

New Chinese Landscapes in the Works of the Chinese Photographer Yao Lu

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Abstract—Many Chinese artists have used digital photography to create works with features of Chinese landscape paintings since the 20th century. The ‘New Mountains and Water’ works created by digital techniques reflect the fusion of photographic techniques and traditional Chinese aesthetic thoughts. Borrowing from Chinese landscape paintings in the Song Dynasty, the Chinese photographer Yao Lu uses digital photography to reflect contemporary environmental construction in his series *New Landscapes*. By portraying a variety of natural environments brought by urbanization in the contemporary period, Lu deconstructs traditional Chinese paintings and reconstructs contemporary photographic practices. The primary object of this study is to investigate how Chinese photographer Yao Lu redefines and reinterprets the relationship between tradition and contemporaneity. In this study, Yao Lu’s series work *New Landscapes* is used for photo elicitation, which seeks to broaden understanding of the development of Chinese landscape photography. Furthermore, discourse analysis will be used to evaluate how Chinese social developments influence the creation of photographic practices. Through the visual and discourse analysis, this study aims to excavate the relationship between tradition and contemporaneity in Lu’s works. According to *New Landscapes*, the study argues that in Lu’s interpretations of landscapes, tradition and contemporaneity are seen to establish a new relationship. Traditional approaches to creation do not become obsolete over time. On the contrary, traditional notions and styles of creation can shed new light on contemporary issues or techniques.

Keywords—Chinese aesthetics, contemporaneity, *New Landscapes*, tradition, Yao Lu.

I. INTRODUCTION

YAO Lu was born in 1967 in Beijing, China. He graduated from Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia, with a Master’s degree in Visual Arts. Lu currently teaches as an Associate Professor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, China. Known as his series *New Landscapes*, Lu was the winner of 2008 BMW – Paris Photo Prize for contemporary photography. In 2009, he held a solo exhibition entitled “New Landscapes” at Bruce Silverstein in New York. Throughout Lu’s creations, *New Landscapes* contributes to the understanding of the transformation of Chinese society.

Yao Lu’s series ‘Chinese Landscape’ began in 2006. During that period, China’s capital, Beijing, was preparing for the 2004 Olympic Games, making it the best example of the rapid transformation of Chinese society. In addition to its special status as the capital city, Beijing was about to take on the historic responsibility of hosting the Olympics for the first time in its history, so it was under international scrutiny. All efforts were being made by the Chinese government to modernize the

country. Beijing was experiencing a period of rapid construction where old houses were being demolished, wastelands were being reclaimed, and new buildings were being constructed, which caused a lot of development and renewal to take place quickly. As a result, Beijing was dominated by construction sites, dust sheets, rubbish, and ruins, making it difficult to distinguish the old from the new. The old Beijing was disappearing to become blurry and indistinct during the reconstruction process. In this sense, the green dust cloth in Lu’s works symbolizes the fate of the city. As Liu believes, the landscape is always in a dynamic process, with green hills appearing and disappearing [1]. In the case of the rubbish and construction materials, they are constantly being taken away and brought back again.

Based on the creative background of the series, Lu follows the aesthetic style of the ancient green landscapes and replaces the mountains, water, pavilions, and clouds in the ancient Chinese paintings with dust clothes, construction waste, ruins, and factories in the modern society, creating new green landscapes with the characteristics of this era. Lu’s Chinese landscape series holds the key to the development of ancient paintings. In Lu’s works, most landscapes use the color of stone green, which are symbols of the hills, gullies, forests and springs in the natural world. In order to achieve realistic imitation effects, Lu used the green dustproof cloth on the construction site to replace the green vegetation, utilized the mounds made of construction waste to replace the mountains and used the exhaust gases emitted from factories to replace the dazzling clouds and mists. In terms of composition, the classic masterpieces of ancient green and blue landscapes are used as the basis, and the layout of the content and structure of masterpieces is substituted as parts of the objects taken from reality, constituting contemporary perspectives of traditional paintings.

II. INSPIRED BY CHINESE LANDSCAPE PAINTINGS IN SONG DYNASTY

In Yao Lu’s new Chinese landscape photographs, he borrowed some formats of Chinese landscape paintings. The hanging scrolls (Fig. 1), album leaves, and fan-shaped compositions are some of the unique forms of Chinese paintings. The distinctive formats of paintings, specifically, the height and width of the scroll not only determine the artist’s composition and influence the way the viewer reads the paintings, but also reveal the different ways in which the

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Chinese artists perceive the natural landscapes. Through multi-layer experiences of appreciating landscapes, the viewers have to linger in the details of paintings to acquire more information. As such, different forms of Chinese landscape paintings are not

merely representations of the proportional relationship between composition and height, width and depth, but rather special proportions chosen to express imposing and aesthetic perceptions.



Fig. 1 Dwelling in the Mount Fuchun

Giant scroll landscapes are particularly different from traditional rectangular paintings. The painter has to carefully organize and place rocks, trees, clouds, houses and people in a long picture. The unusual ratio of width to height of the picture requires the painter to divide the complete landscape space into several segments so that there is a disjointed quality in paintings. This incoherent, segmented space in turn forces the viewer to visually divert from the bottom upwards step by step, when appreciating the whole picture. The shifting viewing from the bottom to the top enables the whole picture to look like a zigzag structure, thus creating twisting and circuitous landscapes. Therefore, the height of the giant hanging landscape extends the space of this ascent and breaks the limits of human vision, broadening one's imagination of infinite heights in a series of looking up into the sky.

There are numerous points of perspective in a single image, the points of perspective are segmented, pulling back the high and distant fields of view that should be drawn further away and reduced in a less perceptible and more easily viewed way, forming a new section. In this way, the point of view is pulled back and forth, adjusted like the lens of a camera. It is an optical illusion in contrast to the perspective of Western paintings, where one has to focus to find a point of extinction as in a single frame. This illusion brings the object closer from a distance, from three-dimensional to flat, resulting in an unexpected qualitative leap in proportion and space.

Spatial Composition

The most immediate change brought about by the format is space. During the process of viewing different formats, space is constantly stretching, pushing and pulling, clipping in and out of one's sight, and the order of space is being broken by the human eye over time. The viewer's mind thus is being organized by the spatial scenes. More importantly, the mind enables space to break free from the constraints of perspectives, thereby flattening three-dimensional spaces or stitching objects together with different depths of field. In contrast to the

geometric spaces of classical Western paintings, which are devoted to placing people in scientific spatial constructions, traditional Chinese landscape paintings focus more on the changes in perceptions that spatial constructions bring to the subject. In the Song dynasty, the technique of San-yuan atmospheric perspectives was coined by Guo Xi, which was one of the key features of Chinese landscape paintings. These three approaches include high distance, deep distance and level distance. According to his definition: There are three distances of mountains: from the bottom of the mountain to the top of the mountain, it is called high distance; from the front of the mountain to peep at the back of the mountain, it is called deep distance; from the near mountain to look at the distant mountain, it is called level distance [2]. One of the ways to show the three distances is to reflect the vertical and deep spatial relationship by dealing with the blank interspersed relationship, showing the three degrees of space, namely, height, width and depth, in the realm of landscapes.

As seen in Fig. 2, the spatial composition incorporates the artist's perceptions of the human body into tangible and visible spaces in paintings, so it is a dual presentation of external space and physical space. According to painting theories in the Song dynasty, it is the spatial existence of the human body and mind that provides a real experiential and palpable space for the spatial unfolding of Chinese landscape paintings. On the one hand, the technique allows the physical and material body of the Chinese landscape painter to be in tune with nature, and on the other hand, it allows the mind of the Chinese landscape painters to settle in the natural landscape. In this sense, the human body in landscape paintings is not only material, also a spiritual carrier of consciousness. Therefore, artist's perceptions of space and external space are interrelated and inseparable.



Fig. 2 Mountain Pasture with Floating Clouds

III. TRADITION AND CONTEMPORANEITY

Lu's artistic vision is deeply rooted in the Chinese landscape tradition that has been passed down through generations. His work is inspired by the beautiful landscapes depicted in Song Dynasty paintings, which have captivated artists and viewers for centuries. However, Yao Lu's unique perspective on this tradition goes beyond mere imitation or replication. He takes a philosophical approach to his art, exploring themes such as nature, perception, and identity. At the same time, Yao Lu also employs innovative photographic techniques that allow him to create new landscapes that seamlessly blend past and present. By using digital manipulation to merge traditional Chinese elements with contemporary imagery of construction sites and urban decay, he creates stunning images that evoke both nostalgia and hope for the future. In essence, Yao Lu's work reflects not only his deep appreciation for Chinese aesthetics but also his commitment to pushing boundaries and challenging conventions. Through his artistry and innovation, he offers us a fresh perspective on an ancient tradition while staying true to its timeless beauty.

The Exploration of Antiquity through Digital Images

One aspect of the confrontation between tradition and modernity lies in Yao Lu's exploration of antiquity through digital images. Yao Lu's works, whether they are displayed in the exhibition space or on the electronic screen, have a great appeal to the viewers, arousing their strong interest and making them unconsciously get closer to the works or enlarge the size of the electronic images. When viewed from a distance, the work always creates an illusion of time travel, as if the viewer were in a world surrounded by traditional Chinese landscape masterpieces. When one approaches the work or zooms in on it with such preconceptions, a new sense of travel emerges - the poetic mood and expectations that had just risen in one's mind are instantly brought back to reality by the green or black dust sheets and the construction rubbish they cover. The harsh,

wretched, pathos-inducing reality and the surreal and contrasting viewing experience are particularly dramatic. Yao Lu's clever use of the visual and psychological contrasts created by the two different mediums of ancient Chinese paintings and photography creates a new way of viewing, effectively bringing the work closer to the viewer, which results in a different kind of viewing experience. What the viewer sees is an illusion of beauty and harmony, in life as well as in the perception of the works, and every kind of beauty seems to be a lie, which Yao Lu ruthlessly exposes. The essence of Yao Lu's work lies in the details that underneath such a poetic and beautiful façade lies such an ugly social and ecological environment, so his photographs involve visible urban markings of modern social development.



Fig. 3 Mount Zhong in the Mist



Fig. 4 Mountains and Streams through Autumn Mist

In Figs. 3 and 4, construction waste is covered with green (or black) dust sheets, and graffiti can be found on the walls. There are small advertisements for rental housing, public warnings, neighborhood notices, slogans against forced construction, national policies, and so on. Aside from this, the seals of literati which were previously found on scrolls of paintings and drawings have now been replaced by the same words or seals that are found on walls, such as moving house, recycling, or unblocking. In this sense, Yao Lu has carefully extracted, selected, categorized, processed, combined and shaped them through highly sophisticated digital image synthesis techniques, replicating the entirety or parts of the ancient masterpieces of green landscapes, using these materials as fillers and substitutes for the content of the scrolls as far as possible, matching the colors and composition styles to achieve the visual effect of faking the real thing. In this sense, Yao Lu's new landscapes series is a means of presenting the contradictions between tradition, culture and modern civilization in China's development. As Lu argues in an interview with Wang Fei, using traditional art to question the role of contemporary reality on tradition is the focus of his works [3]. That is to say, although Yao Lu's Chinese Landscapes series still focuses on those distinctive Chinese landscapes, it does not take the form of direct photography or objective reproduction but presents them in a unique visual form. The documentary and reproductive functions of photography are not the driving force behind Yao Lu's use of this medium. The purely documentary nature of photographs is not enough to carry Yao Lu's heavy artistic aspirations, and he admits that he prefers the extensibility of photography, especially when it is digitized, which expands and enriches this extensibility of photography itself.

The freedom to transform antiquity into digital images is

precisely what makes it possible. By making full use of digital technology's ability to recreate the symbolic landscape of China's social development process through the artistic expression of photography, Yao Lu also attempts to break the boundary between photography and painting, intermingling the language of painting with that of photography and opening up a new visual style for photography. Therefore, Yao Lu's approach to creation is not simply to mechanically and objectively present the images with a camera, but to transform and recreate them, adding his subjective consciousness and using this artificial approach to find a unique and expressive vehicle for the objects of his works. Outside the images, they are social landscapes that have been transformed by man; inside the images, they are visual wonders that have been transformed by Yao Lu with digital software, forming an interesting correspondence between this internal and external transformation.

The Appropriation between Tradition and Reality

Another aspect of the confrontation between tradition and modernity lies in the appropriation between tradition and reality. Appropriation is an important means of connecting tradition and reality, both as a search for new meaning and as a critical inheritance of tradition. It is also an effective strategy for communicating with contemporary issues in artistic creation. The use of appropriation also opens up the works to openness and multiplicity of meanings, enlightening the audience to appreciate and interpret the connotations of the works from multiple perspectives and dimensions. In the process of appropriation, the artists reconstruct the meaning and content of the appropriated objects and then place them in a new context, where new semantics are created.

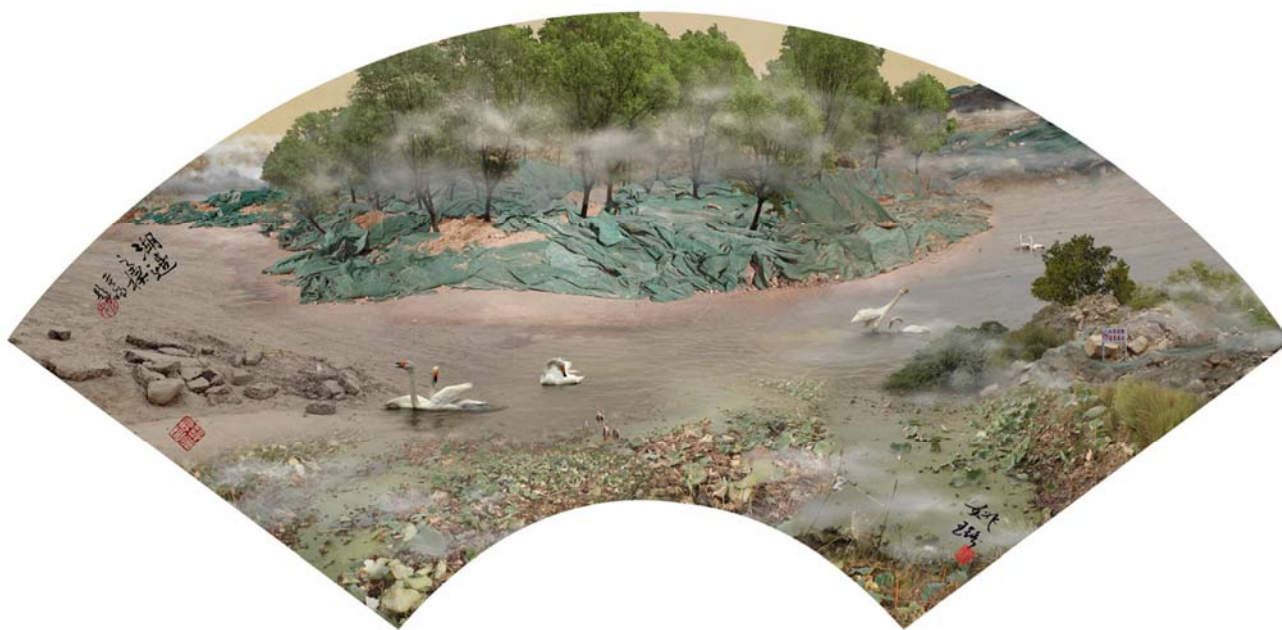


Fig. 5 Quacking amongst the Dewed Duckweed



Fig. 6 Details of *Quacking amongst the Dewed Duckweed*

Chinese society is undergoing rapid changes, with the creation of new things and the demise of old things occurring all around us regularly. It is a significant social background in contemporary China. The rapid progress of society has inevitably brought about many problems, among which the environmental crisis cannot be underestimated, as seen in Fig. 5. With the power of digital technology, Yao Lu appropriated the formal appearance of classical paintings in the Song Dynasty, allowing the traditional aesthetic style to be perpetuated in a new context and pushed into a new aesthetic form. He sees these common places, unremarkable but unique traces of China's development as aesthetic objects, finding new possibilities for their aesthetic expression. In this way, tradition and modernity break through the confines of time and space to produce an intelligent blend, full of spaces for imagination and reflection. As Kars comments, Lu becomes aware of the dangers of appropriation, and the contrast between the old and the new makes these seemingly ancient paintings exude a different light at present and reflects the photographer's thinking and viewpoints on culture, society and aesthetics [4]. As such, tradition and reality in Lu's works are cleverly integrated to create connections and contrasts.

Lu's appropriation has two dimensions. On the one hand, the appropriation of objective reality (Fig. 6), is the mutual appropriation of traditional Chinese painting styles and available image materials. Lu extracts and reclassifies different content of the photographic materials taken by the camera, imitating the color, composition and perspective relationships of classic paintings and other external forms, and simulates the original scenes in the picture with ready-made photographic materials, grafting and piecing them together, for example, replacing green vegetation with green dust clothes, simulating the texture of mountains and rocks with black dust cloth. On the other hand, appropriation lies in the photographer's subjective consciousness, using the external form of traditional paintings to wrap up the naked social and environmental status quo. Lu's appropriation activates the possibility of establishing a link between tradition and reality, displacing the natural landscape of the ancient literati paintings with the drab modern landscapes. Lu uses this image to tell the audience the truth: behind the glamour, there is always a grim reality, and to remind us that we must never forget the cost of enjoying the sweetness of development, vividly reflecting the cruel price behind development. In this way, Lu's appropriation not only perpetuates the aesthetic form of traditional Chinese painting in this day and age but also expands the deeper connotation and

value of green landscape, with thought-provoking and practical significance. Lu's appropriation is a way of activating tradition, recreating classics and deconstructing new ideas. His creation reflects a kind of compromise and helplessness, as he can only use this virtual way to forcefully continue the poetic and beautiful appearance of traditional landscapes. As Lu said, Photography can be understood in traditional ways: It can record many histories long before our own time, and it can take people back to times and situations many years ago. But photography also is very contemporary. It can re-assemble and re-edit the things that we see in order to produce illusions that people see when they are in front of such photographic works. In these works, you see images that are true and fictional [5]. Lu's work is therefore more like an elegy, a nostalgia and a remembrance of the beauty that has passed.

IV. CONCLUSION

Yao Lu, with his broad humanistic vision and unique visual sensitivity, transforms the green landscapes of traditional Chinese paintings into visual symbols, and uses photography to record the distinctive marks of the times, such as the green nets of construction sites and the ruins of walls, which are covered and exposed during the process of modernization of the city, and then cuts and extracts them into countless fragments of materials, which are then implanted into the context of traditional paintings by using the technological means of digital image media, opening up a new image language, nakedly inserting ugliness into the framework of beauty. In the context of traditional painting, the artist has opened up a brand-new image language, nakedly inserting ugliness into the framework of beauty, seemingly appropriating tradition, but drunkenness in the present, borrowing the traditional Chinese painting's oriental aesthetic coat to wrap up the saddening social reality, and drawing a piece of contemporary green landscape-style broken mountains and ruined water, presenting many familiar and unfamiliar visual wonders. The visual spectacle is both familiar and unfamiliar, reshaping the ethereal quality of classical painting and the idealistic sentiments of the literati, showing the conflicts and contradictions exposed in the process of China's changing times, and thus examining the enormous damage to the environment brought about by China's high-speed economic development and awakening the public's conscience about environmental issues. Through Yao Lu's artistic creation, we see a contemporary artist's sense of social responsibility to pay attention to reality and his artistic mission

to take care of the tradition.

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