

# The Construction of Agonistic and Strategic Landscape in Chinese Painting of the 1920s and 1930s

Chunyan Zhang<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of International Chinese Language Education, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China

Correspondence: Chunyan Zhang, School of International Chinese Language Education, Beijing Normal University, 19 Xijiekouwai Street, Haidian District, 100875, Beijing, China. E-mail: diana0825cn@163.com

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the construction of nature in Chinese painting during the period of the late 1920s and 1930s. In this period, in the context of nationalism, in order to arouse people's national sentiments, artists constructed, or even distorted nature as a threatening "other" of human beings or as a strategic landscape to be controlled by human beings. Both convey the idea of agonistic relationship between human beings and nature. This idea was new, betraying the traditional idea of "harmony between man and nature" and the traditional image of nature as an idealized utopia without any political associations. Most scholars argue that in the 1950s Chinese painting began to produce representations of nature and people in a new ideology with all kinds of "struggle" as the main theme. However, this phenomenon actually began as early as the late 1920s and 1930s. In this new construction, the appearance of nature was portrayed as destructive or as a battlefield, while human beings were represented as battlers, which is the result of social context and ideology.

**Keywords:** Construction, Nature, Agonistic, Chinese painting

## 1. Introduction

This paper aims to explore the position from which Chinese culture departed, betraying its deep-rooted belief in "the harmony of humanity with nature" (*tianren heyi*). One of the distinct characteristics of Chinese culture has always been its emphasis on the harmony of man with nature. This is still widely accepted in Chinese intellectual discourse. For example, Du Weiming, a leading representative of "New Confucian" thought, has pointed out, that one of the foundations of Chinese philosophy, is the perception of inanimate objects, plants, animals and humankind as one entity closely bound up in mutual communications. Man is part of the mighty current of the universe (Liu, 2005, pp. 7-10) (Note 1). However, few scholars have noticed the new attitudes towards nature that began to germinate in the late 1920s and 1930s.

The Chinese culture of this period frequently constructed the agonistic and strategic landscape in which nature as destructive or as a territory and human beings as battlers. This was a break with traditional ideas, and is shown clearly in painting, such as *Peasants in the Boundless Dusk* (c.1933), *Snowstorm in the Orchard of the Cangshi Road* (c.1933), *Waiting to be Saved* (c.1930s), and *A Boat in Exile* (c.1930s) by Zhao Wangyun (1906-1977), *Cannon Emplacements at Yongjiangkou* (1932) by Pan Tianshou (1897-1971), and *Five Storied Tower* (1926) by Gao Jianfu (1879-1951).

Due to the length of the paper, not all paintings are treated as equally importantly or given fully discussion. Some are expounded in detail and others are just mentioned in one or two sentences. The discussion of specific representations will be combined with a more general exploration of the ideology, aesthetics and social context that fostered those representations. As the focus is the ideology, the issues of technique, style and medium of paintings will not be emphasized.

During this period, Chinese artists were influenced by social ideology to a great extent, therefore the Chinese social context will be discussed in next section. Then in section 3 I will discuss the construction of antagonism between nature and human beings, which is demonstrated in two themes: "nature as a threatening 'other'", and "nature as strategic territory to be controlled". In section 4, a full and thorough analysis of the reasons for the ideological and aesthetic change was given, then comes the last section of conclusion.

This paper sometimes uses the term "*shanshui*" to refer to "nature". "*Shanshui*" is a single term comprised of the

two words “mountain” and “water”. In Chinese cultural tradition, “*shanshui*” signifies the whole natural world, not only mountain and water.

## 2. Social Context of the Late 1920s and 1930s

During the 1920s and 1930s, in China, the age of self-containment and isolation was over with the overthrow of the Qing Dynastic regime in 1911. Chinese society was experiencing a strong national sentiment. External forces such as foreign aggression denied peace to China and forced the Chinese government to open its doors and import Western cultures. Internally revolutions and rapid changes of regime, civil war amongst the warlords, and the war between the newly established Communist Party and the nationalist Party (KMT), pulled the whole nation into a state of crisis and agony. This compelled the Chinese intellectuals to consider the condition of the national spirit, in their urgent need to save the country from collapse.

In terms of culture, this was one of the most turbulent periods in Chinese history. Because of a series of revolutions and movements, among which the most influential one was the New Culture Movement, the traditional culture was tottering. The New Culture Movement, which radically liberated people’s thoughts, was an intellectual revolution starting from 1915 and lasting to the 1920s, whose leaders included Chen Duxiu (1879-1942), Li Dazhao (1889-1927), Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940), Hu Shi (1891-1962) and Lu Xun (1881-1936). It sprang from the upsurge of nationalism and disillusionment with traditional Chinese culture, and aimed to resist both Chinese feudalism and Western imperialism by the way of creating a new culture based on Western science and democracy. The movement reached its peak on May 4, 1919 (the “May Fourth Movement”), with the student demonstrations in Beijing, protesting the Chinese government’s weak response to the Treaty of Versailles after the First World War. These revolutions and movements fiercely criticized age-old Chinese traditions, especially those of Confucianism and Daoism, accusing them of being responsible for the backwardness and poverty of China. The revolutionaries introduced new ideas such as enlightenment and modernity, shifted the artistic and literary emphasis from an idealized or imagined peaceful world to the realistic world of conflict (including the reform of society and the struggle with nature), and from heaven to earth.

## 3. Construction of Antagonism between Nature and Human Beings in Chinese Painting

### 1) Nature as a Threatening “Other”

In Chinese paintings with nationalistic sentiments of this period, the landscape was harsh, and the human figure was represented as very significant. This kind of painting departed from the traditional idea of “harmony between human beings and nature” to “great man pitted against hostile nature”. The greatness and supremacy of humanity is usually achieved at the cost of the harmony between humanity and nature. Human beings’ struggle against nature and their distressful life in nature is brought to the fore. As the art critic Zhou Xing claims, the New Culture Revolution and the spirit of the May Fourth movement had such a great impact on Chinese culture that they changed its direction altogether (Zhou, 2005, pp. 36-37). Many artists became involved in the depiction of human suffering and the struggle in nature. Zhao Wangyun is an example.

Zhao Wangyun (1906-1977), one of the pioneer Chinese painters advocating the representation of real life, made heroic journeys to the northwestern rural areas. In his painting, the threatening force of nature fuses with a clear anxiety about the destiny of the nation. For example, in *Peasants in the Boundless Dusk* (c.1933) (Figure 1), the dense texture of the rocky surface, the deep folds of the mountain, the rising precipices and the eerie atmosphere created by the murky ink tone articulate a great tension and convey a sense of threatening landscape in the northwestern Loess Plateau (Cheng, 2002, p. 15). *Snowstorm in the Orchard of the Cangshi Road* (c.1933) (Figure 2) depicts the travellers’ difficulties and struggles caused by the snowstorm; even the trees are nearly blown down (Cheng, 2002, p. 152). *Waiting to be Saved* (c.1930s) (Figure 3) represents the terrifying waves of a river and passengers in a boat fighting with the waves and waiting to be saved (Cheng, 2002, p. 21). *A Boat in Exile* (c.1930s) (Figure 4) depicts the flood in Jiangsu and Shandong provinces and human figures battling with it (Cheng, 2002, p. 22).

Whereas traditionally in Chinese painting human figures are assimilated into the oneness of nature, in *Waiting to be Saved* and *A Boat in Exile* the appearance of the human figures and their struggle with the force of river are impressive and striking elements in the whole picture. There is a manifest lack of harmony between humanity and nature. Instead, what impresses the viewer is the confrontation between man and nature, and the longing for human emancipation and freedom through the breaking of the oppression of nature.



Figure 1. *Peasants in the Boundless Dusk* (c.1933)



Figure 2. *Snowstorm in the Orchard of the Cangshi Road* (c.1933)

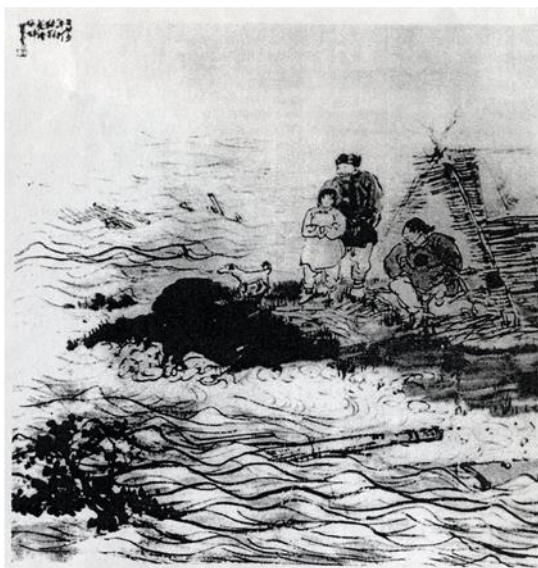


Figure 3. *Waiting to be Saved* (c.1930s)



Figure 4. *A Boat in Exile* (c.1930s)

In these paintings, there are several related points of significance. What relates them together is the idea that nature is something to be battled against. The first point concerns the representation of nature's appearance – the subject matter. For hundreds of years, mainstream Chinese *shanshui* painting was characterized by the beauty of softness, elegance and peacefulness. From the 1920s, the subject of the *shanshui* painting was expanded. This is exemplified in Zhao Wangyun's painting. Instead of representing the mild and pleasant southern scenery, Zhao was the first influential painter to take the northwest landscape as his major subject (Cheng, 2002, p. 171). Through depicting a basically hostile terrain (the precipitous mountains, the storm, the deluged river), and the strength of the human beings or animals in their battle against the harsh natural environment, Zhao intended to convey a strong sense of realism and thereby to awaken the spirit of the people. In this period, the subjects in Chinese painting were expanded to include the Loess Plateau, the Gobi Desert, the banks of the Yellow River and the far southwestern and northwestern regions where the climate is harsh and the terrain bleak and inhospitable (Note 2). To Zhao and those painters who focused on depicting the harsh environment, the more harshly the landscape was represented, the more the heroic qualities of the human spirit could be demonstrated. Such subjects, compositions and motifs became their vehicles to evoke the national spirit. This can be seen in the flood, rainstorm, snowstorm, typhoon, and drought represented in *A Boat in Exile*, *Snowstorm in the Orchard of the Cangshi Road* and *Waiting to be Saved*.

The second point concerns the way human beings are represented. From these paintings, it is clear that depicting the contemporary common people, especially low-class people (e.g. peasants and workers), as opposed to immortals or noble figures, became the focus of attention. Compared with the traditional idealistic and idyllic style, this new style was highly realistic and sardonic, with a power of evocation. This is shown in *Peasants in the Boundless Dusk*, *Waiting to be Saved* and *A Boat in Exile*. The image of these poor people (especially the peasants exhibiting qualities of bravery, endurance and fighting spirit), either in the role of “fighter” or as “victim”, with their shabby, worn-out clothes and bare feet, broke with the tradition of the decent, elegant stereotype. They were endowed with a heroic quality to fight against natural forces such as flood, in contrast with the noble figure and their “unity” with nature. Both these realistic figures and realistic nature are from “this” world, as opposed to the traditional imagined *shanshui* image of “other” world.

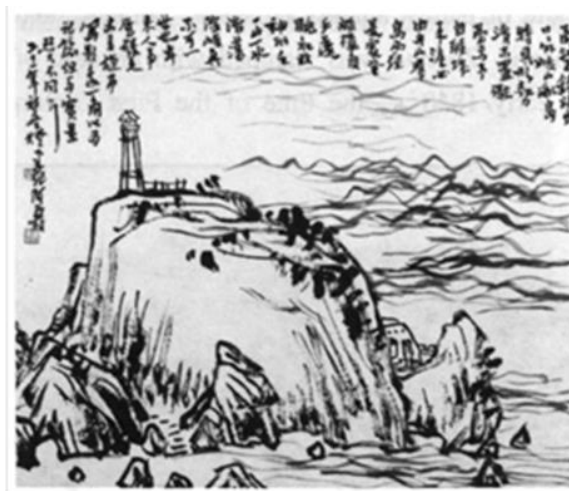
The third point concerns the image of water. In these realistic paintings of the 1930s, water is a destructive power, as seen in roaring rivers or flood. This image of water works to test the human spirit. It is distinct from its counterpart in traditional Chinese culture, in which water was considered to be the mother or the nurturing force which fostered humanity. In traditional *shanshui* painting, the dominant character of water was tender, mild and peaceful. The unselfish nourishing character of water suggested the Confucian idea of mercy and benevolence. Daoists also sang the praise of water: “Water benefits all things without contending with them” (Lynn, 1999). There was little representation of floods in traditional *shanshui* painting.

Another image relevant to the image of water is snow. In traditional *shanshui* painting, “snow” was depicted as bringing peace and consolation to the human spirit, covering the “ugly” reality and misery, and detaching human beings from “this” world. For example, Ju Ran's (active in the Five Dynasties) *Snow* (Figure 5) depicts a sublime mountain covered with snow. Several travellers, light on their feet, are walking toward a temple which is partly hidden in the depth of the mountain, symbolizing the clean “other” world of Buddhist detachment. Similar representations of snow can also be found in Dai Jin's (1389-1462) *Walk in the Snow to Look for Plum Blossom* (Figure 6) which demonstrates the tender character of snow and the travellers' joyful journey through it. There is no expression of haste or misery in these paintings. To paint the snow is to paint the ideal of transcending the filth of “this” world. In addition, the white snow symbolizes the realm of “emptiness” and “void”, which is in accordance with the idea of Daoism. However, the 1920s and 1930s, as we have seen in Zhao Wangyun's paintings *Snowstorm in Cangshi Road*, a new image of snow appeared, as an unfriendly and threatening force bringing trouble and increasing the potential for misery in human lives.

Figure 5. *Snow* (Five Dynasties)Figure 6. *Walk in the Snow to Look for Plum Blossom* (Ming Dynasty)

## 2) Nature as Strategic Territory to be Controlled

Because of political upheaval, social turbulence and various wars, sometimes nature was constructed as a territory, a strategic terrain, or a battlefield. This is most clear in painting, even in some paintings of the traditionalist Pan Tianshou. This deconstructs the traditional construction of nature, especially the mountains and river as a place and symbol of reclusion. It focuses instead on the defense or loss of territory, and the strategic function of nature, placing it within a political ideology and school of tactical thought, as shown in Pan Tianshou's *Cannon Emplacements at Yongjiangkou* (1932) (Figure 7), which deals with the theme of anti-Japanese aggression, and Gao Jianfu (1879-1951)'s *Five Storied Tower* (1926) (Figure 8), which is concerned with the civil war of the 1920s. This sort of *shanshui* painting is a type of distorted or deformed *shanshui* art which has lost the essential qualities of traditional *shanshui* painting. The painters made use of it as a foil to manifest their strong national sentiments, distorting *shanshui* to mirror social attitudes and psychology (Lu, 2005, p. 27).

Figure 7. *Cannon Emplacements at Yongjiangkou* (1932)



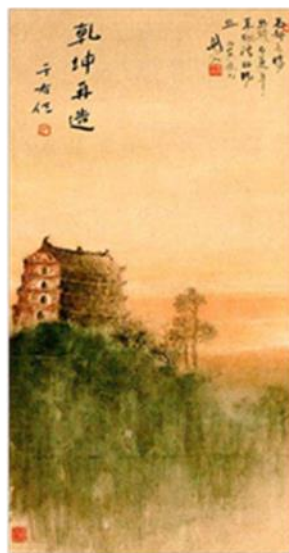


Figure 8. *Five Storied Tower* (1926)

Distorting *shanshui* painting by investing it with nationalistic overtones is not a recent phenomenon in China. In the Southern Song period, the Jin Tartar occupation of northern China constituted a violation of China's nationhood. It resulted in the style of "One-Corner" composition represented by Ma Yuan and Xia Gui. They simply painted one corner of mountain or water, signifying "broken water and debilitated mountain". When the Mongols overran China in 1279, Zheng Sixiao (1239-1316) painted orchids without earth to grow in, signifying the loss of land. However, none of them endowed their work with political associations or depicted the signs of war (e.g. watchtowers and cannons), or rendered *shanshui* in terms of strategic terrain or the battlefield as did the painters of the 1920s and 1930s.

Pan Tianshou's *Cannon Emplacements at Yongjiangkou* differs markedly from the traditional *shanshui* painting in that it is a strategic landscape that has strong historical associations with the defense of the coast against Japanese pirates. It depicts the cannon emplacements around the Zhenhai estuary, near the mouth of the Yongjiang River in Zhejiang province. This place had been the site of battles against Japanese "pirates" and invaders as long ago as the Ming dynasty. It was therefore stamped with an aura of anti-foreign resistance (Vinograd, 2006, p. 292) (Note 3). In this picture, Pan emphasizes the block-like bread loaf shape of the hill, the watchtower atop the hill and cannon emplacements set in a protective notch at the viewer's lower right, and a vista to the ocean beyond.

The inscription of another painting by Pan Tianshou, *Qianjiang Shanshui* which was produced in later period (1945) (Figure 9), depicts a related topography with similar strategic and military associations, and reveals that his traditional literati's idea of escape and reclusion was mixed with a new idea of "engagement with the realistic life": "Feeling concerned about world affairs and depressed by the times, my mind is not at ease; facing the wind helplessly, I dawdle around. The lone cry of a goose tumbles down from the midst of the heavens, the autumn and the river billows can be seen beyond the sky" (Vinograd, 2006, p. 298). The allusions to world affairs, difficult times, and feelings of helplessness are all typical of the feelings of this turbulent period. This sort of strategic *shanshui*, whether expressing the feeling of national triumph or national humiliation, as Vinograd argues, is engaged with the themes of national pride, resistance to aggression, and feelings of exile at a time of wars and crisis. It embodies the dialectic of the 20th century China's historical and political turmoil. The artists used *shanshui* as a sort of assumption of cultural power, through which certain distinct regional, national, and cultural identities were represented (Vinograd, 2006, pp. 298-301). In this construction of national and cultural identity, nature loses its traditional role as a place of refuge for the recluse, detached and aloof from worldly struggles. It becomes instead a place of battle, associated with struggle and warfare. What is more significant is that, through the act of endowing the *shanshui* with a strategic ideology, a sense of the control exercised by man over nature becomes explicit, emanating not from human labour, but from warfare.

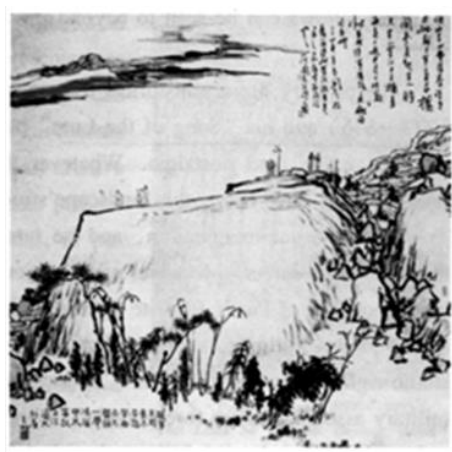


Figure 9. *Qianjiang Shanshui* (1945)

#### 4. Reasons for the Ideological and Aesthetic Change

The reasons for these great changes were profound. Chinese art had maintained a steady, uninterrupted and continuous development for more than one thousand years with relatively few influences from abroad (Note 4). However, from the beginning of the 20th century, especially since the New Culture Movement, many momentous changes within the tradition as well as great challenges from abroad upset the centuries-old complacency. Political upheavals in history almost always bring radical changes in art in their wake. When society is in chaos caused by trouble and unrest, artists are prone to give vent to their feelings. The violence of the social changes and the impact of alien cultures on China in the 1920s and 1930s was of an order unprecedented in history since the Spring and Autumn Period. Not surprisingly this resulted in Chinese painting undergoing radical and profound change in its subject, content and social function.

Chinese painting at this time were consequently saturated with the serious concerns of the nation and the misery experienced by its people. One of the fundamental concepts propounded by the New Culture Movement was that artistic works should have a positive effect on society and should both reflect the real life of ordinary people (especially their misery) and help to reform society. The peasants in the countryside and the workers in the city were considered the lowest class in China. They experienced great misery. To represent their life and struggle thus became the primary concern of many Chinese intellectuals, as can be seen in Zhao Wangyun's painting. At the same time, the status of the literati was declining. Before the 20th century, the literati who represented the mainstream of cultural life, were inspired by a passionate love of nature. They were educated within the ideological structures of Confucianism and Daoism, both of which upheld the ideal of human unity with nature. In addition to this, the traditional literati, especially the aristocratic class, were less worried about the necessities of life, even if they lived a reclusive life in the mountains or by riversides. Wolfgang Kubin expressed a similar idea, that the development of the concept of nature in Chinese classical literature had a close connection with the rise of the aristocracy. Without the feudal nobility there would not have been the passion for *shanshui* from the Six Dynasties (Kubin, 1990, p. 2). Although there were always exceptions such as Tao Yuanming, who lived a reclusive life in relative poverty, Kubin's thesis is broadly speaking a reasonable one. But in the 1920s and 1930s, the majority of the peasantry and workers, who were now thought of as representing the mainstream of Chinese social and cultural life, were by no means lovers of nature. Rather, they were, and were often represented as, the embodiment of those who opposed the forces of nature. On the one hand they were seldom if at all influenced by Daoism and Confucianism, because most of them could quite simply not afford an education. On the other hand the radicals or leftist intellectuals were fiercely opposed to Confucianism and Daoism, which they regarded as feudal doctrines responsible for China's backwardness.

This state of affairs is particularly evident in Chinese painting, which was in a state of acute tension, pulled in opposite directions. While some artists sought to preserve existing artistic traditions and conventions, others supported a move towards Westernization and a complete abandonment of tradition. This tendency was the product of the psychology of a militarily and economically inferior nation. During this period of crisis and the wholesale questioning of traditional values, the fundamental tenets of Confucianism and Daoism were being severely criticized. How could the values of traditional *shanshui* painting remain stable and unchallenged? During this time Western painting and the ideas it was based on became widespread in China and achieved almost the same standing as traditional Chinese painting. In 1917, in the preface to his treatise *Collected*

*Paintings of Wanmu Hut (Wanmu Caotang Canghuamu)*, Kang Youwei (1858-1927) severely denounced literati painting and advocated the adoption of a western realistic style of art (Note 5). This call for change was echoed by Chen Duxiu, Liu Haisu (1896-1994) and Xu Beihong (1895-1953), leading artists and progressive thinkers of this period. These people, together with other students who had studied in Paris during the early 1920, had the strongest impact on modern Chinese painting. After their return to China, they were given important positions in the new system of art education based on French models (Ruan & Hu, 2005, p. 11). This group of reformists advocated the rejection of all the formulae of traditional painting, its technique and its aesthetic, from colour and form to idea and spirit. The aesthetics and value of traditional painting, which had lasted for more than 1000 years, were re-examined, and some artists began to explore a new way of embodying the Chinese national spirit in painting. The movement of Chinese and Western Art Fusion (*Zhongxi Hebi Yundong*) in the 1930s introduced a new element into Chinese art: to paint directly from models and nature. Although some painters still followed the conventional methodology, they were more or less influenced by this new idea. As Zhang Qiang comments, the introduction of western realistic painting and the reform of Chinese painting based on realism had a destructive impact on traditional aesthetics. In the period from the 1920s to the 1940s, the focus of Chinese painting was to criticize its tradition (Zhang, 2005, pp. 12, 16). Hui Lan is not exaggerating when he claims that the art movement during the 1920s and 1930s produced the ideological seeds of the whole of 20th-century Chinese modern art (Liu, 2003, p. 58).

The aesthetic and ideological shift from the “imagined” or “idealized” *shanshui* to the realistic landscape, symbolized the transition from traditional to modern culture. In Chinese culture, the “modern” signifies the separation from the “classical” or “traditional”. “Modern” culture starts with the break from the traditional aesthetics of “harmony” and “idealization” (Zhang, 2005, pp. 3-4). The new images of nature and human beings are in fact the embodiments of modern aesthetics and ideology. At the beginning of the 20th century, China began to attempt to modernize its culture, a change which was accelerated by the impact of western cultural concepts. The concept of “modern” Chinese painting has a dual connotation. On the one hand, it refers to those works which are in a historical sense produced in “modern” times, namely, in the 20th century. On the other hand, it refers to those works which are in a cultural sense produced with “modern” ideas ((Zhang, 2005, p. 9). All the paintings discussed in this paper are in a double sense “modern”. During this period, in the eyes of Chinese traditionalists, “modern culture” was condemned, while traditional culture was thought to be pure, clean and morally uplifting. But in the eyes of the reformists, especially the leftists of the 1930s, “modern culture” was seen as a construction of images mirroring the national sentiment, and an advanced and morally lifting trend.

In this process of modernization, with the overthrow of the old empire and the end of the feudal system, classical aesthetics began to collapse. The new aesthetics were constantly absorbing Western aesthetic ideas. In this way Chinese aesthetics in the 20th century went through a difficult process, involving both collision and fusion between traditional Chinese and Western aesthetics. The principle shifted from being one of “detachment from society” and admiration of “unity between man and nature”, to one advocating “participating in and transforming both society and nature”. The ultimate aesthetic ideal became “sublimity” in the Western sense (Huang, 2001, pp. 18-20). As Feng Xiaolun argues in *Chinese Aesthetics of the 20th Century (Ershi Shiji Zhongguo Meixue)*, “harmony” represented the pre-modern classical aesthetic ideal, stressing that the elements composing “beauty” (such as human beings and other parts of nature) should be harmoniously combined into one. “Sublimity” (*chonggao*) represented the modern aesthetic ideal, and a state of disharmony, imbalance or contradiction between those elements (Feng, 1997, p. 9). His idea was echoed by many scholars such as Xu Jianrong, who claims that the fundamental principle of the “new culture” in the 20th-century China is disharmony, or to put it in another way, that the 20th-century cultural tradition is anti-tradition (Lu, Xu, & Gu, 2002, pp. 106-107). In this “anti-tradition”, struggle was the core issue, and the representation of heroism and tragedy in this human struggle became widely accepted as the target of modern art.

This aesthetic change is the result of both Western influence and the domestic crisis of the nation, which from a pastoral and lyric past projected modern art into a new era of “blood and fire”. The “feminine gentility”, regarded as the measure of classical beauty since the Song Dynasty, was subjected to severe criticism, on the premise that fragile beauties and bookish gentlemen would lend no assistance to the strengthening of a weak nation. The traditional idea of harmony was regarded as fostering a faint-hearted and conservative national character, causing the stagnation of Chinese civilization, especially in the Qing Dynasty (Ma, 1994, pp. 74-75). To prove this, the reformists and leftists pointed to the fact that in traditional Chinese art and literature, while there were many good works which dealt with reclusive or lofty ideas, there was a lack of real tragedy and any expression of a true fighting spirit. This had helped to cultivate the “middle-of-the-road” national character. Consequently, during this reformist period the harmony, detachment, peacefulness and unassertiveness of



classical aesthetics were repressed, while conflict and struggle among human beings, between humanity and nature and between human beings and their fate came to the fore. In fact, as Huang Huilin claims, these struggles and conflicts lasted through the whole 20th century, in all those areas, including social conflict, national conflict and class conflict, in which the ideal of harmony could never be regained (Huang, 2001, pp. 18-20).

Even in the *shanshui* painting of some “traditionalists” such as above-mentioned Pan Tianshou, it is easy to find evidence of this change of aesthetics. In his *Shanshui in the Style of Shi Tao* (1932) (Figure 10), a free rendering of a Shi Tao (1630-1724) original, although Pan Tianshou claimed that he wanted to defend the non-utilitarian character of traditional literati painting, and stated his allegiance to the old master Shi Tao, the traditional representation of ease and detachment were no longer present (Lu, 1995, p. 78). Through his use of forceful and vigorous brushwork (as opposed to fine and smooth), through his creation of precipitous compositions and imposing forms (in some cases painted with his fingers), a heroic feeling is conveyed. This is a bold manner and a powerful style, rough, cold, and fierce. Clearly the modern aesthetic, which emphasized “conflict”, “sublimity” and “heroic vigour”, had freed him from the bonds of tradition (Lu, 2005, p. 52) (Note 6). The violent emotion, imposing manner and iron-like modern composition in Pan Tianshou’s painting convey a great sense of strength to the viewer. It is full of masculine beauty and irrepressible vitality, without any hint of femininity or the traditional detachment of the literati. His painting demonstrates his desire to use extreme strength to counter the delicacy and fragility in both Chinese painting and the Chinese national character (Lu, 2005, pp. 26-28).



Figure 10. *Shanshui in the Style of Shi Tao* (1932)

## 5. Conclusion

During the period of 1920s and 1930s, in the context of the nationalism, Chinese painting were consequently saturated with the serious concerns of the nation and the misery experienced by its people. To represent their life and struggle thus became the primary concern of many Chinese intellectuals, as can be seen in Zhao Wangyun’s painting. The construction of nature as a “destructive” enemy against which “great” man won the battle, or as a territory or battlefield to be possessed, as in Pan Tianshou’s painting, reflects man’s relationship with nature in Chinese culture developed from one of traditional harmony to one of a more and more pronounced antagonism.

This is a great change, one that permeated every aspect of Chinese culture. It resulted in the discarding of age-old ethical and moral traditions, mild social reforms or unpractical humanist ideals. As a result, we see sharp conflicts between man and nature in the national myth-making in Chinese painting. In these conflicts, there was glorification of the hero. Ordinary people were encouraged to confront public grief and threatening nature, rather than compromise with them. This generic trend of social realism yielded an aesthetic legacy of passionate concern about social tragedy, and with time inevitably to a more passionate involvement in the class struggle.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of this paper.

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## Notes

Note 1. This idea is an expression of the Chinese love of nature, the desire to be part of it, as opposed to the desire to conquer it; their aspiration to be equal with it, rather than enslave it.

Note 2. In the past, occasionally there were also descriptions of the cold and harsh nature unfriendly to human beings in the north of China. But this kind of representation was never the dominant or mainstream tradition.

Note 3. Pan Tianshou's engagement with the site may have begun in 1932, and he depicted this place many times from 1932 to 1959. He started to paint this kind of strategic *shanshui* in 1932 because at the end of the preceding year, Japan had invaded Manchuria and in January 1932, Japanese naval forces bombed Shanghai.

Note 4. During the Qing period Chinese court painting was influenced greatly by the Italian Jesuit painter Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766). But this influence was confined to the court and did not affect mainstream literati painting.

Note 5. See the article "Kang Youwei's Panting Treatise Criticizes the Weakness of Tradition Chinese Painting", in *Guangzhou Painting (Guangzhou Huajuan)*, vol. 11, 2009, in the website of Guangzhou Library: <http://www.guangzhoulibrary.com/>.

Note 6. The change of style in Pan Tianshou's painting is most obviously demonstrated in his flower-and-bird painting. He chose the vulture which is more ferocious than the eagle as his major subject matter. His son Pan Gongkai explains, "In Chinese ancient literary works, the raptors such as the eagle, falcon, and roc were sometimes used to symbolize the human spirit. But the vulture was never represented because it was rare in the Central Plain area. The vulture is the bird which flies the highest in the world, and it always lives independently on the top of the snow-capped mountain. It has a strong vitality, a kind of majestic and rough beauty totally different from the tender beauty of oriole or parrot. This kind of beauty is not a "sleeping pill", but the "stimulant", which rouses people, gives people strength, inspiration and courage".

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