of Landscape Paintings and Their Audience] (Taipei: Rock Publishing International, 2017), 342.

invisible undercurrents and situate the film in its historical context alongside the artistic one.

When the Shanghai Animation Film Studio was founded in 1957, there had been an ongoing debate about the status of traditional Chinese ink paintings. Before the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, communist revolutionaries looked to the Soviet Union as their model and adopted a Marxist, Russian-oriented approach to ideological, literary, and artistic matters.²⁰ They sought to emphatically distinguish themselves from the feudal remnants. Traditional, aristocratic, and individualistic, ink wash paintings represented everything that the communists opposed. Thus, there remained little surprise that during the 1930s and the 1940s, traditional-style paintings—among which landscape was a prominent genre—fell out of favor.²¹

As the communists seized power and established their regime in 1949, however, they were obligated to adopt a different approach. Instead of downright rejecting the “feudal remnants,” they needed to resituate themselves as the rightful successors to the Chinese tradition, to reinsert themselves in the narrative of Chinese history, a narrative in which traditional art, including landscape art, played a significant role. Thus, in the 1949–1957 period, the main debate in the art world was “whether traditional painting should be preserved, reformed, or simply eradicated” in the new society.²² In fact, soon after liberation, many Shanghai-based traditional-style artists were retrained as book illustrators so as to appeal to the masses. Lu Yanshao, who would become the teacher of *Feeling's* background artist, was one of them.²³ The tides turned during the Hundred Flowers Campaign. Initiated in 1956 by the party central, the Campaign encouraged the country's intellectuals to “let a hundred flowers bloom”—to freely express their opinions and exert their creativity.²⁴ During this period, traditional-style artists expressed their disagreement with the low status of Chinese ink paintings in the art academies' curricula.²⁵ Their criticism was well-received, and traditional paintings were deemed “the heritage of [China's] excellent tradition” as opposed to Westernized art.²⁶

It was at this historical juncture, under the auspices of the Hundred Flowers Campaign, that the Shanghai Animation Film Studio was founded.²⁷ With the official

²⁰ Li Chu-ting and Thomas Lawton, “The New Chinese Landscape,” *Art Journal*, vol. 27, no. (Winter 1967–1968): 143, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/775109>.

²¹ Julia Frances Andrews, “Traditional Painting in New China: Guohua and the Anti-Rightist Campaign,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 49, no. 3 (August 1990): 558, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2057771>.

²² Andrews, “Traditional Painting in New China,” 559.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.* at 567.

²⁵ *Ibid.* at 562.

²⁶ *Ibid.* at 566.

²⁷ Alex Dubok de Wit, “Te Wei, founding father of Chinese animation,” *British Film Institute*, published August 3, 2017, <https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/te-wei-founding-father-chinese-animation>.

rhetoric of celebrating the national essence, the Studio oriented itself toward the traditional art forms of China. Te Wei 特偉 (1915–2010), the mastermind behind *Feeling from Mountain and Water* and the director of Studio since 1957, published a passionate article in *People's Daily* three years into his directorship. According to him, the mission of the Studio was to “create animations that belonged to the nation,” to “nationalize the genre of animation.” He went on by saying: “When we ponder how to make animation—a foreign art form—with a more distinct national style, we naturally think of ink paintings, the traditional pictorial art of our country.” Having just finished an animation based on the animal paintings of Qi Baishi 齊白石 (1864–1957), Te Wei was ambitious. He wished to adapt more genres of Chinese paintings to animation, from portraiture, flower-and-bird, to landscape.²⁸ Thus, the seed of *Feeling from Mountain and Water*, a marriage between ink landscapes and cinematic arts, was already sowed in the 1960s, and it was sowed with a strong sense of nationalism at its core.

Despite the nationalistic and patriotic fervor in its founding years, the Studio suffered a heavy blow during the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976.²⁹ When interviewed by French sinologist Marie-Claire Quiquemelle, Te Wei lamented the fate of the Studio. All but two of their productions were banned because most of their works did not place enough attention on class struggle.³⁰ The new projects were all shelved. Many core members of the Studio underwent political persecution, including Te Wei himself. In retrospect, even if the Studio's production was allowed to proceed, *Feeling from Mountain and Water* would no doubt have been criticized. There was no motif of class struggle involved in the friendship between the old master and his protégé. The story seems to take place in a utopia, spatially and temporally indefinite, without any concerns about politics. It would have been emphatically incongruent with a period defined by the animosity towards bourgeois culture and the divide between the oppressors and the oppressed. Indeed, the screenplay of *Feeling from Mountain and Water* was written in 1980, four years after the end of the Cultural Revolution.

In the early 1960s, the ink aesthetic of *Feeling from Mountain and Water* would have been seen as a symbol of nationalism as opposed to Western art. However, between 1966 and 1976, it would have been seen as the symbol of bourgeois culture as opposed to the oppressed working class. The “Ten Lost Years” would not have welcomed such a production. Yet as Chinese history moved into a new chapter, the fate of *Feeling from Mountain and Water* was not without peril. Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, China entered the market reform era, a period in which China transformed from a socialist economy to a capitalist market economy. The subsequent

²⁸ Te Wei, “创作民族的美术电影” [Creating Art Films of the Nation], *People's Daily*, August 31, 1960, <https://rnr.org.cn/read-hm-tid-252359.html>.

²⁹ Sean Macdonald, *Animation in China: History, Aesthetics, Media* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 147.

³⁰ *The Lost Magic of the Shanghai Art Studios*, 00:25:15.

upsurge of materialist and utilitarian worldview differed much from the lofty, transcendent sentiments in *Feeling from Mountain and Water*.

Beyond the ideological divergence, the new economic climate caused concrete damage to the prospects of ink-wash animation as a whole. Wang Genfa 王根發, one of the film directors at the Shanghai Animation Film Studio, remembered how the influx of Japanese anime dominated the Chinese market. According to him, in about 1984, the Japanese companies offered their anime series to Chinese TV channels without charge whereas the channels had to purchase the rights to play the Studio's animated films. Driven by an interest-oriented mindset, all the TV channels began exclusively showing anime series from Japan.³¹ As the production of an ink-wash animation was expensive and time-consuming, it quickly lost its edge.

Feeling from Mountain and Water was released when traditional Chinese animation was drawing its last breaths.³² The “foreign invasion” could be detected even in the utopian world of timeless landscapes. Early on in the film, after his physical health has gotten better, the old man stands on the top of a hill and gazes into the skies. Several eagles are seen circling in the sky. At exactly 08:32, an eagle dives down and skims across the frame (Fig. 8). If one looks closely at the fleeting image, one would recognize that the eagle's eyes appear almost cartoonish, not unlike that of the Disney characters or the big, round eyes in Japanese anime. Indeed, traditional Chinese landscape paintings do not usually feature an extreme close-up of a bird. Without any pictorial precedents to fall back on, designers had, whether consciously or not, resorted to non-Chinese models. Though this close-up could easily be overlooked, it reflected the challenges that the Studio was finding harder and harder to handle.



Fig. 8. Still from *Feeling from Mountain and Water* (08:32). Directed by Te Wei 特偉. Shanghai Animation Film Studio, 1988.

³¹ *The Lost Magic of the Shanghai Art Studios*, 00:38:10.

³² Macdonald, *Animation in China*, 168.

The minute improvisations were not enough to salvage ink-wash animation. *Feeling from Mountain and Water* was the last of its kind, often described as the swansong of Shanghai Animation Studio. Taking the context into consideration, the film gains an extra layer of meaning. The story between the old man and his protégé essentially concerns how “one generation pass[ed] down an artistic tradition to the next.”³³ Thus, the entire film could be read as a metaphor, representing the dream of an older generation of animators that their skills and techniques could be carried on. Under this interpretation, *Feeling from Mountain and Water* is even more melancholic: while the young girl bids her teacher farewell in the film, viewers bid their farewell to a bygone generation and a discontinued craft.

Conclusion

Feeling from Mountain and Water is fraught with tensions and contradictions. It is a lively, moving continuation of the Shitao-style landscape paintings; it is also a relic, a witness to the extinction of ink-wash animation techniques. Inside its story is an idyllic utopia, far removed from the scheme of money or politics. Yet outside of the fictional realm, the film needs to negotiate with the aftermath of political turmoil and the challenges in a new economic climate. It is both in motion and at a standstill, both timeless and acutely time-specific.

Tracing back to the film’s thematic origination, the Qin-dynasty story of Boya and Ziqi itself is not simply a fairytale of spiritual human connection. In *Liishi Chunqiu*, it is used as a metaphor for a model relationship between the ruler and his subject. The author Lü Buwei 呂不韋 argued that, just as a good musician deserves a good audience, so too a virtuous subject deserves to be treated with respect in order to inspire his loyalty.³⁴ At the end of the day, the music that Boya played meant more than the landscapes. Likewise, the significance of *Feeling from Mountain and Water* extends beyond its achievement of making landscapes come alive. In the film, animators’ clever design allowed the fleeting moment of ink running across the expanse of paper to be forever preserved. Similarly, the film itself is a capsule of a now-lost historical juncture, where the *xuan* paper met the celluloid, where the embers of Maoist national spirit met the onslaught of the global market.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Andrews, Julia Frances. *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.09169>.

³³ Macdonald, *Animation in China*, 169.

³⁴ Lü, “The Spring and Autumn Annals of Mr. Lü.”

Andrews, Julia Frances. "Traditional Painting in New China: Guohua and the Anti-Rightist Campaign." *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 49, no. 3 (August 1990): 555–577. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2057771>.

Benjamin, Walter. *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, 3: 1935–1938*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.

Chen, Weihe. "Lu Yanshao [Lu Yen-shao; ming Di; zi Wanruo]." *Grove Art Online*. Published January 30, 2002. <https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T097498>.

Dubok de Wit, Alex. "Te Wei, founding father of Chinese animation." *British Film Institute*, August 3, 2017. <https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/te-wei-founding-father-chinese-animation>.

Fu, Guangchao. "解密水墨动画《山水情》" [Decoding Ink-wash Animation *Feeling from Mountain and Water*]. *Bilibili Animation Column*, October 25, 2020, <https://www.bilibili.com/read/cv8089095>.

Li, Chu-tsing, and Thomas Lawton. "The New Chinese Landscape." *Art Journal*, vol. 27, no. (Winter, 1967–1968): 142–151. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/775109>.

Lin, Yu-tang. *The Chinese Theory of Art: Translations from the Masters of Chinese Art*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1967.

Ling, Lizhong. "石濤何時始用“大滌子”之號" [When Did Shitao Start Using the Title "Dadizi"?]. Macau Museum of Art. Accessed December 20, 2021. https://www.mam.gov.mo/MAM_WS/ShowFile.ashx?p=mam2013/pdf_theses/635592521071675.pdf.

Lu, Yanshao. "山水画刍议" [On Landscape Paintings]. *Chinese Artists in Painting and Calligraphy*, no.1 (2016): 46–51.

Lü, Buwei. "吕氏春秋" [The Spring and Autumn Annals of Mr. Lü]. Chinese Text Project. Accessed 20 Dec. 2021. <https://ctext.org/lv-shi-chun-qiu/zhs>.

Macdonald, Sean. *Animation in China: History, Aesthetics, Media*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

- Moore, Roger. "After the Magic." *The Orlando Sentinel*, June 20, 2004.
<https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/os-xpm-2004-06-20-0406180524-story.html>.
- Naughton, Barry. *The Chinese Economy: Transitions and Growth*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007.
- Quiquemelle, Marie-Claire, director. *The Lost Magic of the Shanghai Art Studios*. Filmmakers Library, 2007. 57 min.
<https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/the-lost-magic-of-the-shanghai-art-studios>.
- Shih, Shou-chien. *山鳴谷應：中國山水畫和觀眾的歷史* [Mountains Resounded, Valleys Echoed: A History of Landscape Paintings and Their Audience]. Taipei: Rock Publishing International, 2017.
- "Shitao or Shih-T'ao; original name: Zhu Ruoji (Chu Juo-ji); monk's names: Yuan-ji (Yuan-chi), Daoji (Tao-chi)." *Benezit Dictionary of Artists*. Last modified November 11, 2021.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/benz/9780199773787.article.B00046718>.
- Te, Wei. "创作民族的美术电影" [Creating Art Films of the Nation]. *People's Daily*, August 31, 1960, <https://r mrb.online/read-htm-tid-252359.html>.
- Te, Wei, director. *Feeling from Mountain and Water*. Shanghai Animation Film Studio, 1988. 19 min. <https://youtu.be/HsXof3p5l3U>.
- The Metropolitan Museum of Art. "Landscapes ca. 1690s." Accessed December 17, 2021. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/49179>.