

# Chinese Art: The Story of Haze (Part Two)

Eugene Y. Wang

In the 20th century, the medium of Chinese painting became an increasingly contentious matter. For millennia, in a self-enclosed cultural context, its practitioners and viewers had never felt compelled to consider its distinct material and formal properties—the question of what constituted *Chinese* art had never been an issue. Encounters with art forms of other cultures in the previous centuries had never quite shaken the Chinese self-confidence in their own art. The Western powers' intrusion into China in the 19th century, however, made the reckoning inevitable. The increased foreign presence and the opening of the coastal treaty port-cities heightened the awareness of Western art forms. Moreover, larger cross-cultural comparative perspectives, strongly affected by social Darwinism, framed the Chinese reckoning with the respective merits of Eastern and Western art. Humiliation following repeated defeats by the Western powers prompted a deep soul-searching among Chinese intellectuals, which coloured their perception of both art traditions. Radical political reformers such as Kang Youwei (1858–1927) and Chen Duxiu (1879–1942) made art a contentious political-cultural issue. They lambasted traditional Chinese painting, as exemplified by the landscapes of the exalted Four Wangs of the early Qing dynasty (1644–1911)—Wang Shimin (1592–1680), Wang Jian (1598–1677), Wang Hui (1632–1717) and Wang Yuanqi (1642–1715) (Fig. 1). The critics correlated the two art traditions with cultural strengths and weaknesses, considering Western art more compelling because it was perceived to embody advanced science and technology. By contrast, they deplored traditional Chinese art for what they saw as

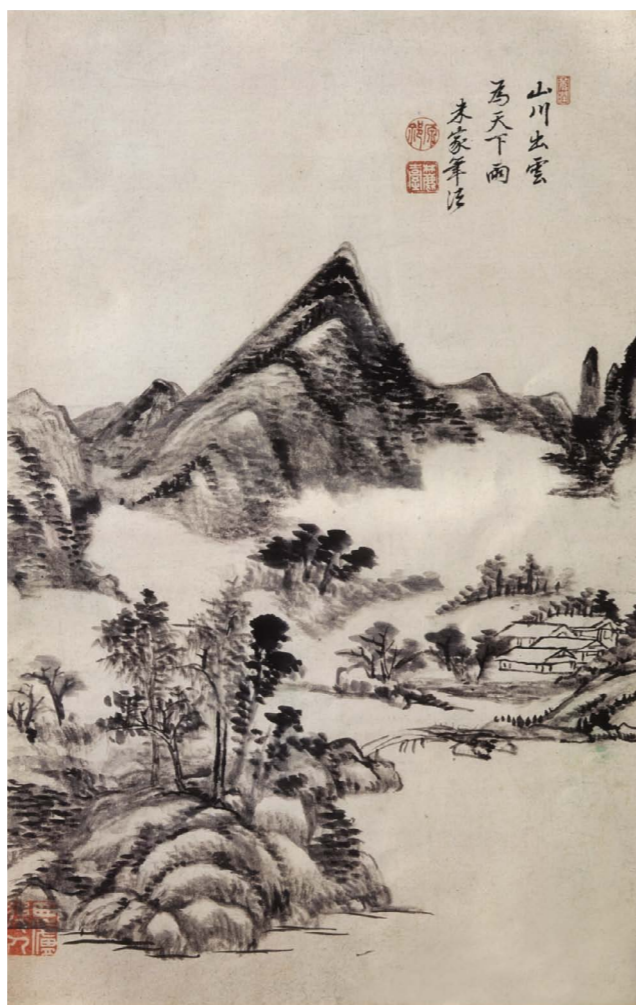


Fig. 1 *Landscape in the Style of the Mi Tradition*  
By Wang Yuanqi (1642–1715), c. 1712–13  
Album leaf from the set 'Landscapes in the Style of Old Masters', ink on paper, 49 x 31 cm  
Tianjin Museum

Fig. 2 *Moonlight in the Woods*  
By Yokoyama Taikan (1868–1958), c. 1904–5  
Unmounted, ink and light colour  
on silk, image: 75.8 x 51.2 cm  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
Gift of the Estate of Mrs. James F. Curtis (27.806)  
(Photograph © 2018 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)



an effete and anaemic tenor, which they regarded as symptomatic of the spineless spiritual malaise that had long plagued China. Its indifference to effects of verisimilitude was seen as evidence of its deficiency in scientific rigour and technological prowess.

The self-strengthening push motivated many Chinese students to seek education abroad. In the 1900s, Japan was the closest outlet for modern Western knowledge. The first group of Chinese seeking art training in Japan came mostly from southeast China. Most notable among them were Gao Jianfu (1879–1951), his younger brother Gao Qifeng (1889–1933), and Chen Shuren (1884–1948), all from Guangdong province. The three were to be the backbone of the Lingnan school, the first group

in 20th century China to reform art. Their sojourn in Japan in the 1900s shaped their artistic vision, and had a lasting impact on their career in China.

Gao Jianfu studied at the Japanese Academy of Fine Arts (Nihon Bijutsu-in) in 1906. Founded in 1898 by Okakura Kakuzō, who had resigned from the Tokyo School of Fine Arts due to his aversion to the latter's curricular inclusion of Western-style art, the Tokyo-based new private institution was intended to be a breeding ground of re-energized Japanese painting. The leading figures of the institute—Hishida Shunsō (1874–1911) and Yokoyama Taikan (1868–1958) (Fig. 2)—sought to modernize traditional Japanese art. Their brand of Japanese-style painting largely retained the traditional Chinese



Fig. 3 *Willows in the Moonlight* (left screen)  
By Maruyama Ōkyo (1733–95), 1793  
One of a pair of six-panel screens, ink, colour and gold on paper, image: 153.9 x 354.4 cm  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York  
Mary Griggs Burke Collection, Gift of the Mary and Jackson Burke Foundation, 2015 (2015.300.197.1, 2)

and Japanese media, including materials and format. It also appropriated formal qualities from European painting, such as light and shading. In particular, they created a distinctive hazy-style (*J. morotai*) painting by purposefully renouncing contour lines, which they identified as the core value of traditional Chinese and Japanese painting. Instead, they gave primacy to ink washes—much in the vein of European watercolour—as the mainstay of their compositions, thereby resulting in works devoid of outlines and overrun with ink washes.

The Gao brothers and Chen Shuren in Japan quickly warmed up to the liberal use of wash and technical treatment of light and shadows. However, they refused to renounce brush lines as a key property of ink painting, and therefore did not fully embrace the Japanese academy's *premise* of the hazy-style aesthetics. Although Tokyo was more fashionable, it was the Kyoto-based Shijō school, established by Maruyama Ōkyo (1733–95) and Matsumura Goshun (1752–1811), that resonated more with the Cantonese students. Ōkyo and his followers had, a century or so earlier, practised a syncretism

by drawing on diverse resources (Fig. 3). Constrained by the Tokugawa shogunate's exclusion policy that denied them direct access to European art, they relied on what came through Nagasaki, the only port open at the time. Illustrated books containing Dutch copperplate engravings with camera obscura effects and Chinese Suzhou prints with stereoscopic qualities derived from European *vues d'optique* gave them hints of how to produce paintings with verisimilitude effects. If Ōkyo provided the model of illusionism, Goshun supplied lyricism (Fig. 4). The Japanese Nanga school style, a late Edo period (1603–1868) descendant of Chinese Yuan (1271–1368) to Ming (1368–1644) dynasty literati painting, was Goshun's source of inspiration for his brand of pictorial style, one that was suffused with poetic sensitivity and emotional resonance. Takeuchi Seihō (1864–1942) updated the Ōkyo school legacy for the Chinese art students in Japan. His exposure to European art during his tour of Europe in 1900 allowed him to renew and re-energize the Shijō school tradition with the techniques of Turner (1775–1851) and Corot (1796–1875) (Fig. 5).



Fig. 4 *Cherry Blossoms*  
By Matsumura Goshun (1752–1811), 18th century  
Hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper, 175.2 x 93.6 cm  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York  
The Harry G. C. Packard Collection of Asian Art, Gift of Harry G. C. Packard, and Purchase, Fletcher, Rogers, Harris Brisbane Dick, and Louis V. Bell Funds, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, and The Annenberg Fund Inc. Gift, 1975 (1975.268.77)

Fig. 5 *Seascape*  
By Takeuchi Seihō (1864–1942), Shōwa period (1926–89), early 20th century  
Hanging scroll, colour on paper, 18.8 x 17 cm  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York  
Gift of Florence and Herbert Irving, 2015 (2015.500.9.59)



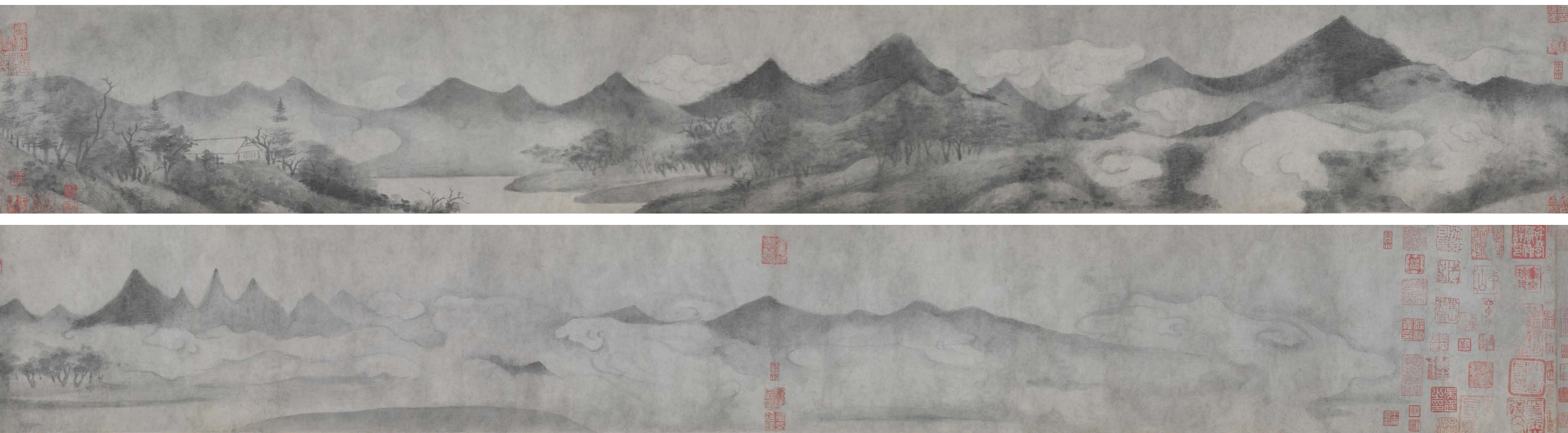


Fig. 6 *Spectacular Views of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers*  
By Mi Youren (1074–1151)  
Handscroll, ink on paper, 19.8 x 289.5 cm  
Palace Museum, Beijing

The Shijō school tradition, with its balance between technical mastery of close empirical observation of the physical world on the one hand and emotionally resonant wash-derived lyricism on the other, decidedly recalls the Chinese Song dynasty (960–1279) tradition. The parity between the two is apparent—the Northern Song (960–1127) striving after verisimilitude derived from empirical observation of the material texture of physical appearances on the one hand, and the Southern Song (1127–1279) wash-centric introspective lyricism on the other (Fig. 6). This resonance was not lost on the Cantonese painters, and they thus advocated for a return to the Song tradition.

This was a radical, revisionist view at the time. From the 14th to the 17th century, literati arbiters of taste had perpetuated the storyline of the Yuan literati triumph over the Song professionals. The sparse and austere Yuan brush-centrism trumped

the effusive wash-centrism of the Southern Song over the centuries. If the Southern Song wash-centrism had been largely sidelined in the canon of Chinese art, it survived as the mainstay of Japanese Kano school (15th–19th century) ink painting, largely unscathed by the Chinese literati's aesthetic preference for dry-brushed austerity. The wash-centric aesthetic thus held on in Japan all the way to modern times. It was further reinforced by the Japanese Meiji period (1868–1912) appropriation of the European mode of watercolour. These resources informed the hazy style in the 1900s. To some extent, then, modern Japanese art reacquainted the young Cantonese students with the Southern Song wash-centrism. The history of Chinese art thus completed a curious circle, with a loop in Japan.

Haze, however, both linked the Chinese and Japanese artists and divided them. It had entirely different overtones for each. Haze spelled cultural

identity for the Japanese *morotai* practitioners seeking to distance themselves from both the Sino-Japanese tradition and the modern Western powers. For the southern Chinese artists, who at the close of the Qing dynasty in 1911 were all zealous political activists, it was a visual trope to gauge the Chinese political climate. A rousing line from the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing*) provided the cue: 'Wind and rain create a sombre haze; the rooster never lets up crowing' (*Shijing*, 2015, p. 178; translation by the author). The trope dominated the southern revolutionary periodicals in the early 1900s (Fig. 7). The supplement of a southern daily paper was pointedly titled *Record of Crowing against Haze* (*Huiming lu*). The inaugural issue of another southern newspaper, titled *Southern Wind* (*Nanfeng bao*), features a rooster atop a rock, crowing and hailing the rising sun. The caption described the political climate in China at the time as trapped in a 'pitch-

black chamber'. The lamentation—when would 'this long night ever see light again?'—turns to the joy of hearing the rooster's crow, signalling the dawn. The Guangdong intellectual Liu Shifu (1884–1915), an ardent anarchist who had organized the China Assassination Group in 1910, founded the Crowing-Against-Haze Society in 1913 and published a journal, also called *Record of Crowing against Haze*. The 'crowing-against-haze' trope was a rallying call to the southern assassination groups aiming to bring down, first, the Qing officials, and subsequently, the reactionary government officials and warlords who betrayed revolutionary ideals.

The Gao brothers' paintings, while resonant with this trope, explore the haze for its complex effects. For one thing, haze fit rhetorically into the fashioning of the progressive artists' self-image. They saw themselves as avant-garde harbingers of



Fig. 7 *Crowing Against Haze*  
By Gao Qifeng (1889–1933)  
Cover design for *The True Record Illustrated Magazine*, vol. 1, no. 3 (1912)  
Guangdong Gallery of Art Library

enlightenment, charged with the mission to shine piercing light on the hazy gloom, to expose the hidden reality, to illuminate for the public, and to awaken the masses from their collective slumber in the 'pitch-black chamber'. The artists' self-regard as Promethean figures destined to bring light to the dark world harmonized with the Chinese reformers' turn-of-the-century quest for modern technology. Photography and other optical devices were thus a part of the modernizing technological apparatus that the Cantonese artists keenly embraced. Gao Jianfu studied entomology in Japan, and was fascinated with the microscopic lens (Fig. 8). Gao Qifeng and other Cantonese vanguard artists were avid photographers. One of Gao Qifeng's paintings presents a photographer aiming his camera at the hazy gloom of some dark woods as if it was

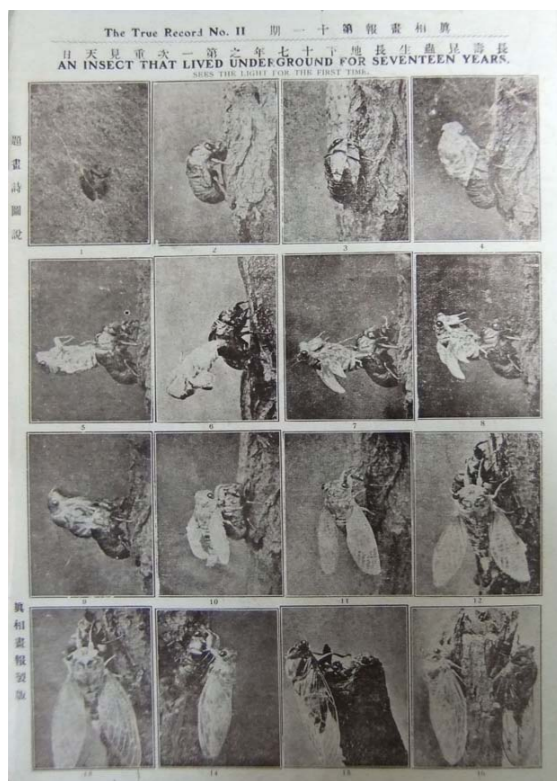


Fig. 8 *An Insect That Lived Underground for Seventeen Years Sees the Light for the First Time*  
By Gao Jianfu (1879–1951)  
*The True Record Illustrated Magazine*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1912)  
Guangdong Gallery of Art Library



Fig. 9 *Cameraman Shining Light on Darkness*  
By Gao Qifeng (1889–1933)  
Cover design for *The True Record Illustrated Magazine*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1912)  
Guangdong Gallery of Art Library



Fig. 10 *Autumn Grasses in Moonlight* (right panel)  
By Shibata Zeshin (1807–91), Meiji period (1868–1912)  
Two panel-screen, ink, lacquer, silver and silver leaf on paper, image: 45.7 x 84.5 cm  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York  
The Harry G. C. Packard Collection of Asian Art, Gift of Harry G. C. Packard, and Purchase, Fletcher, Rogers, Harris Brisbane Dick, and Louis V. Bell Funds, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, and The Annenberg Fund Inc. Gift, 1975 (1975.268.137)

a penetrating searchlight (Fig. 9). Camera lenses reinforced the Cantonese artists' keen interest in capturing the acuity of observational techniques.

The Cantonese artists also created psychologically charged hazy paintings. Their compositions typically feature a low-hanging moon—a device derived from the Japanese artist Shibata Zeshin (1807–91) (Fig. 10) and others—except that the moon is veiled in haze. The hazy background typically offset an oversized insect, for example, a grasshopper, in the foreground, as epitomized by Gao Jianfu's *Autumn Melodies* (1914) (Fig. 11). The distinctness of the foreground grasshopper is thus pitched against the haziness of the background moon, resulting in a photographic effect, a technologically mediated vision processed through a camera lens. The visual drama stems from the low-hanging moon serving as a back-lighting source, illuminating and exposing the foreground grasshopper, a vulnerable subject put on the spot. The exposure and the grasshopper's precarious perch on the grass stalk hint at a recent or imminent act of violence—patches of red smeared over the surface of the painting suggest a blood stain. It is unclear what kind of killing is involved. However, given the Gao brothers' predilection for

painting ominous owls on a hazy moonlit night, we know that someone is in for a killing. The painting is fraught with foreboding. In view of the long Chinese tradition of enjoying drinking in moonlight at the Mid-Autumn Festival, we have come a long way. With the moonlit night now unsettled by nervous apprehension, it comes as no surprise that a few years later, one of the best-known fictive characters of 20th century China went mad on a moonlit night. The neurotic first-person narrator of Lu Xun's (1881–1936) *A Madman's Diary* (*Kuangren riji*; 1918) sees murderous intent in the glisten of his neighbour's eyes on a moonlit night. For him, anything can now happen on such a night. This thought drives him mad. Thus began a new page of modern Chinese history—all with haze on a moonlit night.

The story of haze sums up a substantial part of Chinese art. It highlights the role of wash, which in turn calls attention to its interplay and, at times, tension with brushed lines. The Japanese line-vs-wash formulation may be gross reductionism. Nevertheless, it highlights a key and constant dynamic that runs throughout the history of Chinese art. Lines describe and washes sing; lines objectivize and washes interiorize; lines establish clarity and order, and washes smear and loosen things up.



Fig. 11 *Autumn Melodies*  
 By Gao Jianfu (1879–1951), 1914  
 Hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper, 132.5 x 63 cm  
 Formerly Li Xiongcai Collection, Guangdong province, China  
 (After Zhu Boxiong and Cao Chengzhang,  
 eds, *Zhongguo shuhua mingjia jingpin dadian*,  
 Hangzhou, 1997, vol. 4, p. 1212, pl. 14)

The interplay of the two formal properties makes the essential drama in Chinese painting, with its capacity at once to devise and revise, to stabilize and destabilize, to externalize and interiorize. Hence, the mimetic impulse strong in Western art was never much of a real concern in Chinese art. That accounts for what makes Chinese art distinct.

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