

# BRUSH AND INK FOLLOWING THE TIMES: REACTIVATING CLASSICAL METHODOLOGIES IN CONTEMPORARY SHANSHUI\*

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## Abstract

This study reframes “brush and ink following the times” from material nostalgia to procedural literacy, proposing a portable grammar for contemporary shanshui (Chinese landscape painting). Drawing on classical treatises and Song–Yuan exemplars, it distills a 14-unit taxonomy-including distance architecture, value-first atmosphere, reserve and “white lines,” calligraphic bone-line, structural rhythm, and viewing paths. Each unit is paired with studio cues and contemporary translation slots.

Reactivation is operationalized through the ITC mechanism (Inheritance–Translation–Coexistence): inherit structural grammar, translate techniques via media-appropriate means, and test coexistence for landscape legibility and relevance today. A case study of Yang Yongliang’s Artificial Wonderland anchors the analysis. Findings show that urban micro-modules and photographic compositing can reconstruct composite distances. Grayscale control and haze re-enact ink hierarchy, while optical gaps reassign reserve. These strategies achieve recognizable shanshui without imitating historical surfaces.

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The study also proposes six guiding principles and twelve operations to make reactivation teachable. A THA instrument (Timeliness, Heritage, Aesthetic coherence; 1–5) is introduced for diagnostic review. Discussion situates the work within scholarship on the “three distances” as compositional routes, reframing modern change as functional reassignment rather than rupture. Pedagogical and curatorial implications emphasize grammar-first instruction and structural legibility in exhibition design. Overall, contemporary credibility depends less on traditional tools than on safeguarding distance logic, value scaffolds, active reserve, and choreographed gaze- procedures that speak to urbanization, technology, and ecological anxiety with a recognizably Chinese inflection.

**Keywords:** shanshui (Chinese landscape painting), brush-and-ink (bimo), Inheritance–Translation–Coexistence (ITC), distance composition, yijing (aesthetic ambience)

## Introduction

Chinese landscape painting (shanshui) draws its enduring vitality from the coupling of brush-and-ink (bimo) and yijing (aesthetic ambience). Classical treatises codified not only procedures-line, texture strokes, ink modulation-but also spatial grammars that choreograph how viewers move through pictorial worlds (Figure 1). Guo Xi’s “three distances” (gaoyuan, shenyuan, pingyuan) articulate a multi-perspectival logic that designs altitude, recession, and breadth, and they crystallize the long-standing Northern Song preference for the sublime “high-distance” view as a cultural–spatial ideal (Jia, 2015). Read this way, the “three distances” function less as a stylistic label than as an operative framework for composing space, rhythm, and mood.



**Figure 1** Travelers Among Mountains and Streams, Song dynasty (Source: <https://theme.npm.edu.tw/exh104/FanKuan/en/legacy.html>)

In the twenty-first century, shanshui faces a double bind. Formulaic quotation of “tradition” risks reducing methods to surface recipes; a breakaway pursuit of novelty can sever the literacies that let audiences read a work as shanshui at all. Scholarship documents a century of transformation-new schools, materials, and image economies-yet much of this mapping is articulated at the level of style labels and movements rather than operational grammar (Zhai, 2008). At the same time, contemporary practices increasingly migrate across media-photography, installation, algorithmic drawing and even into spatial and environmental design, where distance logics structure circulation and reserve calibrates sightlines. The field lacks a common, studio-ready vocabulary that can

both honor historical intelligibility and guide cross-media translation. As a result, pedagogy gravitates toward either antiquarian mimicry or medium-driven experimentation, while curation often defaults to “Oriental ambience” as a proxy for heritage.

This study argues for a grammar-first approach that relocates tradition from materials to procedures. It proposes an Inheritance–Translation–Coexistence (ITC) mechanism: inherit structural grammar (distance architecture, value scaffolds, reserve, calligraphic cadence), translate it through media-appropriate means, and test coexistence by asking whether the result remains legible as landscape while speaking in a present voice. Building on classical sources and Song–Yuan exemplars, the research distills a 14-unit taxonomy paired with studio cues and contemporary “translation slots,” then validates the mechanism through a single, close case from current practice. The contribution is twofold. Conceptually, it reframes modern change as functional reassignment rather than rupture, aligning with accounts of aesthetic development that emphasize continuity beneath surface shifts (Xing, Razak, & Noh, 2023) and conversing critically with periodizations that privilege stylistic breaks. Practically, it delivers teachable principles and operations plus a diagnostic THA instrument (Timeliness–Heritage–Aesthetic coherence) to support curricula, studio critique, and curatorial selection. By safeguarding distance logic, value-led atmosphere, active reserve, and a choreographed gaze, shanshui can address urbanization, technology, and ecological anxiety with a recognizably Chinese inflection—without imitating historical surfaces.

## Objectives

1. Identify reactivatable elements of classical shanshui methodology.
2. Explore pathways for translating these elements into contemporary contexts.

3. Develop a replicable system including the Six Principles, Twelve Operations, and THA instrument for evaluation.

## Literature Review

### 1. Historical–Cultural Foundations

Liu Bingxian (2007) sketches a macroscopic cultural history of shanshui, arguing that the genre is structurally “culture as ground, brush-and-ink as surface.” Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist thought codify ethical order, cosmology, and transcendence respectively, which sediment into choices of tool–material–format and narrative paradigms. This triad—concept, material, schema—functions as an origin map for reactivation: innovations that sever the cultural semantic field risk becoming merely stylistic.

Cao Shu and Kong Li (2014) frame shanshui within an interdisciplinary discourse, showing how “unity of Heaven and humanity” and “following the Dao of nature” translate into operational devices—three distances, strategic reserve, and ink modulation—while the “poetry–painting isomorphism” legitimizes the primacy of conception over procedure.

Liu Li (2021) codifies four features for pedagogy—line as structure, ink as spirit, reserve as breath, and the three distances as field—recasting “five tones of ink” and “color that does not hinder ink” as procedural standards rather than slogans, thus enabling quantifiable rubrics for creation and critique.

### 2. Evolution and Modern Transformations

Zhai Zhili (2008) argues that the genre’s evolution is an incremental enrichment of grammar: compositions migrate from single trajectories to composite “three distances,” texture-stroke lineages diversify with region and material, and literati aesthetics fuse yijing, personality, and brush-and-ink into a unified evaluative community—historical grounding for our forthcoming taxonomy.

Xue Yongnian (2007) periodizes the last century's turning points—from the Shanghai School to New Literati painting and modern-ink material experiments—concluding that beneath stylistic shifts lie methodological renegotiations of how tradition speaks to the present. Contemporary validity arises not from abandonment but from proactive restatement and recoding.

Jie, Zakaria, and Aziz (2024) apply shanshui principles to contemporary living environments: reserve calibrates sightlines, the three distances structure pedestrian flows, and brush-ink textures inform material palettes. Their framework models our pathways of format/media translation and viewer-path evaluation.

## Methodology

### 1. Research Design.

This study employs a qualitatively driven, multi-layered design to explore how classical shanshui grammar can be reactivated in contemporary contexts. The design integrates three stages: (1) text–image analysis of canonical treatises and Song–Yuan exemplars, (2) case-based examination of contemporary works, and (3) comparative evaluation through the ITC mechanism and THA instrument.

### 2. Sampling and Data Sources

Two layers of sources are defined. The tradition layer comprises ten canonical texts, including the Six Laws, Bifaji, and Linquan Gaozhi, alongside benchmark works from Northern and Southern Song painters such as Fan Kuan and Guo Xi, and Yuan literati exemplars. These texts and works were chosen based on three criteria: frequency of citation in art-historical scholarship, representativeness of distance and ink-value systems, and accessibility of reliable reproductions.

The contemporary layer includes artists whose projects explicitly engage with shanshui grammar through cross-media experimentation. Selection criteria

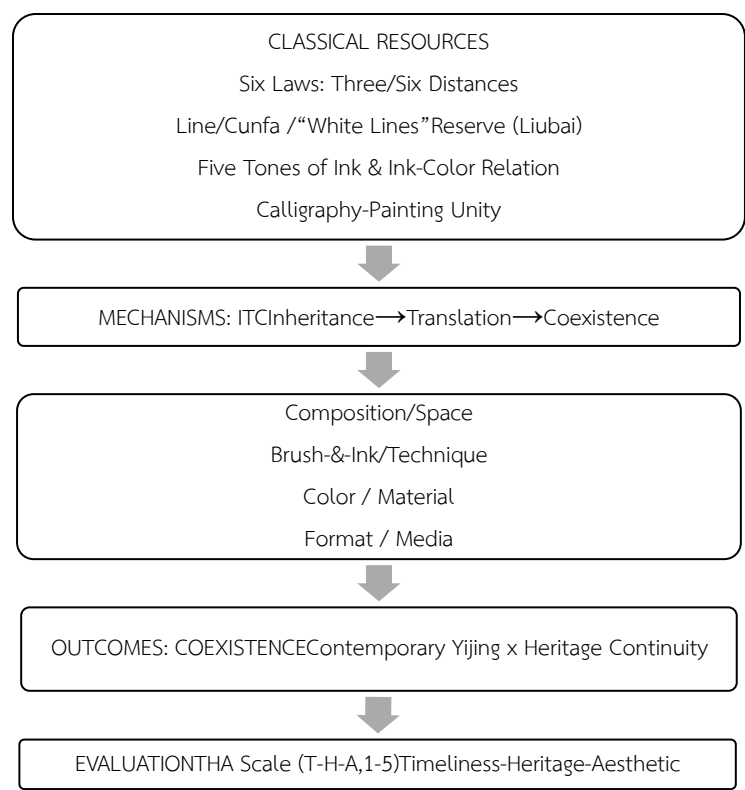
were (a) observable deployment of distance logic, reserve, or ink-value hierarchies; (b) active translation into non-traditional media such as photography, installation, or algorithmic drawing; and (c) recognition in exhibitions or academic literature. Yang Yongliang's Artificial Wonderland was analyzed in depth as an exemplar of digital translation

### 3. Coding and Analytic Procedure

Analysis proceeds with two-layer coding. On the form layer, the research code for composite deployment of the three distances, scattered-view path design, the cascade from line to texture to “white lines,” proportion of reserve, regulation of the five ink tones and the “color not hindering ink” principle, material/texture handling, and format translation. On the meaning layer, it will assess yijing coherence (rhythm, density–void balance, atmospheric continuity), thematic timeliness, and the legibility of heritage grammar. Evaluation uses the THA scale (1–5), which rates Timeliness (purposeful contemporaneity), Heritage (readable traditional syntax), and Aesthetic coherence (coupling of form and content). The workflow comprises source consolidation, a pilot codebook, dual independent coding with inter-rater agreement targeting Cohen's  $\kappa \geq 0.70$ , adjudication, and the production of one-page “causal cards” for each case, followed by a cross-case comparative matrix.

### 4. Conceptual Framework

The ITC framework operationalizes reactivation as a pipeline in which classical resources are identified, translated through four actionable pathways, and brought to coexist with contemporary expression without severing heritage continuity. Outcomes are judged by the THA instrument to ensure that innovation remains purposeful, tradition remains legible, and the overall aesthetic stays coherent. The framework can be summarized as follows (Figure 2):



**Figure 2** Conceptual Framework (Source: Constructed by the researcher)

**Results**

1. A Reactivable Taxonomy of Method

1.1 Rationale and scope

Synthesizing classical treatises and Song–Yuan exemplars, this research distill a 14-unit grammar that reliably generates legible shanshui across media. These units—line as bone, families of cunfa (texture strokes), dotting systems, reserve and “white lines,” five tones of ink, “color not hindering ink,” the three/six distances, scattered-view composition, calligraphy–painting unity, idea leading method, “make the near with the far,” structural rhythm, and viewing-path design—function as operational levers rather than decorative motifs. Framed this way, “brush and ink following the times” becomes a set of portable



procedures: ways to route space, scaffold value, pace breath, and let inscription co-author meaning.

### 1.2 Operability—definitions, cues, translation slots

Table 1 codifies each unit with (a) a classical definition, (b) a studio cue for application, and (c) a contemporary translation slot—i.e., where the unit can be redeployed today without losing heritage legibility.

**Table 1** Reactivable Shanshui Method Taxonomy

Component	Classical definition	Operational cue	Contemporary translation slot
Line as bone	Calligraphic contour and internal force	Stroke order; press–lift; tempo	Plotter/robotic vectors; CNC incisions retaining cadence
Texture strokes (cunfa)	Hemp-fiber, axe-cut, cow-hair for geology	Cascade line → texture; dry/wet contrasts	Algorithmic patterns; laser etch; shader graphs
Dotting	Raindrop/lichen for rhythm & ecological time	Density synced to depth/humidity	Particulate sprays; stochastic point fields; audio–visual grains
Reserve / “white lines”	Voids and hairline edges carry light/air	Design negative fields as active	Backlit diffusers; masked projection; glass/acrylic voids
Five tones of ink	Dry-light → rich-dark as atmospheric spine	Timed value stack; “weather” tests	Grayscale-first workflows; pigment–binder ratios; LUTs
Color not hindering ink	Chroma subordinate to value scaffold	Ink first, then limited saturation	Mineral grains; calibrated HSV overlays
Three/Six distances	High–deep–level (+ vast/maze/remote)	Braid altitude, recession, breadth	Multicam parallax; layered scrims; split-level scenography

Scattered-view	Multi-perspectival route over time	Stagger focal anchors; S-curve path	Panoramas; scroll-driven UIs; walk-through installs
Calligraphy-painting unity	Stroke grammar from script; co-inscription	Import script rhythm; weight inscriptions	Motion-captured writing; typographic light traces
Idea leading method	Yi governs fa (technique)	Declare theme; reject unserving effects	Curatorial brief driving technique; prompt discipline
Make the near with the far	Distant massing scales the near	Block horizon first; set silhouettes	Drone → ground edits; skyline → street translations
Structural rhythm	Dense/void, heavy/light, dry/wet pacing	Bar-by-bar rhythm across the scroll	Timeline rhythms; spatial pacing in exhibits
Viewing path	Ordered traversal (gate → axis → recess)	Foreground gate; diagonals/bridges	Way-finding nodes; XR navigation cues
Poetry-painting isomorphism	Image and poem co-produce meaning	Match stroke cadence to meter	On-screen verse triggers; audio-image coupling

Note. Cunfa = texture-stroke families; LUTs = lookup tables; HSV = hue-saturation-value; XR = extended reality.

## 2. Validating ITC: Inheritance – Translation – Coexistence

### 2.1 Composition/space: classical mountain, urban sublime

Yang Yongliang's Artificial Wonderland restages the Song landscape triad of distance within a contemporary city image. A dominant vertical mass establishes height; a serpentine middle ground articulates depth; lateral breadth opens into veiled margins that read as level expanse. The eye is routed rather than fixed, moving through far, mid, and near without a single vanishing point. Here, inheritance lies in the distance scaffold and dispersed viewpoint; translation

is achieved by substituting architectural micro-units—towers, cranes, highways—for rock and pine; coexistence emerges in a sustained double reading where metropolis and landscape remain simultaneously legible instead of collapsing into collage (Figure 3).



**Figure 3** Yang Yongliang, Artificial Wonderland (Source: [https://shop.artron.net/w\\_work\\_detial.php?ArtWorkId=6270](https://shop.artron.net/w_work_detial.php?ArtWorkId=6270))

## 2.2 Technique/material: matter as method

The series reassigns the functions of brush and paper to lens and compositor while keeping the hierarchy of values in command. Grayscale control precedes chroma, with haze and atmospheric falloff staged as value operations. Repeated yet varied urban modules take on the role of texture strokes, while particulate lights and signage supply a modern counterpart to dotting. Reserves and hairline separations allow light to perform what withheld ink once did. Inheritance resides in ink-first discipline, stroke-like modularity, and active voids; translation appears as a photographic and digital pipeline that preserves breath and route; coexistence is secured when the surface reads as city from close range but resolves into mountain weather at a distance.

## 2.3 Format/media: from ink on paper to light through matter

Across large panoramic prints and time-based works, Artificial Wonderland preserves scroll logic as journey rather than tableau. Gates in the near field,

diagonal spans, and recesses cued by aerial diffusion engineer the viewer's path; micro-detail invites slow reading, then releases the gaze to distant silhouettes. Format and medium evolve, yet the governing grammar—distance architecture, value-first atmosphere, and the choreography of void and mass—remains intact, allowing inheritance, translation, and coexistence to operate within a single, contemporary platform.

### 3. From Principles to Instrument: Making Reactivation Teachable and Reviewable

#### 3.1 Six principles

The practice condenses into six mutually supporting principles: idea commands method—theme precedes and governs technique; calligraphy governs image—stroke discipline inhabits contour and texture; make the near with the far—fix far silhouettes and value bands before local detail; ink before color—build the value scaffold first and admit chroma sparingly; know white, keep black—reserve and white-line carry light and breath; variation within measure—innovation remains tethered to structure rather than effect.

#### 3.2 Twelve operations

Compose the three distances in composite and convert scroll unfolding into a route the eye or body can traverse. Stage white-line highlights to let light articulate edges. Couple cunfa with dotting—secure macro planes before seeding micro-time. Alternate dry and wet passages to pump atmosphere, and keep mineral-plus-ink layering faithful to value. Use bone-line segmentation to lay ridges, banks, and eaves as structural spines before “skin.” Design scattered-view paths that begin with a gate, then steer diagonals through bridges and recesses. Translate scroll to installation by replacing paper joints with spatial nodes so walking time equals unfolding time. Anchor themes—urban, technological, ecological—to present contexts. Align image and text so inscriptional cadence corroborates stroke rhythm. Test viewer paths and adjust density and contrast until the pulse runs clean.

### 3.3 THA evaluation: making reactivation reviewable

A three-dimensional THA scale is introduced to balance Timeliness, Heritage, and Aesthetic coherence, each rated from 1 (weak) to 5 (exemplary). The instrument is diagnostic rather than bureaucratic. When Timeliness outpaces Heritage, reintroduce a governing unit such as distance scaffold or reserve logic. When Heritage is strong but Timeliness weak, reassess the fit between theme and medium. When Aesthetic coherence falters, repair rhythm and route—dense versus void, dry versus wet, near versus far—until the work breathes as one.

**Table 2** THA Evaluation Scale (1–5) and Checkpoints

Dimension	1 (weak)	3 (adequate)	5 (exemplary)	Observable checkpoints
T – Timeliness	Surface-level trend; novelty-for-novelty	Theme/media plausibly contemporary	Concept, media, and social/tech locus mutually reinforce	Clear present-day locus; media appropriateness; purpose beyond effect
H – Heritage	“Oriental ambience,” grammar illegible	Recognizable units present (distances, reserve, ink hierarchy)	Units not only present but govern structure	Readable three/six distances; ink-before-color; calligraphic line presence; reserve/light designed
A – Aesthetic	Fragmented, effect-driven	Basic coherence; uneven transitions	Seamless rhythm of dense/void, dry/wet, near/far; moving <i>yijing</i>	Rhythm score (e.g., 3-2-3 bars); breath continuity; focal hierarchy; route clarity

## Discussion

### 1. Structural persistence and a present voice

The analysis indicates that what endures in shanshui is less the historical toolbox than a set of transferable logics: the architecture of distances, value-led atmosphere, reserve as light, calligraphic cadence in line and texture, and an engineered viewing path. When these units govern decision-making, contemporary workflows—photography and compositing as in Artificial Wonderland, installation, or algorithmic drawing—can host recognizably shanshui experiences without mimicking antique surfaces. This relocates “authenticity” from tool nostalgia to structural clarity and supports the article’s central claim: reactivation succeeds when *yi* leads *fa*, value leads color, white leads light, and path leads picture. The single-case validation shows that a Song-style triad of distance can be rebuilt from urban micro-units; that ink hierarchy can be reenacted through grayscale control and atmospheric falloff; and that reserve can be reassigned to optical gaps and hairline separations—thus achieving inheritance, translation, and coexistence within one contemporary platform. These observations also function as the conclusion: a living grammar, not specific implements, is what allows brush and ink to “follow the times.”

### 2. Convergences and tensions with existing scholarship

This grammar-first account converges with studies that root shanshui space in culturally sedimented “high/deep/level” orientations. Treating *gaoyuan*, *shenyuan*, and *pingyuan* as compositional routes rather than mere labels aligns with arguments that “high” is an aesthetic stance structuring how the eye travels and how the image breathes (Jia, 2015). Tensions appear with narratives that frame the last century primarily as stylistic rupture—new schools, media, palettes—where change is plotted at the level of look and label. The present argument suggests fewer hard breaks and more functional reassignment: historical roles such as *cunfa*, dotting, and reserve migrate to new carriers

(modules, pixels, light) while the underlying spatial and atmospheric logic persists. This does not negate “a century of changes,” but reframes it: surface vocabularies indeed shift, yet deep procedure often remains continuous even when it is not named as such.

### 3. Practical implications and limits

For pedagogy, a grammar-first scaffold moves practice beyond style mimicry. Teaching distance composition, value scaffolding, reserve design, and stroke cadence before medium-specific effects equips students to translate method across paper, lens, and screen. For curation and commissioning, a concise THA rubric—Timeliness, Heritage, Aesthetic coherence—helps articulate why a work feels both contemporary and classically legible, and where it fails when spectacle overwhelms breath or when “Oriental ambience” replaces structural heritage. Limitations remain: the framework privileges practices that value route, rhythm, and atmosphere over blunt graphic impact or concept-first provocation; blue-and-green monumental decorativeness and micro-scale literati modes may require tailored checkpoints; and any THA scoring depends on trained judgment, making inter-rater calibration essential. Even so, the overall conclusion holds: continuity lives in procedures that can be named, taught, translated, and reviewed, allowing shanshui to speak credibly about cities, technology, and ecological anxiety without forfeiting its cultural cadence.

## Recommendations

### 1. General recommendations

Adopt grammar-first curricula: Prioritize distance architecture, value scaffolding, reserve design, and calligraphic stroke cadence before medium-specific effects; use the six principles and twelve operations as critique criteria.

Curate for structural legibility: Hang and light works to reveal route, breath, and reserve; foreground how far-field silhouettes govern near-field

incident and how value structures anchor chroma; apply THA as a diagnostic, not a gatekeeping score.

#### B. Further research recommendations

Extend the test-bed across media: Trial the ITC mechanism and THA rubric on XR scrolls, robotic-plotter murals, light-and-mist environments, and data-driven “landscapes,” documenting where grammar holds and where amendments are needed.

Empirical validation of yijing: Pair expert THA ratings with eye-tracking and dwell-time studies to correlate route clarity, dense-void rhythm, and reserve usage with audience reports of yijing; develop inter-rater calibration protocols to raise reliability across institutions.

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