

Comparative Study of Western and Chinese Landscape Painting

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Abstract: Landscape painting, as the name suggests, is an art form that primarily depicts natural scenery. However, there are significant differences between landscape painting in different regions, particularly between China and the Western traditions. This article analyzes the reasons for the differences between Chinese and Western landscape painting in audience's perspectives and emotional responses, focusing on the impacts of religion, science and cultural influences on Western landscape painting. By comparing famous Chinese and western landscape painting works, this paper explores differences in content, brushstrokes, color usage, structure and social context. The findings reveal that Chinese landscape painting emphasizes composition hierarchy, and the conveyance of audience atmosphere and artistic conception, reflecting Taoist principles. Western landscape painting, on the other hand, is deeply influenced by science, religion, and cultural development, focusing on detailed depictions of light, shadow, and color.

1 INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on the differences and similarities between Chinese and Western landscape paintings, particularly in painting techniques, cultural influences, and societal backgrounds. Painting has evolved as a primary means of human expression, documenting life and emotions over centuries (Deng, 2008). Landscape painting, as an important branch of this art, not only captures the beauty of nature but also reflects profound cultural connotation and aesthetics (Ding, 2024). With globalization facilitating cultural exchanges, comparing these two traditions has become increasingly significant.

This study is significant for deepening the understanding of Chinese and Western painting traditions and promoting cultural exchange and integration. First, by examining the similarities and differences between these two traditions, it highlights the unique charm of landscape painting in completely different cultural settings. Second, this research supports cultural exchange and integration by enhancing understanding and respect for different artistic and societal contexts.

The analysis focuses on four key areas: painting techniques, emotional expression, social background, and aesthetic concepts. In terms of techniques, traditional Chinese landscape painting emphasizes the use of ink and the creation of artistic conception (Fu, 2024). It reveals a unique Oriental charm through

the smooth lines, dark and dry ink, and balanced compositions. By contrast, Western landscape painting prioritized the use of light and shadow, and colors, achieving three-dimensional and realistic effects through careful light and shade contrast and rich color layers. Emotional expression also varies between the two traditions, each having its own distinctive characteristics (Guo, 2014). Traditional Chinese landscape painting often expresses emotion through natural scenes, reflecting the painter's inner world and life philosophy (Monet et al., 2011). This introspective approach conveys a harmonious connection between humans and nature, where emotions flow through the depicted landscapes. Western landscape painting, on the other hand, pays more attention to the magnificence and harmony of nature itself, using delicate light, shadow processing, and color matching to emphasize an external sense of beauty. The social background and aesthetic concept of these traditions further distinguish them. Chinese landscape painting is deeply rooted in traditional philosophies, particularly Taoist ideas about the unity between humans and nature. This philosophical foundation imbues the art with a meditative and spiritual quality. In contrast, Western landscape painting reflects the influence of scientific advancements and cultural developments. The discovery of optics, perspective, and color theory contributed to its realistic depictions and a fascination with the natural world.

To further explore the similarities and differences, this study uses the literature analysis method to search for and review relevant materials and scholar works. This method provides a foundation for examining the historical origin, development context, and representative works of Chinese and Western landscape painting, offering rich resources and theoretical support for the comparative study. In the research process, this study first organizes and compares the historical evolution of Chinese and Western landscape painting traditions. This includes a detailed examination of their painting techniques, emotional expression, social background, and aesthetic concepts. By identifying patterns and changes over time, the study highlights the defining features of each tradition (Tang, 2005). Furthermore, specific representative works are analyzed as case studies to provide a direct and intuitive comparison of the similarities and differences in Chinese and Western landscape paintings. These examples help to illustrate the unique charm and artistic value of each tradition, offering deeper insights into their cultural and artistic identities.

The ultimate goal of this study is to uncover the cultural and social roots behind the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western landscape paintings, thereby providing theoretical support and practical guidance for promoting cultural exchange and integration. The findings demonstrate that the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western landscape paintings are not confined to artistic techniques or emotional expression but also reflect the aesthetic concepts and values of their respective cultural backgrounds. By understanding these differences, we can better appreciate the diversity of artistic traditions and develop new perspectives to foster cross-cultural integration and innovation in art.

2 BACKGROUND

Landscape painting, as the name suggests, is a form of art where natural landscapes such as mountains, rivers, and streams as the primary subject. It records the spectacular and beautiful natural scenes that the artist observes (Rafting, 2024). However, landscape painting is not solely focused on observation; it also carries rich connotations shaped by various regions, periods, and social backgrounds, highlighting the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature as a central theme.

Whether in terms of surface-level painting techniques or deeper emotional expressions, landscape paintings show both noticeable differences and commonalities across regions (Wan, 2021). The contrast between Western and Chinese landscape paintings serves as a classic example of how geographical and cultural differences shape artistic expression. The long-standing separation of the Western and Eastern worlds has resulted in entirely different societies, histories, religions, cultural values, and traditional customs, which directly influence their respective approaches to landscape paintings.

Although there are clear differences between Chinese and Western landscape paintings, both traditions have produced exceptional works with distinct artistic value (Wang, 2024). By comparing famous and widely recognized landscape paintings from the two regions, one can better understand these differences and how they influence the audience's reception and perspectives. For instance, Chinese landscapes often focus on composition and layers to create magnificent landscapes using exquisite brushwork and ink colors on silk or paper. In contrast, Western landscape artists emphasize the interplay of light and shadow, using oil paints on canvas or wood to achieve vivid and realistic depictions of nature and making the contrast more obvious.

3 ANALYSIS OF CHINESE LANDSCAPE PAINTING

In ancient China, landscape paintings held a noble status and became a primary art form within society. Its development reached its peak during the Song Dynasty, producing many renowned artists and masterpieces. Among these, Fan Kuan's "*Traveling in the Mountains and Rivers*" stands out as a representative work of Chinese panoramic landscape painting (Figure 1).

Fan Kuan, a prominent artist of the Northern Song Dynasty, created this masterpiece with an ink brush on silk. Spanning 206.3 cm in height and 103.3 cm in width, this magnificent painting depicts the scenery of the Zhongnan Mountain area in the ancient Qinlong area, now part of Shanxi and Gansu provinces. Through vigorous brushwork, the painting conveys the magnificence of the northern landscape (Wang, 2023). At the center of the composition, a towering mountain peak occupies most of the space,

drawing the viewer's attention and establishing it as the painting's protagonist. Dense forests and clouds surround its summit, while evenly distributed trees and shrubs enhance the sense of depth and vitality. Further details, such as the weathered texture of the rocks and the cascading waterfall in the valley, add dynamism to the composition. At the foot of the mountain, a broad but looming stream winds through the terrain, where a group of merchants and their donkeys traverse a narrow mountain path. This imagery vividly reflects the painting's theme of "traveling in the mountains and rivers."

When observing Fan Kuan's *"Traveling in the Mountains and Rivers,"* the viewer's gaze is guided and influenced by the thoughtful composition of the painting. In this context, the composition plays a critical role (Xu, 2007). The arrangement within the painting helps the artist direct the viewer's focus, establish layers, and enhance the overall visual effect. Fan Kuan utilized multiple compositional techniques to achieve these effects in *"Traveling in the Mountains and Rivers,"*. First of all, the use of a "high and far" perspective offers the viewer an ascending view of the scenery (Yu, 2008). This technique emphasized the mountain's grandeur, beginning from its base, leading the eye upward to its majestic peak, ultimately creating a powerful visual impact. In addition, Fan Kuan did not limit the painting to a single mountain but also included a smaller one in the foreground. This deliberate choice of overlapping elements creates a sense of depth and spatial arrangement, with a clear primary and secondary relationship,

Secondly, Fan Kuan employed a three-stage composition, diving the scenery into close-up, middle, and distant views. In the close-up view, the painting features large rocks, dense forests, mountain roads, and merchants traveling along the path. The middle view includes a stream flowing from the mountain's base and the clouds gathering at its foot. The distant view is dominated by the towering central mountain, its rugged stone texture complemented by cascading waterfalls and peaks covered with vegetation. This layered composition not only enhances spatial depth but also creates a harmonious layout.

Regarding brushwork, *"Traveling in the Mountains and Rivers"* exemplifies the majestic and intricate style typical of Northern Song Dynasty landscape painting. Fan Kuan's use of heavy brushstrokes conveys the mountain's solid weight and texture. With techniques such as iron-wire-like outlines and raindrop textures, the rocks appear vivid and lifelike. The brushstrokes in the foreground are

bold and precise, while the lines in the middle view suggest movement and continuity. the distant peaks are rendered with lighter, more concise brushwork, ensuring the painting retains balance and a sense of progression. Another notable feature of Fan Kuan's brushwork is his combination of points, lines, and surfaces, which gives the painting structural stability while maintaining dynamic variation. This mastery allows him to demonstrate both the rugged strength of the rocks and the smooth, flowing essence of natural elements like clouds and water. His brushwork shapes the complicated details of the painting and reinforces its overall sense of power and unity.

In addition to brushwork, Fan Kuan excelled in the use of ink to add depth and atmosphere to the painting. By varying ink intensity- from thick and bold in the foreground to light and delicate in the foreground- he creates a layered and immersive effect. The trees and rocks in the foreground are depicted with darker tones, while the distant mountains and mist are rendered with softer, diluted ink to evoke a hazy beauty. This interplay between light and dark not only enhances the painting's three-dimensional quality but also creates a harmonious balance between elements. Fan Kuan also utilized layering techniques to achieve coherence with the painting. He meticulously adjusted the shading of ink to blend the mountains, rocks, and clouds seamlessly, giving the landscape a unified and dynamic feel. The clouds and mist extend the natural elements of the scene, adding motion and vitality to the otherwise still composition. Through these techniques, Fan Kuan vividly captures the majestic and poetic natural scenery in *"Traveling in the Mountains and Rivers"*.



Figure 1: Traveling in the Mountains and Rivers.

4 ANALYSIS OF WESTERN LANDSCAPE PAINTING

Landscape painting also occupies an important position in Western art. Its origins in the East and West often stem from its initial role as a backdrop in portraiture, rather than as a standalone subject. For example, in portraits such as *Joséphine de Beauharnais, Queen of Napoleon*, landscapes were secondary elements designed to emphasize the central figures. However, with the rise of Romanticism, landscapes gained prominence as independent subjects. Artists began to use them as a means of conveying mood, atmosphere, and emotion, shifting the focus toward the authenticity and emotional resonance of natural scenes.

With the tradition of Western landscape oil painting, the contributions of three preeminent artists—John Constable, Vincent van Gogh, and Claude Monet—stand out as particularly transformative. These artists, through their innovative approaches to light, color, and composition, significantly shaped the development of the genre and altered viewers' interpretations of the natural world.

John Constable, a leading figure of the Romantic movement, gained acclaim for his realistic depiction of rural life in 19th-century Britain. One of his most famous works, *"The Hay Wain,"* epitomizes his dedication to capturing the serene beauty of pastoral landscapes (Figure 2). The painting features a hay-filled carriage crossing shallow, surrounded by lush greenery and an expansive, cloud-filled sky. Constable's meticulous brushwork and vibrant use of greens and blues create a fresh, tranquil atmosphere that departs from the warmer tones typical of earlier landscapes. He skillfully portrays the reflections in water, the rippling waves caused by the cart's motion, and the changing patterns of sunlight on the clouds, offering viewers an authentic and immersive experience of rural England.



Figure 2: The Hay Wain.

Conversely, two renowned Impressionist artists,

Vincent van Gogh and Claude Monet, each approached landscape painting with unique yet compelling styles. Despite their differing artistic choices, both used oil paints masterfully, harnessing the interplay of color, light, and shadow to create deeply evocative works. These innovative approaches transformed the viewer's experience, offering a nuanced perspective on nature through their unique artistic lenses.

Van Gogh's *The Starry Night*, perhaps one of the world's most famous paintings, presents a mysterious and dynamic depiction of the night sky (Figure 3). The scene appears as if viewed from halfway up a hill, with the swirling sky dominating the composition. The dramatic movement of the stars and clouds, seemingly caught in the whirlpool of wind, creates a sense of cosmic energy and turbulence. Below, the grass and trees appear similarly affected, yet the town remains calm and undisturbed, its illuminated windows symbolizing tranquility amidst the chaos. Unlike John Constable's meticulous realism, Van Gogh employed bold and rough brushstrokes to convey his emotional response to the scene. The exaggerated forms and vivid contrasts between the glowing stars and the darkened sky evoke a sense of wonder, drawing the viewer into Van Gogh's inner world. Despite its departure from literal accuracy, the painting resonates deeply, reflecting his profound respect for the universe and his introspective thoughts on life and existence.



Figure 3: The Starry Night.

As a groundbreaking impressionist artist, Claude Monet excelled in capturing specific moments and details of natural landscapes, transforming them into evocative visual experiences. His famous *"The Water Lilies"* exemplifies this approach, where he focused on a serene pond rather than a complete landscape (Figure 4). The viewer's perspective is directed to the water lilies of different colors, lotus leaves, and their reflections on the calm surface of the lake. Monet's

emphasis on subtle changes in natural light and shadow is masterfully conveyed through his sensitive use of color and delicate brushstrokes. Over the course of his career, he created approximately 250 paintings in this series, each capturing the tranquil beauty and meditative atmosphere of the scene. Through his unique vision, Monet invites viewers into a peaceful, introspective encounter with nature, presenting an alternative perspective to the grand, panoramic landscape of traditional paintings.



Figure 4: The Water Lilies.

5 COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS

A comparative analysis of notable landscape paintings from both Western and Eastern traditions reveals distinct approaches to the portraying and interpreting nature. Chinese landscape painting, exemplified by Fan Kuan's *"Traveling in the Mountains and Rivers,"* prioritized harmony between humans and nature through its layered compositions intricate brushwork, and refined use of ink tones. In contrast, Western landscape painting, such as Monet's *"The Water Lilies"* and John Constable's *"The Hay Wain"*, uses a distinctive oil-based color palette and a focus on light and shadow to evoke emotional resonance and sensory realism. Despite these differences, both traditions achieve profound artistic value, offering audiences complementary ways to experience and appreciate the natural world.

In *"Traveling in the Mountains and Rivers,"* Fan Kuan depicts the majestic scenery of northern China, with towering peaks occupying the viewer's focus. The mountain forms layered visual structures, while streams and merchants traveling on winding

mountain roads provide a narrative dimension. This high-angle composition is combined with three-stage layering (foreground, middle ground, and background), enhancing the painting's depth and spatial hierarchy, creating a sense of grandeur. By contrast, Western landscape oil painting often emphasizes the immediate, observable realism of natural scenes. For example, John Constable's *"Licorice Cart"* presents a vivid depiction of rural life, capturing details such as streams, forests, and lawns. The fresh and natural color palette conveys an immersive and tranquil atmosphere, demonstrating Western painting's focus on realistic detail and sensory engagement.

The brushwork in *"Traveling in the Mountains and Rivers"* embodies the Northern Song Dynasty's grand and profound style. Fan Kuan uses heavy, precise strokes to outline the lines and rocks, emphasizing the natural weight and texture of the landscape. His "iron-like" outlines and fine "raindrop" textures imbue the painting with an intricate sense of detail and structure. This combination of points, lines and surfaces creates both stability and variation in composition. By comparison, Western landscape artists, such as Vincent Van Gogh, use bold and expressive brushstrokes to emphasize mood and emotional depth. For example, in *"The Starry Night"*, Van Gogh employs swirling, exaggerated strokes to depict the sky's dramatic energy, contrasting sharply with the calm town below. This expressive technique reflects an emotional and subjective interpretation of the natural world, prioritizing artistic vision over realism.

In *"Traveling in the Mountains and Rivers,"* Fan Kuan relies on ink tones to achieve depth and atmosphere. By layering dry and wet ink, he creates a dynamic interplay of light and shadow, bringing a three-dimensional quality to the painting. The darker ink highlights foreground details, such as trees and rocks, while the lighter ink softens the distant peaks, adding a sense of vastness. This subtle use of ink reflects the Chinese tradition of pursuing an artistic conception rather than strict realism. In contrast, Western landscape oil paintings, such as Claude Monet's *"The Water Lilies"*, focus on capturing the natural interplay of light and color. Monet's meticulous attention to changing light conditions is evident in his vibrant and shifting color palette, which conveys a sense of fluidity and tranquility. Both conditions excel in their use of color to evoke distinct emotional and visual experiences, rooted in their respective cultural contexts.

The development of Chinese landscape painting is

deeply tied to traditional culture and philosophical ideas. For example, Chinese art often emphasizes harmony between humans and nature, reflecting societal values of balance and coexistence. This stems from the Taoist ideology which promotes the idea of "the unity of heaven and man", meaning that man and nature are in harmony, rely on each other, and develop and promote each other. This makes Chinese landscape painting convey the theme of man and nature while expressing the natural scene, just like the commercial journey slowly moving forward at the foot of the mountain in "*Traveling in the Mountains and Rivers*". In contrast, Western landscape painting has been shaped by scientific advancements and cultural developments, such as the discovery of perspective, optics, and color theory. These innovations enabled artists to depict nature with unprecedented realism and detail, mirroring the West's growing fascination with exploring and documenting the natural world. This divergence in social and cultural influences highlights the distinct techniques and themes of Chinese and Western landscape traditions, offering audiences diverse and enriching artistic experiences.

6 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, through an in-depth comparison of Chinese and Western landscape painting, this research highlights the significant differences in techniques, emotional expression, and social contexts between the two traditions. The findings reveal that Chinese landscape painting emphasizes structured composition and layered hierarchies, focusing on the nuanced interplay of ink tones and the overall design to evoke a sense of atmosphere and artistic conception. This approach reflects cultural influences, particularly the philosophical values of balance and harmony promoted by Taoist beliefs. Western landscape painting, on the other hand, prioritizes the interplay of light, shadow, and color, delivering detailed descriptions of natural scenes. These elements reflect the integration of religious themes, scientific advancements, and cultural developments in Western art.

This study not only deepens our understanding of the foundational differences between Chinese and Western painting traditions but also provides a new perspective for fostering cross-cultural artistic exchange and integration. Both traditions carry distinct cultural identities and aesthetic values,

contributing to the rich diversity of human artistic expression. In addition, this research underscores the importance of mutual learning and innovation, encouraging a dialogue between Chinese and Western painting traditions that can further enrich and diversify global art culture.

Looking ahead, the ongoing acceleration of globalization is expected to facilitate more frequent and meaningful exchanges and integration between China and the West. This study serves as a valuable reference for future artists and cultural practitioners, inspiring them to boldly innovate while respecting their own artistic heritage.

By building on these shared insights, artists from different traditions can collaborate to create a new chapter in the evolution of art, one that reflects both individual traditions and a shared global vision.

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