



# A Brief Discussion on the Influence of Lao-Zhuang Aesthetics on the Creation of Song Dynasty Landscape Paintings: Taking Fan Kuan's Travelers among Mountains and Streams as an Example

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## Abstract

The concept of “harmony between man and nature” in Lao-Zhuang aesthetics profoundly influenced the creation of landscape paintings in the Song Dynasty, exemplified by Fan Kuan's masterpiece—Travelers among Mountains and Streams. The painting illustrates the Lao-Zhuang aesthetics in its composition, texturing technique, and underlying theme, expressing a deep appreciation for life and a profound regard for nature. This work reproduces the grandeur and majesty of natural mountains and rivers and serves as a carrier connecting the artist's spirit with the universe. Furthermore, it encapsulates the aesthetic endeavor to achieve balance and unity between nature and the inner self, as expounded in Lao-Zhuang aesthetics. As a result, it serves as a wellspring of artistic inspiration and spiritual nourishment for the development of landscape paintings in the future.

## Subject Areas

Art, History

## Keywords

Lao-Zhuang Aesthetics, Landscape Painting of Song Dynasty, Travelers among Mountains and Streams, Fan Kuan, Harmony between Man and Nature

## 1. Introduction

In Laozi's Tao Te Ching, the concept of “harmony between heaven and man” is

elucidated as the principle that “man governs the earth, the earth follows the heavens’ order, and the heavens follow the natural law”, emphasizing humanity’s adherence to natural principles and pursuit of harmonious coexistence with nature. In Zhuangzi’s Theory of the Harmony of Things, Zhuangzi formally put forward the concept of “heaven and earth are born with me, and all things are one with me”, implying that man and nature are a community of life and should live in harmony. The idea of emphasizing the harmony and unity between man and nature, through continuous interpretation and development, has formed an aesthetic system based on the philosophical thoughts of Lao Tzu and Zhuangzi, which has had a profound influence on Chinese politics, economy, culture and other aspects, and has played a guiding role in the development of Chinese art.

Neo-confucianism, as the mainstream academic thought in Song Dynasty, its core idea of “knowing things through in-depth observation and research of things, in order to obtain the understanding of the essence of things”, it also profoundly influenced the Song Dynasty painters’ creative ideas. They began to pay more attention to the careful observation and deep understanding of natural scenery, and strive to accurately reproduce the physical and spiritual features of objects in their paintings. This pursuit of “truth” made the painting of Song Dynasty reach an unprecedented height in realism. At the same time, the aesthetics of Lao-Zhuang is still subtly influencing the artistic creation with its unique view of nature and universe. Under this background, the creation of landscape painting in the Northern Song Dynasty absorbed the essence of neo-Confucianism and Lao-Zhuang aesthetics at the same time, and nurtured the creation style of pursuing nature and containing rational interest. As one of the “three masters of the Northern Song Dynasty”, Fan Kuan’s creative concept is deeply influenced by the aesthetics of the old Zhuang, which is fully interpreted in his masterpiece “River Mountain Travel”. The composition, wrinkle method and emotion of the painting all embody the natural concept of “harmony between nature and man”.

## **2. The Mind and Matter Are Integrated, and the Composition Is Exquisite**

Through unique composition, Fan Kuan integrates the magnificent scenery of nature with the unity of nature and man in Lao-Zhuang’s aesthetics, not only realizing the visual “looking far away” [1], but also touching the reflection on nature, the universe and the philosophy of life in Lao-Zhuang’s philosophy at the spiritual level, and creating a model of “huge mountains and rivers in Song Dynasty”.

### **2.1. Panoramic Composition**

The panoramic composition of mountains and rivers is one of the most prominent features of Fan Kuan’s “Travelers Among Mountains and Streams” (See **Figure 1**). In the center of the painting stands a towering main peak, which occupies 2/3 of the picture. The peak is located in the visual center of the picture, which not only highlights the dominant position of the main peak, but also conforms to the



**Figure 1.** Northern Song Dynasty Fan Kuan “Travelers among Mountains and Streams” (ink and silk painting) 206.3 cm in length, 103.3 cm across.

aesthetic principle of the golden Section. There are dense forests among the rolling mountains, silver waterfalls in the mountains, and a business team slowly comes into view from left to right on the mountain path. Adds dynamic beauty to the picture. The monumental mountain is majestic, giving people a strong visual impact. This composition method depicts the whole scene in the picture, highlighting the majestic mountain.

The painter Guo Xi proposed “three distances” in “The High of Forest and Spring”, which are respectively flat, high and far-reaching [2]. The mountain road, figures and trees in the middle part of the work give people the feeling of looking up, and the distant mountain gives people the feeling of looking up, and the pedestrians are surrounded by the surrounding peaks, which makes them look extremely small. Therefore, “three distances” is perfectly reflected in the “Travelers Among Mountains and Streams”. In the panoramic composition, the viewer seems to be in the real mountains and rivers and the nature of heaven and earth, can clearly and completely see the whole picture of the scene, enhance the realism of the picture.

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## 2.2. Central Axis Composition

Guo Xi in the “Forest and spring Gao Zhi” stressed the use of the same “far” and “near” mode to observe the “true landscape” and “landscape painting”, to “take the body is the mountains and rivers, then the meaning of the landscape is seen” ((Song) by Guo Si; Lin Kun Note Yi. Lin Quangao Zhi, 2013) [2]. Fan Kuan solved his problem of observing natural mountains and rivers with a central axis composition. The central axis provides visual guidance for the viewer, dividing the picture into close-range, mid-range and long range, and elevating the three parts step by step to simulate the different perspectives of human observation of nature. He left the main peak on the central axis, and the close-range scene at the lower part of the central axis included boulders, streams and traveling teams, with the line of sight following the axis from bottom to top. To the middle scene, the trees on both sides began to gather, the standing pine trees in the axis position is poised to rise, the lofty main peak thus gathered with the potential of “clouds”, like a giant monument presented in front of the whole picture is like a masterpiece of nature. The picture is very spatial and authentic, the viewer can enjoy the picture from near to far, from low to high, feel the beauty of nature, feel the harmonious coexistence of man and nature, and convey the profound connotation of “the unity of heaven and man”.

## 3. Brush and Ink Wrinkle Method, Tracing to the Source

Influenced by Neo-Confucianism, Fan Kuan attached great importance to sketching, “always sitting in danger, looking around, for its interest”, and “must wander and browse, for thinking”. Through his insight and understanding of objective nature, the elements of the picture in Xi Shan Travel Map are realistic and vigorous, successfully describing the characteristics of the majestic mountains and dense forests in Guan Shan area. It is also known as “getting the bone of the mountain and conveying the spirit with the mountain”. The whole work uses strong brush, vigorous ink, strong and thick, which reflects the painting concept of “learning from nature and obtaining the source of heart”, and also shows the harmonious resonance of his inner world and nature, and sustenance his admiration for the power of life, the eternity of nature, and the vastness of the universe.

### 3.1. Rock

Mr. Fang Wen also summarized the Fan Kuan painting mountain as three steps in “Heart Seal”: the outline of thick and fine, the wrinkle method of regulation, and the light ink [3]. The natural landforms around Guanshan in the north are depicted in the “Xishan Travel Map”. The mountains in the north are lofty, and the stones are hard and angular. Based on the careful observation of the depicted images, Fan Kuan created the “Rain spot Cun” with his personal characteristics to depict the rocks. Short and powerful center strokes can well shape the volume sense of Yin and Yang and the texture of the stone surface, and the different shapes and different shades of rain can reproduce the scratches and weathered textures

of the stone surface, bringing the viewer a real visual experience. Rain spots run in each line direction, length, size, circumference, rhythm, etc. are rich in changes, Tibetan wind no longer goes, showing a “thick mountains, strong and powerful” [4], “such as the night mountain” trend.

Mr. Yang Chonghe highly appraised the wrinkle method in “The Representation of Visual Texture” in “Xi Shan Travel Map”. He thinks that the wrinkle method used in “Xi Shan Travel Map” is “texture tracing” or “texture simulation” of natural mountain stones, which are both “authentic” experiments of landscape painting of Song Dynasty [5]. Through his in-depth observation and accurate reproduction of the natural rock texture, Fan Kuan makes viewers feel the simplest and most authentic shock and beauty from nature across the boundaries of time and space when they appreciate the paintings, which reflects his profound reverence and love for life, nature and the universe.

### 3.2. Trees

The depictions of trees in “Travelers Among Mountains and Streams” are equally exquisite, adding endless vitality and vitality to the whole landscape. The trees under Fan Kuan’s pen are not only embellishment in the painting, but also an important role in balancing the composition of the picture. Mi Fu once commented on the trees under Fan Kuan’s pen: “The top of the mountain is good for dense forest, and the wood is withered and old [6].” From the top of the mountain to the foot of the mountain gradually transition from coniferous forest to broad-leaved forest, this change is in line with the vegetation distribution of the northern mountains, it can be seen that the depiction of Fan Kuan is based on the careful observation and deep grasp of natural objects.

“The style painting of trees, or side or side, the shape is like a thin cover, it is a kind of wind, but there is no painting of pine and cypress ears.” According to the different species of trees, Fan Kuan uses his profound artistic observation ability to outline the outline of the tree with different shades of ink, and then uses different dry brush strokes to rub out the texture and texture of the trunk. In the depiction of leaves, Fan Kuan adopts the techniques of dyeing and gathering clusters, using different shades and dense ink dots to express the lush and hierarchical leaves, making them more delicate and realistic in vision. The trees near the picture use a combination of hook and dyeing techniques, first outline the trunk and branches with a pen, then outline the leaves with a double hook method, and apply ink stain. The pine trees in the middle of the picture are also thick, which forms a black and white contrast with the distant mountains behind, opening up the spatial distance of the picture. The trees and leaves on the top of the mountain mostly use the ink accumulation method, presenting the rich leaves in front of the viewer, while drawing the viewer’s sight to the center of the picture, echoing the thick of the rocks. The trees under Fan Kuan’s works truly reproduce the various positions of trees in nature, and the leaves in the mountains seem to be blown by the wind, reflecting the weather of life.

### 3.3. Travelers

The highlight of the painting is the appearance of the caravan, where the smallness of the pedestrian stands in stark contrast to the towering natural mountains and rivers, explaining the philosophical concept of harmonious coexistence between human beings and nature. Fan Kuan arranges the travelers in the close view of the picture, or walks together, or walks alone on the mountain path, adding the interest and sense of hierarchy of the picture, and providing viewers with an excellent path to “swim”. In the depiction of characters, he attaches importance to the objective characteristics of the objects, and uses delicate strokes to outline the lines of the characters. Compared with the mountains and trees, the lines of the characters and animals are more flexible and relaxed, thus showing the vitality of the objects. The gestures and actions of pedestrians also have their own unique meaning, or the head down the road to reveal the firm belief in reaching the destination, or looking into the distance seems to be in a dialogue with heaven and earth, whether it is a business team or a monk, are slowly moving forward on the mountain road and harmonious coexistence with nature, showing its perseverance, fearless spirit quality, this spirit is not only the affirmation of human own strength, It is also a firm affirmation of human beings in the face of natural challenges. It is highly consistent with the idea of conforming to nature and respecting nature advocated in “the unity of heaven and man”.

### 4. Learn from Nature, Love in the Scene

The landscape paintings of the Song Dynasty are no longer limited to simply describing the meaning of the brushwork image itself, and the unique cosmological view and philosophical view of Chinese landscape paintings are vividly reflected in them. In the Tang Dynasty, Zhang Zhao proposed that “learn from nature and find the source of heart”, which means that the natural world provides the source of materials for painting creation, and only by combining the accumulation and observation of life experience. Only by incorporating emotion into the creation can we get excellent works. Some scholars have demonstrated that the Xishan Travel Map is the product of Fan Kuan’s “mind, matter and reason”, and put forward that the mind, matter and reason are actually the relationship between “nature” and “heart source”. Fan Kuan once said, “It is better to learn from the ancients than to learn from nature, and it is better to learn from the heart source.” On the basis of learning the techniques of predecessors, he found that only when he fully integrated into nature and integrated his understanding of nature into his paintings can he depict the “mountain in the chest”. Therefore, his paintings are not only simply reproducing nature, but realized the intercommunication and integration of the spirit of matter and self and placed personal emotions in his paintings, completing the highly agreement between man and the life spirit of nature and reaching the realm of “unity of nature and man”. his paintings were once listed as divine goods in Famous Paintings Review of the Holy Dynasty, called them “The reign of the whole kingdom in the Song Dynasty, is the landscape, is

the right (is fan Kuan) and become the absolute, has not reached”.

“Travelers Among Mountains and Streams” is divided into three realms, respectively telling the three realms of life, symbolizing the harmonious symbiosis between man and nature and the universe. The prospect describes the mundane picture, the travel team is walking through the mountain path, the road at the foot of the broad but no end, meaning in the road of life is full of challenges, only courage, perseverance can achieve a breakthrough; the middle scene depicts the level of good path, seeking the path, and cultivating the path. A line of monks walk alone in the forest, and the temple hidden by the woods seems to be the monks’ study destination. Although the road is far away and the road is rugged, it can not stop the monks’ enthusiasm for learning; the vision depicts the supreme will of the universe, and the mountain reaches to the sky, as if it has become the medium leading to the gate of the universe, blurring the boundary between man, nature and the universe, returning to the exploration of the essence of life, and embodying the lofty concept of “the unity of heaven and man”, in which man and nature depend on each other, influence each other and develop together. We are all people who carry the burden of moving forward among all sentient beings. When we encounter difficulties, we can find inclusiveness and eternity in nature and the universe through Khe Shan Travel Map, feel the humility of human beings, and meet the challenges and difficulties in life with a more peaceful and positive attitude.

## 5. Conclusion

As one of Fan Kuan’s representative works, “Travelers among Mountains and Streams” shows the peak height of the Northern Song Dynasty landscape painting. Dong Qichang once commented that it has the typical characteristics of the northern school landscape painting, without losing the carefree mood of the Southern school landscape painting, so “Travelers Among Mountains and Streams” is called “the first Song Dynasty painting”. After an in-depth discussion of the artistic charm of Xi Shan Travel, it is not difficult to find that the exquisite composition, exquisite brushwork and emotional philosophy of the painting all reflect the thought of “harmony between nature and man” of Lao-Zhuang aesthetics, which interprets the highest realm of harmonious coexistence between man and nature, and also shows Fan Kuan’s unique views and artistic expression of Lao-Zhuang aesthetics. This work is not only an outstanding representative of Chinese landscape painting, but also a vivid practice of Lao-Zhuang aesthetics in Chinese art history, reflecting the important position of Lao-Zhuang aesthetics in Chinese art history and its far-reaching influence on the artistic creation of later generations. In order to further study the profound influence of Lao-Zhuang aesthetics on the creation of landscape painting in Song Dynasty, I would like to put forward the following suggestions: Tracing to the source of the clear flow, the theory of deep digging. Systematically study and sort out the essence of Lao-Zhuang aesthetics, compare and study the theory of Song Dynasty landscape painting, and explore

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the resonance and fusion of the two; classic analysis, painting meaning exploration. Select the classic landscape paintings of Song Dynasty, analyze the aesthetic elements of Lao-Zhuang from multiple angles; interdisciplinary integration, multiple interpretation. Combined with the social background of Song Dynasty, literary works, philosophical thoughts and other multi-angle, multi-dimensional interpretation of Lao-Zhuang aesthetics on the Song Dynasty landscape painting creation penetration. I believe that this journey of exploration is not only an artistic dialogue through thousands of years of time and space, but also a profound exploration of the essence of Chinese culture.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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