

## What's in a Painting? The Yin and Yang of Sumi-e: Part II

by Yvonne Liu Wolf

### The Yin and Yang of Mountain and Water Motif

In my previous article on the Yin and Yang of Sumi-e, I applied some principles of Yin and Yang to the birds and blossoms motif. In this subsequent article, I clarify some basic Yin and Yang applications on another popular classical East Asian sumi-e motif, mountain and water (山水).

Although in translation, mountain and water paintings are broadly called landscape paintings, there is one important difference. Mountains represented in sumi-e paintings are not real mountains in the sense that you can match a mountain and water painting to a real, physical location. Many landscape paintings in the Western tradition are painted using real physical locations, where the finished product has a photographic quality albeit with a touch of artistic splash of color or glow to the actual location. This is not so in the mountain water paintings.



Landscape Painting, Image from Layers by Pixaby.com

If you ask a sumi-e painter, "Where is the mountain that you painted?" the painter would most probably chuckle uncomfortably. That question in itself is culturally incompatible. Why?

Landscape paintings in the Western tradition, such as the American frontier tradition, developed from surveying land and documenting it for forestry and wild game purposes. Exact landmarks for the locations are important for subsequent travelers who desire to follow their paths. The sumi-e tradition is a scholarly tradition. The Chinese did not travel nor had even been encouraged to travel very much until the 21st century. The purpose of a mountain water painting is not to match

a real mountain location, but to show the ideal Yin and Yang relationship. It is frequently said that Chinese painting tradition developed to paint the energy and the relationship of its subjects rather than to produce a photographic copy of the physical world. The purpose aims to communicate a pleasant message with the audience and thus, the goal is bringing people together, especially people who do not travel. [Please see my previous article on the audience in the Summer 2021 Quarterly.]



Yosemite Painting, Landscape Collection of National Park Service

Hence, the mountain and water motif paintings are highly stylized versions of true mountains and actual places. There are some paintings that are true to life, such as paintings of Mount Fuji or Fujisan, but a far greater majority of these paintings represent imagined places beyond the physical realm.

In my previous article, I pointed out four principles of the Yin and Yang relationship that are relevant to our birds and blossoms theme:

1. the Sun rises higher in the sky than the Moon
2. sunlight is hotter than moonlight
3. the Sun shines constantly, while the Moon phases in and out
4. more animals and insects are active during the sun-filled part of the day or diurnal while fewer creatures are active during the moon-filled part of the day or nocturnal.



Mount Fuji Painting, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Yang represents hotter energy, higher objects, activity, and constancy. Yin represents colder energy, lower objects, passivity, and ephemerality.

Of these principles, the first three are represented in the mountain and water motif in the following manner. First, in these mountain and water paintings, mountains will rise higher than any bodies of water. Typically, the mountains loom over lakes, rivers and ponds. Mechanically speaking, the brush strokes of the mountains move upwards, while waterfalls require downward strokes. The Sun will often make an appearance above the mountains to reinforce this rising motion, a Yang connection, between the two symbols.

Secondly, the principle of harsher vs. softer, as in the sunlight is hotter than moonlight, is represented in the angular vs. swirly lines. The rocky mountain face will often be roughly represented with harsher strokes than the gentle, silky flow of the water. Sumi-e mountains may not look like any mountains in the North American landscape. That is because they come from a tradition of following the dramatic design of the Guilin mountains. Since these mountains are made of limestone, water carves them over the millennia to produce their unique facade. Water may seem soft to the touch compared to a jagged mountain face, but in time and due to erosion, it will wear down any rugged surface. The water is the mountains' enemy as well as their creator. This is the epitome of the harmonious Yin and Yang relationship. Without one, the other's beauty cannot be showcased.

Thirdly, just as the Sun represents constancy, the mountains also represent the tangible. The mountains are stable, solid foundations. Their angles and lines set the framework of the painting itself. The bodies of water are often added to the painting after the mountains anchor down the perimeters of the scene. The bodies of water allow more fluid lines and may change course based on the positioning of the trees and tiny huts and pavilions. Hence, the function of the water demonstrates the Yin principle of the changing phases of the Moon.

Lastly, a yin and yang relationship that is more relevant in the mountain and water motif is the concept of big and small, i.e., the Sun being bigger than the Moon. In a typical mountain and water painting, people, huts, boats and pavilions are far smaller than the mountains. There is a standard of sizing used for proportion. If the people are too big, such that they bear distinguishable clothing, hairstyle, and facial features, they would not fit in the style of sumi-e tradition of a landscape painting.

Mountain and water paintings emphasize the grandeur of nature. This idea is similar to the 18th and 19th centuries' Western art tradition of the Sublime in landscape paintings. The Chinese painting tradition also saw people



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as an inconsequential part of the natural world. The sparse people in a sumi-e painting, if there are any at all, are dwarfed by the natural scenery. Their function is to show the Yin and Yang relationship, between the powerful, looming, and majestic mountains (Yang) vs. the meek, powerless and indistinguishable people (Yin). The idea is that we are ants in comparison to nature's earthquakes, hurricanes and tsunamis.

Sumi-e art work reflects the Yin and Yang concept that demonstrates a balance of contrasting and complementary energies through symbolic pairs. Just to name a few in the mountains and water theme, they include: high and low positions of the mountain vs. water; rough, hard, angular mountains vs. smooth, soft, swirly water; constant mountains and unpredictable water; hard mountains vs. soft clouds; humongous mountains vs. tiny people and tiny pavilions.

In conclusion, I hope this article enhances your appreciation of the mountain and water motif. May it inspire your journey in painting them.

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