

CASE 09: LANDSCAPE

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Today we will continue our discussion of the theme: how Chinese painting visualizes the subjectivity or voice effect. Our focus today is on landscape painting, one of the most exalted forms of Chinese art. We have partially dealt with the subject in our previous session as a backdrop to the bird-and-flower painting. Today we are going to take it on its own terms. It is impossible to cover its millennium-long history in a short span of time. We could, however, do more with less. A 17th century scroll at the Harvard Art Museums serves our purpose well, as it was created for teaching purpose (Fig 1).



Figure 1. Gong Xian, *Landscape*, 1660s, Qing dynasty. Handscroll, ink on paper. Harvard Art Museums.

Chinese paintings come in some basic formats: murals, screens, handscrolls, hanging scrolls, album leaves, and fans. What we have here is a handscroll, unfurled from the right to left. It was painted by Gong Xian (1618-1689), a celebrated painter based in Nanjing, in the Yangzi River region. The scroll is one of the rare surviving works that a premodern Chinese artist used to demonstrate to his students the range of landscape forms. We are fortunate to have it in our own collection.

Here Gong set forth different landscape modes and techniques, referencing time-honored models. We thus have a history of Chinese landscape painting telescoped into one scroll. More significantly for our purpose, much as Gong recapitulates established models and acknowledges the standard art historical narrative prevalent in his times, he takes his own stand. The 17th century was a heady time when critical contentions on art peaked. Art was forcefully historicized and packaged in a way it had never been. Our present-day narrative of Chinese art still bears the indelible imprint of the seventeenth century thinking, warts and all.

A main feature of the 17th century narrative of art is binary opposition. Paintings of the previous ages were divided into opposing camps with distinct cultural values. The division is devised in a number of ways. It could be based on geographic mapping, such as Northern vs. Southern Schools, only that the geography is not to be taken too seriously. It could be based on social hierarchies, such as the plodding craft-obsessed professionals vs. intellectually inspired literati. Or it could be based value-laden formal techniques, such as angularity vs. curvilinearity, “axe-cut” vs. fibrous texturing, drawing-centric vs. wash-centric ink modes, and so on. No matter how one slices the pie, the larger thrust of the aesthetic is an exaltation of idea over over-wrought artistry, and understated ease and restraint over stridency and showmanship.



Figure 2. Fan Kuan, *Travelers among Mountains and Streams*, 10-11th c, Song dynasty. Hanging scroll, ink on silk, 206.3×103.3cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.



Figure 3. Ni Zan, *The Rongxi Studio*, 1372, Yuan dynasty. Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 74.7×35.5cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

For our purpose, two binary oppositions are particularly relevant. The first is the Song-vs.-Yuan opposition (Fig. 2 and 3). By way of heavy-handed reductionism, seventeenth century critics created a schematic opposition between the Song and Yuan period styles. Note that the two dynastic names here are no more than stylistic labels rather than designation of real historical periods. The Song mode is associated with methodic academicism, monumental landscapes, ax-cut texturing, verisimilitude, etc. The Yuan mode is linked to evocative sketchiness and the fibrous brushwork-obsessed formalism. Even though the canonical Yuan masters present different stylistic profiles, the 17th century elitist taste ultimately settled on the formal quality of one Yuan master. To the seventeenth century critics, Ni Zan (1301-1374) was the paragon or canonical standard-bearer of the literati aesthetic. A typical, or rather, stereotypical Ni Zan landscape, as the seventeenth century imagination would have it, is one of sparse, barren, and pale composition. It embodies the aesthetic ideal of chastened purity, austerity, and spiritual autonomy. A passage in the middle of our scroll epitomizes the stereotypical Ni-style landscape prevalent in the 17th century (Fig. 3 and 4).



Figure 4. Detail of Gong Xian, *Landscape* (Fig. 1)



Ni Zan, *The Rongxi Studio*, 1372 (Fig. 3).



Figure 5. Detail of Gong Xian, *Landscape* (Fig. 1)



Figure 6. Detail of Gong Xian, *Landscape* (Fig. 1)

With that in mind, we can see how Gong deals with the dominant aesthetic standard of his time. Compare this Ni-style landscape curious passage at the beginning section of the scroll (Fig. 5 and 6). A massive cliff looms over a grove on a ridge. Both rock formations are flattened to press against the picture plane. Forceful and jerky texturing and stippling brushstrokes overrun the cliff face, imbuing it with substance, solidity and weight. For any educated viewer versed in the history of Chinese art, one would hardly associate this muscular and roughen quality with the Ni model. Yet, it is precisely this unlikely association that Gong imposes on us. His inscription states: “this work is a cross between Ni [Zan] and Wang [Meng]” 此作在倪王之間. Leave the Wang part aside for now, he insists that the Ni element is there when we hardly see one, except perhaps the composition Ni repeatedly uses: a cluster of tree in the foreground and some distant hill in the background. For a painter deeply steeped in history of painting, Gong certainly knows what a standard Ni-style landscape looks like: pale, sparse, and ethereal. Why would he fly in the face of common knowledge, insisting on *his* improbable version of Ni with its decidedly un-Ni or anti-Ni overtones: heavy, somber, and massive?





Figure 7. 'White Gong' and 'Dark Gong'

If we take a broad view of the stylistic trajectory over Gong's career, we find a striking turn in the 1660s (Fig. 7). Up to 1658 or so, his paintings belong to a phase of so-called "white Gong," i.e., he was a close follower of the standard Ni model like everyone else. Ten years later, around 1668 or so, he switched gear and started a phase of the "Dark Gong." Subsequently, he never looked back, staying "Dark Gong" to the end of his life. In other words, the Ni-style landscape no longer spoke to him. What may have caused this darkening of tone?

1660s were the hard years for Chinese elite of the Yangzi River region, an area where both wealth and cultural sophistication were concentrated. Following the Shunzhi emperor's death in 1661, the country was ruled by four regents, chief among them, Gūwalgiya Oboi (1610-1669). Their distrust of the southern elites led to several severe campaigns that persecuted and punished a large swath of southern gentry. The harsh and stressful circumstances provide a good backdrop for the darkening of mood and tonality in Gong's landscapes. In other words, the anemic Ni-style landscape no longer resonated with him. He was not alone. The backlash against the dominant Ni model had in fact already started before 1660s: "Though with pale flavor," says one revisionist critic, "the likes of Ni Yunlin suffer from dryness and drabness, much like a frail sick man about to breathe his last. They say it possess some lithe ease and [adorable] fragility. This has gone overboard." Gong must have concurred.

So Gong faced a dilemma. In theory, he had to tacitly acknowledge the Ni-style landscape as the exalted aesthetic standard of elegance and good taste, since everyone thought so. Meanwhile, he apparently felt its disconnect with the mood of his own time. So he set out to recreate a Ni-style landscape after *his* own taste and preference. How does he do it? He adds volume and weight to it. What are his models and sources of inspiration? The monumental landscape style, variously tagged as either "Song" or "Northern School" in the seventeenth century parlance, with its massive weight and solidity, reinforced by forceful and choppy stippling strokes. It is a rather bold move. In the prevalent aesthetic scheme of things, the Northern School and Song were considered an embarrassment and losing proposition. The triumph of the Southern School aesthetic was total and uncompromising. By the early seventeenth century, the massive Northern School monumental mountainscape had been largely forgotten. Here Gong revives it. The climate of his time called for an aesthetics of the sublime magnitude.



Figure 8. Hongren, *Retreat Place in Forested Mountain*, 1658, Qing dynasty.



Details of Gong Xian, *Landscape* (Fig. 1)



Gong was not alone in this endeavor. Painters from the Huangshan region, close to Nanjing, shared his aspiration. Gong’s inscription on the scroll gives a lineage of the Huangshan School—which he calls “Tiandu School.” Tiandu is the name of a peak of Huangshan. So in some way, the scroll both pays homage to the Huangshan School, and engages a conversation with it. Like Gong, the Huangshan-based painters were also close followers of the Ni-style landscape. Here is a landscape by Hongren (1610-1663), a Huangshan-based monk-painter (Fig. 8). The

composition still recapitulates the Ni model, except that it has a hint of a Northern School monumental landscape. The cliff reaches skyward into infinity, beyond the frame. This is something inconceivable within the Southern School framework epitomized by the Ni model, which is consistently undramatic. Gong does the same, with the exception that he applies choppy stippling strokes—a staple of the Northern School or Song mode—to the cliff surface to give it more weight.

Gong has his reason to take extra steps here. To the 17th century viewers, Hongren’s sparse and barren landscape conveys a “deadening stillness” and “bleak forlornness.” While it captures the mood under an oppressive regime, some critics found this excessive reticence short of channeling the pent-up emotion.



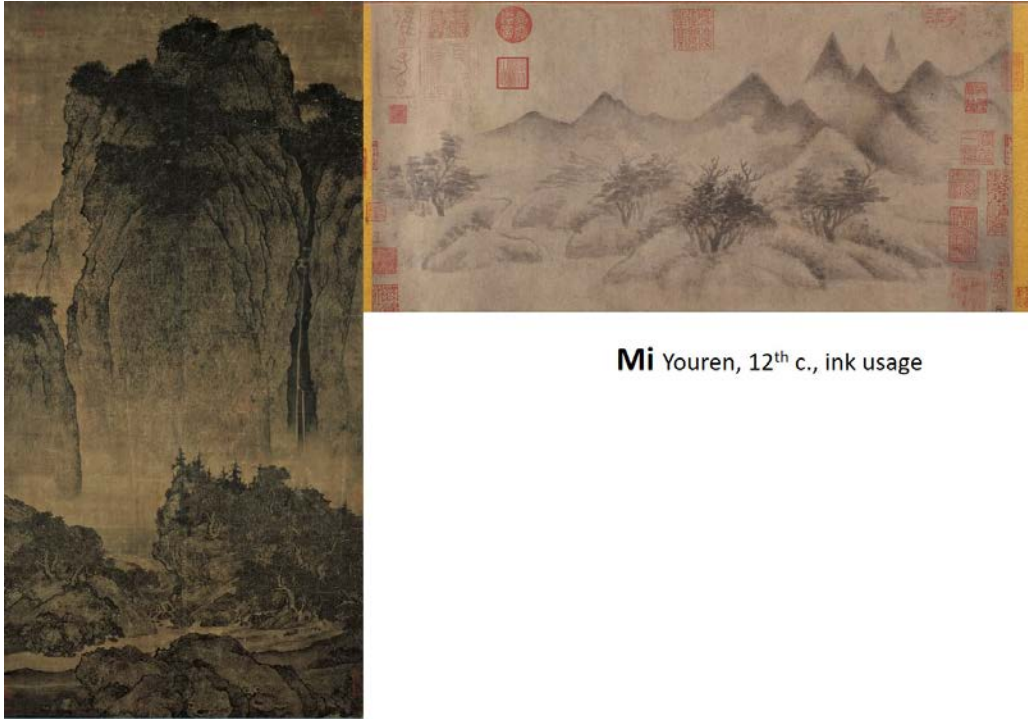
Mi Youren, 12th c., ink usage

Ni Zan, 14th c. – brush usage

Figure 9. Examples of brush usage and ink usage (1)

How then does one channel that emotion in painting? How does one make a landscape sing? It involves artful working with formal properties of ink painting, a water-based medium. The medium derives its effect from both **drawing** and **ink wash**, or in traditional Chinese parlance, the brush and ink methods. Drawing produces outlines and textures; wash generates tonalities (Fig. 9). According to Dong Qichang (1555-1636), one of the most influential 17th century arbiters of pictorial taste, the use of “light ink wash” 渲淡 (*xuandan*) marks the departure of literati painting from that of the plodding and overwrought professional painting entrenched in “the hardened outlining and choppy texturing” 钩斫之法 (Fig. 10). The statement, an overstatement, actually cuts too many corners and does not measure up to historical reality. It

does, however, highlight the self-expressive quality that Dong imputes to his ideal condition of the literati painting.



Fan Kuan, 11th c. – brush usage

Mi Youren, 12th c., ink usage

Figure 10. Examples of brush usage and ink usage (2)

The mode of painting that best epitomizes the “light ink wash” method is the “cloudy mountainscape” tradition. The two Mi, father and son, of the 11th and 12th centuries are traditionally credited with the invention of this landscape mode. Again, it is not entirely accurate. But we can make do with the conventional labeling of the “cloudy mountainscape” as a Mi-style landscape. Its most distinguished quality is the liberal use of ink wash and near total absence of drawing and texturing strokes. The diffusion of ink wash creates a sense of spontaneous overflow, thereby serving as an apt visual analog of musical resonances. Paintings animated by washes thus take on articulate or singing qualities.



Figure 11. Detail of Gong Xian, *Landscape* (Fig. 1)



Mi, 12th c.



Gong, 17th c.

Figure 12. Comparison of ink-wash effect between Mi Youren and Gong Xian

The array of hazy distant hills across the river in the scene next to the opening passage of our scroll has a strong hint of the cloudy-mountainscape (Fig. 11). Again, like his radical treatment of the Ni model, Gong's recapitulation of the Mi model is just as revisionist in vein. Rather than embracing the smoothness and fluidity of the Mi-style light wash, Gong uses heavy-toned dry-ink choppy strokes. Note the stippling and stabbing, more in the manner of drawing rather than sweeping washes. In other words, where one expects wash, Gong obliges with quasi-wash or wash-by-way-of-drawing. This is a radical departure from convention. Overtime, the ink strokes got heavier, darker, thicker, coarser, and drier. The method would eventually evolve into a distinct ink-application procedure known as the "layered ink method." The key to the method is to treat wash as if it were drawing, overlaying choppy brushstrokes rather than overrunning paper surface with spreads of light ink washes. This results in a complex visual effect. If the overflowing light ink wash carries musical resonance or singing quality, Gong's wash-by-way-of-drawing is a visual analog of a choked or suppressed singing (Fig. 12). The mood is fitting for a time and climate that prompted emotional outpouring. Only such channeling is often checked and choked.

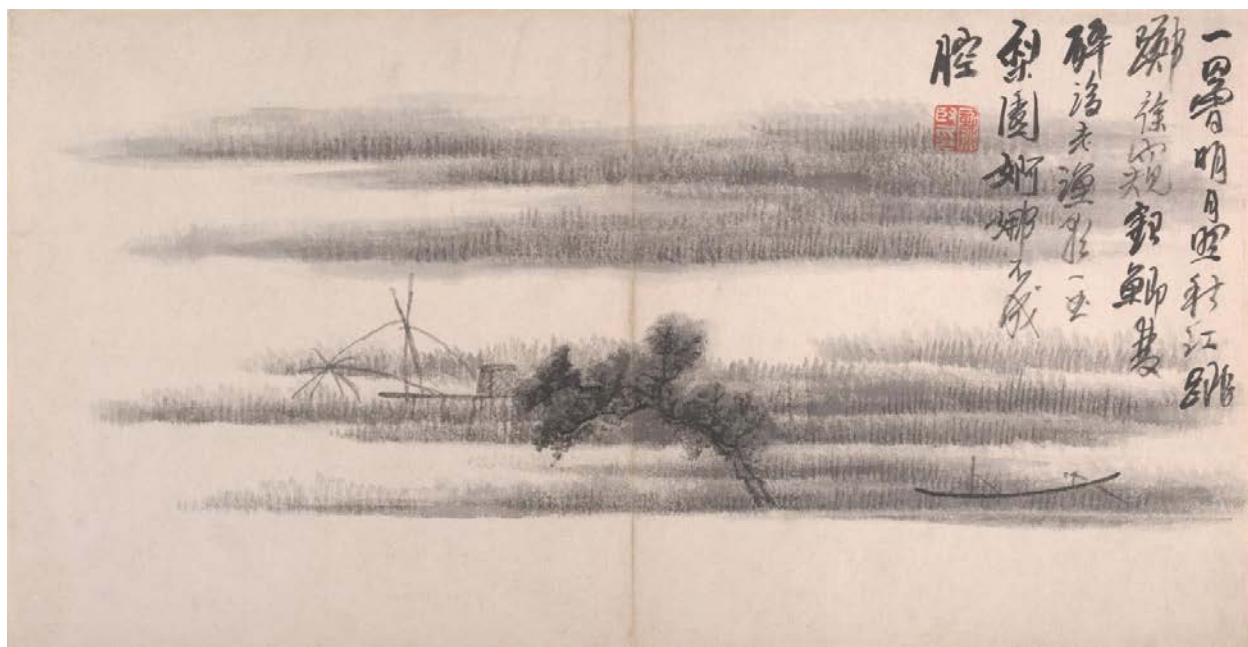


Figure 13. Gong Xian, *Landscape*, 1682-88, Qing dynasty. Album, ink on paper, 22.2×44.1cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

An album leaf by Gong Xian at the Metropolitan Museum, New York, best demonstrates the visual rhetoric (Fig. 13). Here is a bent tree and a fishing station amidst a water marsh

A shade of moonlight illuminates the fall riverfront
 The shimmering waves offer glimpses of twin carps' luster
 Old and inebriated, the fisherman lets out a tune

一叢明月照秋江，
 跳躑徐窺銀鯽雙。
 醉後老漁歌一曲，

Ever so graceful, the Pearl Garden girl chokes amidst her madrigal 梨園婀娜不成腔.

Fittingly, arrays of choppy strokes, presumably weeds, punctuate the rhythmic overflow.



Figure 14. Detail of Gong Xian, *Landscape* (Fig. 1).



Figure 15. Xiang Shengmo, *Listening to Sound in Cold*, 1647, Qing dynasty, Tianjin Art Museum.

Our scroll ends with another curious passage (Fig. 14). Rather than presenting the foreground riverbank with a heavy tone and the rock formation across the water with light tone, Gong reverses the order: the nearer the lighter, and more distant the heavier. Moreover, the conventional composition typically presents a cloudy mountainscape across the river, here it is absent. Why so?

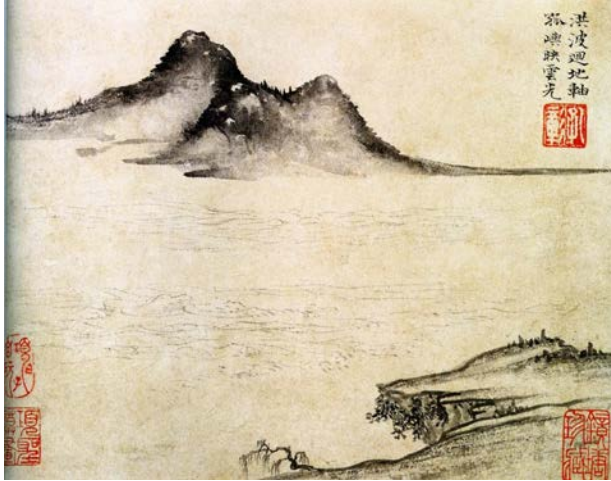


Figure 16. Xiang Shengmo, from album leaves of paintings after Wang Wei’s poem, 1628, Ming dynasty, Shanghai Museum.

Gong may have drawn on some precedents. Here is a painting by Xiang Shengmo with a similar composition (Fig. 15). Dated 1647, in the wake of the dynastic change of 1644, the painting apparently registers a profound sense of pathos. If we follow Xiang’s artistic trajectory, we come to see how this composition comes about. An album leaf produced by Xiang Shenmo in 1628 is a starting point (Fig. 16). Xiang plays the foreground promontory with the distant hills rendered in the manner of “cloudy mountainscape.” The foreground is treated in dry ink drawing; the distant hill in pure ink washes with tonal gradations. The composition solicits lyrical thoughts fitting a variety of situations: the fond memory of “cloud-and-rain,” i.e., amorous encounters of recent past, or anticipation of future destinies (promotions, home-coming, etc.) in the cloud-veiled land of transcedents.





Figure 17. Fragmented land depicted in paintings of Gong Xian and Xiang Shengmo.

It is remarkable that, in the wake of dynastic change, the same composition is repurposed to articulate a different sentiment (Fig. 17). The ink-wash cloudy mountainscape is now replaced with massive hanging rock formations, suggesting the “fragmented land” 半壁江山. It is just as remarkable that Gong’s scroll ends with a similar composition. Where one expects the distant hill to be a cloudy mountainscape, it is taken up by a massive, monumental hanging rock formation. The bent trees, vaguely anthropomorphic in character, greet the passing or returning sail along the stream of time. If the distant hill often stands for another time and space, the viewer can connect the dots.

Appendix (Inscriptions by Gong Xian, transcribed by Bing Huang)

此作在倪王之間，而其圓厚復又自巨然來。

This section is between Ni Zan and Wang Meng, but its roundness and thickness comes from Ju Ran.

皴法無一定，隨人變轉，要各成一家，雜用不可。古人多用斧劈皴，后人变其法，有大斧劈、小斧劈之別。至宋元以后，多用麻紕皴，後又稱披麻皴，又有豆瓣皴、牛毛皴、解索皴、皆正派，铁线皴古人間亦用之，然易板刻。邪派如丁头、鬼面，芝麻皴者不可勝數，學者當宜禁之。

Texture strokes are not fixed to one method but shift and transform in accordance with the individual. [Yet,] each should form a part of its lineage, they cannot be used in a hodge-podge fashion. The ancients often used the ax-cut stroke, [while] the later generations transformed the method, and so there is a differentiation between large ax-cut strokes and small ax-cut strokes. From the Song and Yuan dynasties onward, [artists] often used the “untwisted-hemp stroke”

(*mapi-cun*), which was later also called the “draped-hemp stroke” (*pima-cun*).¹ There is also the split-bean stroke, ox-hair stroke, and unwound rope stroke—all of which are orthodox. There were also those amongst the ancients who used the iron-wire stroke, but it is liable to become stiff and chiseled-looking. Heterodox strokes, like the nail-head stroke, demon face stroke², and sesame-seed stroke, are countless and students had best avoid them.

苔點亦無一定，畫家有幾多樹葉，即有几多苔點，惟雙勾不可用耳。松針葉不可施於石上，在樹根地景，古人亦常用之。

Moss dots are also not fixed to one method—however many leaves the artist paints should then be matched by the number of moss dots. Only double-outlines cannot be used. Pine needles cannot be painted over stone but the ancients also commonly used them over terrain covered in tree-roots.

小则为牛毛，大则为麻纒。筆跡圓活則為鉤索，其拳曲者又稱捲雲，其實皆一派也。畫家大痴有曰：板、刻、結，劈斧近板，铁线易刻，解索善结，学者当避之。

If small, then it is the ox-hair stroke. If large, then it is the hemp-fiber stroke. If the stroke is rounded and flexible then it is the hooked-rope stroke—its bends and twists are also called “rolling clouds,” but they are really all of the same type.

The painter *Dachi*³ once said: “Stiff, chiseled, knotted: the axe-cut stroke approaches stiffness; the iron-wire stroke is liable to look chiseled, the unwound rope stroke quickly becomes knotted. Students should avoid them.”

孟陽開天都一派，至周生始氣足力大，孟陽似雲林，周生似石田仿雲林，孟陽程姓名嘉燧，周生李姓名永昌，俱天都人，後來方式玉、王尊素、僧漸江、吳岱觀、汪無瑞，孫無逸、程穆倩、查二瞻，又皆學此二人者也。諸君子并皆天都人，故曰天都派。

Mengyang is of the Tiandu School, [a school] whose energies grew ample and strength grew large upon the arrival of Mr. Zhou. Mengyang's style is like Yunlin,⁴ Mr. Zhou is like Shitian⁵ imitating Yunlin. Mengyang's surname is Cheng and his given name is Jiasui. Mr. Zhou's surname is Li, and his given name is Yongchang—they both come from Tiandu. Later came Fang Shiyu, Wang Zunsu, Seng Jianjiang, Wu Daiguan, Wang Wudian, Sun Wuyi, Cheng Muqian, and Zha Erzhan, who all studied these two. All the aforementioned gentlemen were also men of Tiandu and so they are called the Tiandu School.

¹ These strokes are both commonly translated as the “hemp-fiber” stroke. However, Gong Xian is making a distinction here between a slight name change that occurred in reference to the stroke.

² The term demon's face is derived from the describing the *taihu* rock.

³ The sobriquet of Huang Gongwang.

⁴ The sobriquet of Ni Zan

⁵ The sobriquet of Shen Zhou

皴法皆先乾後濕則潤，若先濕後乾則混加皴，亦必俟乾透而施重墨方可，不然濃墨入淡色死矣。皴法外宜露，內宜渾，先用乾淡墨皴之後帶染故渾；俟乾外加稍重墨勾勒數筆則露。若先後二遍墨不相合再用稍重墨加皴一遍謂之調停。

For all texture strokes, if you first apply dry strokes and afterwards wet strokes, then they will appear moist. If you were to first apply wet strokes and then dry strokes, the texture will be muddled. Thus, the painter must wait until the painting is completely dry before applying another thick layer of ink, otherwise the dark ink will enter into the lighter shades and kill them. Texture strokes should be dewy on the exterior and vigorous on the interior. [To achieve this effect,] first use dry and light ink to apply texture and afterwards dye the area [with more ink] –then it will look vigorous. After the area has dried, add a bit of dark ink outline with several strokes and then it will appear dewy. If the two layers do not come together, then use a bit of dark ink to add a layer of texture. This is called “settling the tone.”

风景木葉草頭布帆皆一向，或樹向東而帆向西，謬矣。

The landscape, trees and leaves, grass tips, and spreading boat sails should all face the same direction. If perhaps your trees face east while the sails face west, this is wrong.

風江片席

Small boat on a wind-swept river