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A Study on the Spatial Schema of Contemporary Chinese Landscape Painting

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Abstract:
Inheriting the traditional spirit of brush and ink, contemporary Chinese landscape painting exhibits a trend of diversified exploration in spatial schema. This paper starts from the spatial composition of traditional landscape painting and focuses on works featured in the National Art Exhibition as its primary research objects. It analyzes how contemporary artists navigate between inheritance and innovation in their spatial schema practices. Through the evolution of schema language, transformation of compositional methods, and the intervention of cultural consciousness, the study reveals how contemporary landscape painting constructs spatial narratives within new contexts, reflecting contemporary social spirit and aesthetic demands. The research concludes that spatial schema is not only a manifestation of formal innovation but also a crucial medium for conceptual renewal and cultural reconstruction.

Keywords:
Chinese Landscape Painting, *Spatial Schema, Schema Language*, *Cultural Translation*

1.Introduction

Traditional Chinese landscape painting often employs “scattered perspective” to construct its distinctive spatial schema. Instead of relying on a single viewpoint, the artist’s gaze roams freely in all directions-up, down, left, and right-shifting with the scene and emotions, thereby creating a spatial atmosphere of “a thousand miles in a single view.” This compositional approach contrasts sharply with the Western geometric perspective, which is based on focal points and vanishing lines. Chinese painting does not aim for accurate three-dimensional representation; rather, it seeks to evoke a poetic space imbued with temporality and emotion, emphasizing the subjective grasp of nature’s rhythm and the spontaneous generation of aesthetic imagery. This spatial concept is deeply rooted in traditional Chinese philosophy and cultural values. Confucian humanism, Daoist harmony with nature, and the Buddhist pursuit of transcendence collectively form the spiritual foundation of landscape painters. Their spatial consciousness emerges not only from artistic practice but also resonates with the classical poetic and literary mode of thought—image, idea, and realm—thus establishing an Eastern spatial aesthetic that creates realms from the heart and conveys meaning beyond form [1].

With the introduction of Western artistic concepts and the dramatic transformation of China’s social structure, Chinese landscape painting has increasingly exhibited tendencies toward modern expression. Its spatial schema has also evolved, extending into diverse compositional logics and forming a visual language embed-

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ded in a multicultural context. This paper systematically explores the evolutionary trajectory and cultural significance of spatial schemas in contemporary Chinese landscape painting through theoretical reviews of representative spatial features across different historical periods and in-depth case analyses.

2. The Historical Accumulation of Spatial Schemas in Traditional Landscape Painting

2.1 The "Three Perspectives" Spatial Schema

Traditional Chinese landscape painting constructs its spatial schema using the principles of gaoyuan (lofty distance), shenyuan (deep distance), and pingyuan (level distance), forming a distinct visual logic that contrasts with Western focal-point perspective. According to traditional definitions, gaoyuan refers to viewing a mountain's peak from its base (looking upward); shenyuan involves peering behind a mountain from its front (looking downward into depth); and pingyuan describes observing distant mountains from near ones (looking across).The three perspectives correspond respectively to upward, downward, and horizontal viewpoints—serving not only as methods of observing nature, but also as aesthetically meaningful compositional strategies. Gaoyuan reveals the abrupt and towering presence of peaks, imbuing the image with a sense of sublimity and vertical grandeur; shenyuan employs depth-extending compositions to articulate spatial rhythm and layered structure; pingyuan depicts vast, remote landscapes, cultivating an atmosphere of quietude and ethereal distance.Guo Xi emphasized that the "Three Perspectives" method underscores the interplay between tonal quality and spatial structure, further enriching the aesthetic expression of space. The spatial world created through this method is not a fixed, realistic reconstruction from a single viewpoint, but rather a poetic construct shaped by the painter's subjective "mental image" (xin xiang). The artist freely orchestrates visual elements through a shifting gaze, dynamically unfolding the composition. This mode of spatial construction highlights the qualities of "walkability" (ke you), "habitability" (ke ju), and "viewability" (ke wang), challenging the geometric rationality foundational to Western perspective. In doing so, it constructs a poetic artistic spatial schema that is fluid, flexible, and multidimensional. [2]

2.2 The "Void and Solid" Spatial Schema

In the spatial composition of Chinese landscape painting, the concept of mutual generation of void and solid (xu shi xiang sheng) is not merely a representational technique, but a structural foundation of spatial schema imbued with Eastern aesthetic qualities. Through the visual interplay of void and solid elements and the psychological rhythm of tension and relaxation, the "Void and Solid" spatial schema achieves an organic organization of space and a profound conveyance of artistic conception (yi jing)."Void and solid" refer not only to the presence and absence of form, but also embody a dynamic philosophical transformation. In Chinese landscape painting, the "solid" is composed of ink marks and brushstrokes—tangible, recognizable, and depictable forms—while the "void" appears as blank spaces, light washes, and open compositions—intangible yet perceivable atmospheres. Void is not emptiness, and solid is not mere filling. Within the painting, void and solid coexist and co-construct, forming an internal mechanism for the generation of imagery and the extension of spatial depth. The "Void and Solid" spatial schema establishes a visual order through the interdependence and mutual transformation of ink and white space, form and formlessness, brushwork and

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emptiness. On a two-dimensional plane, it constructs a sense of three-dimensional space layered with depth and infused with fluid energy (qi yun). In this compositional system, the “solid” typically serves as the structural anchor and visual focal point, providing tangible form and narrative grounding. The “void,” on the other hand, becomes a dimension of spatial release—often realized through swirling mists, untouched water surfaces, or empty mountain valleys—guiding the viewer’s gaze in motion, evoking immersion, and stimulating a sense of expansion and poetic imagination. The fundamental feature of this spatial schema lies in its elasticity and non-linearity of spatial generation. It does not rely on focal-point perspective or geometric rationality. Instead, it constructs a perceptual space through the rhythm of brush and ink, the structural function of blankness, and the fluidity of overall composition—fusing qishi (momentum), and yun (resonance). This space is not a reproduction of the objective world, but an externalization of subjective spirit—a representational paradigm where image arises from the heart. [3]

2.3 The "Liubai" (Reserved Blankness) Spatial Schema

As a crucial compositional strategy in Chinese landscape painting, liubai (“reserved blankness”) is not merely a visual emptiness, but a spatial schema rich in Eastern cultural connotation. Through the dynamic interplay of emptiness (xu) and presence (shi), it constructs a “spiritual space” that fuses aesthetics, philosophy, and poetic conception. Liubai refers to the intentional reservation of areas on the painting surface without any ink, lines, or color. These blank spaces are not voids of meaning, but visual expressions charged with tension and imagination [4]. As the ancients said, “Blankness is also painting,” underscoring the equal significance of blank and filled areas in spatial composition. Blankness not only participates in shaping form, but also carries emotional and intellectual weight—an affirmation of the liubai spatial schema. The construction of this schema is not simply a visual act but a philosophical practice. It is the visual embodiment of the Chinese cosmological view of the unity between heaven and humanity (tian ren he yi) and reflects Daoist principles such as “being arises from non-being” and “non-being encompasses all being.” By intentionally leaving areas unmarked, the artist creates a space that is visible yet undefined—one that invites the viewer into realms of imaginative association and internal visualization beyond the painted forms. More importantly, the liubai spatial schema transcends naturalistic depiction and turns toward the construction of subjective spiritual space. It guides the viewer from the concrete image into realms of abstraction, initiating a journey of the spirit through the act of looking. This type of spatial schema often interacts with the integrated cultural structure of poetry, calligraphy, painting, and seal carving (shi shu hua yin), forming a multi-layered cultural code that fuses imagery, language, and temporal narrative.

3. The Main Characteristics of Spatial Schemas in Contemporary Landscape Painting

With the continuous evolution of temporal context, visual media, and cultural consciousness, the spatial schemas of contemporary Chinese landscape painting have demonstrated multi-dimensional innovations grounded in tradition. This transformation in schema is not merely a shift in visual form; more profoundly, it reflects artists’ reconfiguration of spatial concepts, reexamination of cultural identity, and the contemporary articulation of artistic language.

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3.1 Pluralistic Perspectives and Structural Reconstruction

The traditional spatial perspectives of Chinese landscape painting—gaoyuan (looking up toward mountain peaks), shenyuan (peering behind mountains), and pingyuan (gazing across open plains)—laid the foundation for the aesthetics of Eastern spatial perception. These perspectives emphasize an idealized space for roaming the gaze and dwelling in the mind, a space that is both livable and traversable [5]. While contemporary artists still draw from these classical principles, they no longer treat them as absolute doctrines. Instead, they actively incorporate visual experiences shaped by modern life and technological advancement. For instance, aerial views—derived from drone or satellite imagery—offer a panoramic, top-down perspective, emphasizing the texture of terrain and the structure of urban landscapes. This often evokes a detached, god-like viewpoint, reinforcing spatial geometry and a sense of order. Microscopic or magnified views enlarge details such as rocks, trees, and water ripples, sometimes even distorting them, to highlight texture, vitality, or internal structure. This invites the viewer into a miniature, navigable world, offering an unusual spatial scale experience. Lateral and cinematic perspectives borrow techniques from film—such as zooming, panning, and tracking—creating dynamic, sequential, or fragmented spatial narratives. These techniques guide the viewer's gaze to wander through the painting, emphasizing movement, temporality, and narrative structure.Psychological perspectives no longer aim to replicate objective, physical space; rather, space becomes a projection of the artist's inner world. The resulting visual schemas may be distorted, transformed, or surreal, serving as vehicles for emotional expression or conceptual interpretation.

In contemporary landscape painting, the integration and transformation of focal-point and scattered perspectives have become a key trajectory in the evolution of spatial schema. On the one hand, artists draw upon Western linear perspective to enhance the volume and depth of specific visual elements; on the other hand, they retain the fluid and dynamic qualities of traditional scattered perspective, creating a juxtaposition of classical and modern visual logics. This hybridized perspectival strategy allows the composition to preserve a sense of meandering spatial exploration while achieving greater spatial depth and visual impact. At the same time, some works adopt multi-focal perspective techniques, juxtaposing multiple vanishing points or perspective systems within a single composition. This results in complex, multilayered, and at times contradictory spatial schemas that respond to the plurality and uncertainty of contemporary society. In more conceptually oriented practices, artists deliberately employ reverse perspective techniques—such as depicting distant objects as larger than those nearby or compressing spatial depth to an extreme—thus intentionally violating geometric norms. These strategies enhance the flatness, decorative character, or psychological tension of the image, constructing spatial configurations charged with emotional resonance and subjective logic.

3.2 Flattening, Abstraction, and Collage Reconstruction

In contemporary Chinese landscape painting, spatial schemas are increasingly tending toward visual languages characterized by collage, fragmentation, and an installation-like aesthetic. Artists construct complex spatial frameworks interwoven with multiple temporal and spatial dimensions through techniques such as layering, recomposition, and deformation. Among these tendencies, the flattening and abstraction of spatial schemas are particularly notable. Some artists consciously weaken or even dissolve the sense of depth and three-dimensional illusion traditionally pursued in landscape painting. Instead, they reconstruct spatial logic through visual layering and planar composition. Flattening manifests in the emphasis on contour lines, flat

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color application, and compressed spatial depth, placing all visual elements on the same pictorial plane. The imagery of landscapes shifts from representational realism to image assemblage. Abstraction goes further by reducing landscape elements to lines, ink patches, color blocks, or visual symbols. It no longer relies on the naturalistic representation of space but instead uses landscape forms to express emotion, concept, or pure formal aesthetics. This renders spatial perception ambiguous and indeterminate, evolving into a visual schema driven purely by brushwork and compositional dynamics. Moreover, influenced by modern urban life, fragmented information, and postmodern thought, some contemporary landscape paintings display spatial characteristics of discontinuity and non-integrality. These works give rise to fragmented, collage-reconstructed spatial schemas that break away from traditional coherence, reflecting the complexities of contemporary experience.

3.3 Subjective Emotion and Mental Imagery Space

The mental imagery spatial schema is a key mode of expression in contemporary landscape painting, marking a shift from external natural space to the internal realm of spirit and psyche. At its core lies the visual manifestation of mental imagery (xin xiang), embodying the artist's subjective consciousness, personal experiences, and latent emotions. This schema typically features the following characteristics.1) Emotional Morphology: In the space of mental imagery, natural elements are often imbued with strong subjectivity. The contours of mountains, gestures of trees, and flow of water no longer follow natural laws but instead deform or exaggerate according to the artist's emotional state. Colors may deviate from realism to heighten sensory impact and psychological tension. This schema emphasizes emotional release and symbolic condensation, moving beyond descriptive naturalism toward expressive emotionality. 2)Subconscious and Dreamlike Imagery: The spatial logic often displays irrational or surreal qualities, such as nonlinear compositions and abrupt juxtapositions reminiscent of dreams. These reflect the artist's subconscious anxieties, desires, or fantasies. Boundaries between reality and fiction, memory and imagination are frequently blurred, generating a psychological space-time landscape.3) Visual Reconstruction of Memory and Experience: Artists often integrate personal life experiences, childhood memories, or cultural recollections into landscape compositions, creating autobiographical mental imagery spaces. These schemas move away from generalized cultural motifs to focus on individual perspectives, transforming landscape painting into a visual diary interwoven with emotion and memory.4) Conceptual Spatial Insertion: The construction of space in contemporary landscape painting increasingly incorporates conceptual reflection. Space is no longer merely a medium for expressing the beauty of nature but becomes a vehicle for critical discourse. For instance, artists may juxtapose industrial ruins with natural scenery to expose ecological damage caused by modernization; depict compressed natural margins in expanding cities to question the power dynamics between humans and nature; or deconstruct, appropriate, and reconstruct classical landscape formats to reflect on cultural identity and traditional authority. In this context, space becomes a symbolic system, its meaning far exceeding visual appearance.

4. The Cultural Implications of Spatial Schemas in Contemporary Landscape Painting

4.1 The Spirit of the Times Amid Social Transformation

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The evolution of spatial schemas in contemporary landscape painting is not merely a visual innovation, but also a concentrated reflection of shifting social structures and transformations in the spirit of the times. With the rapid development of urbanization, industrialization, and informatization, artists' spatial consciousness has expanded—from the traditional ideal of nature as a space for dwelling and wandering, to a lens through which to observe contemporary realities and mental states. Visual elements such as towering skyscrapers, fragmented natural environments, "urban landscapes," industrial ruins, and ecological ruptures have emerged in paintings, reflecting the disjunctions and reconstructions of social reality. At the same time, spatial structures characterized by fragmentation, collage, and discontinuity metaphorically express the existential condition of modern individuals living under fast-paced, high-pressure, and information-saturated circumstances. The tranquility and transcendence once embodied by traditional landscape painting are increasingly replaced by the conflicted and complex realities of the present-day world.

Contemporary artists have not abandoned traditional composition or brush-and-ink language; rather, they reinterpret and reconstruct traditional cultural symbols, endowing them with new conceptual significance. In this process, the landscape schema becomes a medium for expressing cultural identity, emotional experience, and social critique. Space no longer serves solely as a vehicle for natural depiction, but instead carries layers of conceptual projection, psychological reflection, and cultural interrogation. On the material and media level, artists experiment with digital imagery, texture rubbings, paper-based installations, and other methods to transcend the two-dimensional limitations of ink and paper. These explorations extend the spatial schema toward installation-based, interactive, and hybrid forms. Such media experimentation enhances the immersive quality and contemporaneity of landscape painting, while also reshaping the relationship between image and viewer. Moreover, the spatial schemas of contemporary landscape painting reflect a dual response to popular aesthetics and global cultural contexts. Artists adjust compositional formats and color structures according to the thematic needs of their work, aligning with modern aesthetic sensibilities and contemporary lifestyles. The increasing abstraction, conceptualization, and installation-oriented tendencies within landscape schemas also signify Chinese artists' engagement with the international discourse of contemporary art—advancing the transformation of Chinese landscape painting from a localized cultural expression toward a trans-cultural presence within the global visual system.

4.2 The Subjective Expression of Individual Spirit

The spatial schemas of contemporary Chinese landscape painting have shifted from traditional representations of nature to internal expressions of individual spirit. Against the backdrop of dramatic social transformation and the reconstruction of cultural identity, artists increasingly focus on the presentation of personal experience, psychological perception, and inner imagery. Landscape space has gradually evolved into a symbolic field of psychological and spiritual resonance. Structural fragmentation, expanded blankness, shifted perspectives, and visual distortions within the composition no longer serve merely as formal devices. Instead, they become crucial visual languages for expressing anxiety, loneliness, emotional conflict, and struggles with identity. These transformations in spatial schema not only reveal the complexity of the contemporary individual's inner world, but also reflect the awakening of artistic subjectivity and personal consciousness.

Conceptually, contemporary landscape painting has moved beyond traditional aesthetic norms, shifting toward the construction of mental imagery and the expression of individuality. The artist is no longer a mere

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"spokesperson" for nature, but instead positions personal emotions, memories, dreams, and subconscious impulses at the core of spatial composition. Landscape painting thus becomes an extension of the artist's inner world—a poetic response to life experiences and the social environment. This shift has led to increasing diversity and de-standardization in spatial schemas, such as fragmentation, collage, and multi-perspective compositions. These are not only updates in visual language, but also reflect deeper artistic inquiries into "how to see the world" and "how to construct reality," challenging conventional models of visual cognition. At the same time, contemporary landscape painting retains its cultural function and spiritual orientation. As an art form of emotional expression, it continues to offer therapeutic and philosophical value in modern society. Amid urban noise and information overload, landscape painting provides a tranquil psychological refuge, allowing viewers to experience inner peace and emotional regulation through the act of viewing. Through brushwork and compositional design, artists embed reflections on life, nature, and culture, endowing their work not only with aesthetic value, but also with emotional warmth and cultural depth.

4.3 The Contemporary Translation of Cultural Heritage

In the context of globalization, the spatial schemas of contemporary Chinese landscape painting serve not only as modes of artistic expression but also as vital mediums for cultural dialogue and identity construction. Through visual translation, schematic hybridity, and cultural embedding, artists develop a visual language system that integrates an "Eastern perspective" with contemporary modes of expression—responding to global cultural discourses surrounding the question of "Chineseness."

The spatial schemas of contemporary landscape painting evolve through transformation within tradition. On one hand, traditional aesthetic principles such as vitality and rhythm (qi yun sheng dong) and the construction of artistic conception (yi jing) continue to be upheld by many artists, forming a core foundation for spatial composition. On the other hand, in terms of expressive techniques, artists often deconstruct and reorganize traditional schemas while incorporating Western compositional logic and media technologies—thereby expanding the expressive potential of landscape painting. These formal breakthroughs represent a conscious exploration of how to inherit, adapt, and reconstruct national cultural heritage, grounded in an identification with traditional cultural spirit. At the same time, they reflect the anxieties and uncertainties faced by Chinese artists in the globalized context when negotiating the tension between cultural inheritance and innovation.

The transformation of spatial schemas in landscape painting also profoundly embodies a self-reflective inquiry into cultural identity. Contemporary artists incorporate elements such as urban landscapes, industrial symbols, and abstract visual language into their compositions, thereby breaking the purity of traditional natural scenery and constructing a hybrid and intersecting cultural space. This space is not merely a visual construct, but also a symbolic field for cultural identification—raising fundamental questions such as: What is contemporary Chinese landscape painting? and How does traditional Chinese culture exist today? Through continuous reflection on, transformation of, and reinvention of tradition, artists reshape landscape painting into a vital means for exploring cultural roots and cultivating national confidence within a modern context.

5.conclusion

The spatial schema of Chinese landscape painting is not a mechanical reproduction of physical reality, but

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an internal spiritual structure that fuses natural and psychological space—an externalization of the artist's subjective consciousness. Its compositional method transcends the constraints of focal-point perspective and linear space, employing techniques such as wandering between spirit and object, temporal-spatial compression, and the construction of imagery to form a spatial expression imbued with Eastern philosophical thought and poetic logic. This "non-geometric" structural schema is deeply rooted in the Chinese cultural view of space, characterized by the principles of the unity of heaven and humanity and expressing spirit through form. It resonates more profoundly with the Chinese emotional projection onto nature and aesthetic sensibility.

Future research on the spatial schemas of Chinese landscape painting should place greater emphasis on its cross-media, cross-cultural, and interdisciplinary integrative capacities. In the context of continuously evolving technological environments, a key challenge will be how to preserve the humanistic warmth of observing nature and extracting imagery and the temporal-spatial philosophy of Eastern aesthetics amid the incorporation of new media such as algorithms, video, and installation art.Through its multidimensional schematic innovations, contemporary landscape painting not only responds to the dual transformation of social structure and individual consciousness, but also actively participates in global cultural dialogue with its unique visual system—demonstrating the vitality and cultural confidence of Eastern art in the contemporary world.

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