



Wang Yuanqi's Archaistic Practices and the Cultural Transmission of Ming-Qing Landscape Painting

Chengjun Jiang¹, Xin Luo^{2,*}

¹THE EXPERIMENTAL HIGH SCHOOL ATTACHED TO BEIJING NORMAL UNIVERSITY, Erlong Road, Xicheng District, Beijing, China

²Zhejiang University, 866 Yuhangtang Rd, Hangzhou, 310058, P.R. China
charlesjiang.08@gmail.com, *39913954@qq.com

Abstract. The archaism in Ming-Qing landscape painting is a key topic in art historical research, with literati painters viewing it as a crucial pathway for both artistic creation and technical refinement. This study clarifies that archaism, as a systematic artistic approach, is driven by the goals of learning, inheritance, and innovation, and thus fundamentally differs from forgery. It primarily focuses on the Southern School of painting, emerging from diverse needs related to cultural transmission, technical development, aesthetic expression, and social recognition. Utilizing a methodology that integrates literature review, iconographic analysis, and comparative study, this paper categorizes archaism into three types: “literal imitation”, focusing on the faithful reproduction of ancient techniques and forms; “interpretive imitation”, which blends the essence of ancient masters with the artist’s personal expression; and “appropriative imitation”, where imitation serves as a medium to express emotions and ideals. In the context of Ming-Qing archaistic landscape painting, Wang Yuanqi’s artistic theories and practices are exemplary, offering significant contributions to both the theory and execution of the art form. The archaistic approach to landscape painting in the Ming and Qing dynasties established a systematic creative framework that played a key role in preserving the lineage of landscape painting while drawing from the past to create the new through the adaptation of ancient techniques. However, this collective archaism also had its drawbacks, including a tendency toward uniformity and lack of innovation. By reassessing the value of archaistic painting and vindicating artists like Wang Yuanqi, this study sheds light on the traditional Chinese painting principle of “learning from the past without being bound by it”, offering crucial insights into the inheritance-innovation logic. These insights hold significant relevance for the future development of contemporary traditional Chinese painting.

Keywords: Ming-Qing Archaistic Landscape Painting; Wang Yuanqi; Artistic Lineage; Innovation Logic

1 Introduction

In the history of Ming-Qing painting, the archaism in landscape painting is a critical and unavoidable subject. During this period, literati painters viewed imitation as a fundamental means of artistic creation and technical refinement. The widespread popularity of this practice not only shaped the aesthetic character of landscape painting at the time but also had a profound and lasting impact on its development in later generations. The rise of the archaistic style in Ming-Qing painting was closely intertwined with the cultural currents of archaism and the “canon complex”, both of which were deeply ingrained in the tradition of Chinese literati culture. Chinese literati have long emphasized the principle that “every brushstroke has its origin”, believing that through the study and imitation of ancient classics, one could master the essence of predecessors’ brushwork and achieve artistic sublimation by aligning technique with the Dao.^[1] Dong Qichang's formulation of the “Southern and Northern Schools” further fueled this trend, designating Huang Gongwang as the “orthodox lineage of the Southern School” and thereby establishing core models and aesthetic standards for imitation that would guide later generations of artists. During the transition from the Ming to the Qing Dynasty, the art world was dominated by a superficial pursuit of contemporary trends, with a lack of true engagement with ancient traditions. While some painters admired the ancients, many struggled with “deep-seated habits that restricted their brushwork” or “narrow perspectives that hindered their ability to absorb diverse strengths”. As a result, archaism became a crucial method for addressing these shortcomings and restoring the foundations of painting theory.^[2]

Wang Yuanqi, a central figure of the Loudong School, is renowned for his significant contributions to archaistic thought, practice, and theory. His work exemplifies the “orthodox Southern School lineage” of Qing literati painting, making him a key representative of this tradition. Throughout his life, Wang Yuanqi devoted himself to both the practice and theoretical exploration of archaistic landscape painting. His works not only reflect a deep inheritance of tradition but also showcase his personal innovation, characterized by a “vast and profound” style. This makes him an ideal case study for examining the phenomenon of archaistic painting in Ming-Qing landscape painting. Previous research on Wang Yuanqi has focused either on his archaistic techniques and stylistic practices in isolation or on the phenomenon of archaistic painting in the Ming and Qing periods without considering its cultural significance. This approach has led to an incomplete understanding of Wang Yuanqi's contributions and an inability to fully grasp the essence of the archaistic tradition in Ming-Qing landscape painting.

In the early 20th century, the May Fourth “Art Revolution” sparked a backlash against archaistic painting, which was condemned for its lack of “originality”. Chen Duxiu, in *New Youth*, echoed Lyu Cheng's views, even going so far as to declare that the works of the “Four Wangs” marked “the final end of China's bad painting”.^[3] As modern individualism and realism emerged as the dominant criteria for evaluating art, Kang Youwei denounced traditional literati painting as “sparse, shallow, and degenerate”. Meanwhile, painters like Xu Beihong, who had studied abroad, vehemently criticized the “effeminate and decadent tendencies” of the archaistic style, equating “learning from the past” with “conservatism” or even “falsification”. The essence of these misunderstandings lies in applying modern artistic standards—such as “originality” and

“realism”—to fragment the full meaning of archaistic painting’s “tradition-innovation” framework, thereby obscuring its value in rectifying artistic trends and preserving cultural heritage. Therefore, it is necessary to reassess the cultural significance and value of archaistic painting. As art history has long shown, the “motif” has always been a central concern, with related artistic practices never dismissing the value of continuing and transforming classical motifs. On the contrary, they view this as a key pathway for preserving artistic traditions and evolving style. Van Gogh’s practice of copying Millet’s engravings serves as a striking example. He regarded works like Millet’s *The Sower* as “seeds that must be sown”,^[4] meticulously copied them with almost religious devotion, but never settling for mere replication. Instead, he replaced Millet’s somber tones with vibrant, fiery colors and infused the compositions with raw vitality through bold brushstrokes, ultimately forging a unique Post-Impressionist style through his re-interpretation of classical motifs.(Fig.1)



Fig. 1. The Sower (Left: Millet; Right: Van Gogh)^[5]

By combining methods such as literature review, iconographic analysis, and comparative study, this research examines key sources, including Wang Yuanqi’s *Lu Tai’s Inscriptions on Paintings* and *Random Notes from the Rain Window*, as well as the painting theories and historical records from the Ming and Qing periods. This approach provides a deeper understanding of the cultural context and artistic concepts of the time. Through comparative image analysis of Wang Yuanqi’s archaistic works and the original masterpieces by the ancient artists he imitated, this paper dissects the technical details and distinctive features of his imitative methods. This paper reveals how archaistic painting embodies a process of drawing from the past to create the new, highlighting the essence of artistic innovation through historical engagement.

2 The Connotation of Archaistic Painting

Archaistic painting is not simply a matter of replication or mimicry; it is a systematic artistic practice undertaken by Ming-Qing literati, rooted in the traditional concept of “learning from the past”. This practice aims at study, inheritance, and innovation, positioning itself as a legitimate and meaningful endeavor within the broader context of art history.

2.1 Characteristics of Archaistic Painting

From a motivational perspective, the purity of archaistic painting is rooted in the refinement of artistic practice and the preservation of tradition, setting it apart fundamentally from the utilitarian motives behind forgery. In his *Lu Tai's Inscriptions on Paintings*, Wang Yuanqi reflects on his early attempts to create the works in the manner of Mei Daoren, admitting his initial confusion. Through a “gradual approach—first refining the structure by mastering the composition to establish the correct framework, then using rendering techniques to harmonize the spirit and atmosphere”, he eventually grasped the essence of the art. His process was entirely centered on mastering brushwork techniques and elevating his artistic vision.^[6] The pursuit of achieving Dao through artistic practice was a common goal among archaistic painters, particularly within the group known as the “Four Wangs” (Wang Shimin, Wang Jian, Wang Yuanqi, and Wang Hui). When Wang Hui created an archaistic work for his mentor Wang Shimin (also known as Lan Weng), his goal was to “employ the brushwork techniques of the Yuan masters, construct the landscape framework and composition in the manner of the Song, and then infuse the painting with the grandeur and spirit of the Tang”, with no commercial intent, fully embodying the purity of the archaistic motive.^[7]

Archaistic painting differs fundamentally from forgery and, at its core, reflects the commitment of Ming-Qing literati artists to artistic integrity. This commitment can be viewed as a unique manifestation of the spirit of contractual responsibility within traditional painting. Artists never conceal the provenance of their works but, instead, actively construct a clear artistic lineage through inscriptions, thereby maintaining transparency and fostering an unbroken connection with the past. Wang Yuanqi's *Album of Lu Hong's "Ten Views of a Thatched Lodge"* stands as a quintessential example. In the section titled “Micui Ting”, he inscribes, “Imitating Dong Yuan (also known as Bei Yuan)'s color techniques to fully express the intended mood”, while in “Daojing Tai”, he notes, “Imitating Huang Gongwang (also known as Da Chi)”. The subjects of imitation and the technical lineage of each piece are clearly outlined, enabling viewers to trace the artistic heritage with precision and clarity.^[8] When Wang Yuanqi created a large-scale work in the manner of Huang Gongwang for Li Xianchen, he elaborated on his creative process in the inscription: “Drawing material from two paintings, rearranging them according to my own methods, and combining them into a cohesive structure”, and candidly acknowledged that the work took “over a year” to complete. This transparent disclosure of his creative logic stands in stark contrast to the deliberate concealment of information typical of forgers.^[9] Another member of the “Four Wangs”, Wang Jian, also adhered to this principle. In his fan painting *Fishing in the Flower Creek* in the manner of Hui Chong, he inscribes, “Occasionally imitating the spirit and charm left in his work”, and reflects on the experience of viewing the original piece with an old friend, stating, “Forms and shadows have no fixed rules; the distinction between true and false need not be a hindrance, as long as the essence and charm are conveyed”. This blend of imitation with personal emotion and artistic exchange demonstrates a deeper connection between the artist and the work, transcending mere technical reproduction.^[10] This reflects not only the artist's responsibility towards their own creation but also a respect for the viewer's right to understanding, akin to honoring an implicit contract of artistic authenticity, which allows the viewer to clearly trace the lineage of the artwork.

2.2 The Origins and Evolution of Archaistic Landscape Painting

In the Ming and Qing dynasties, the focus of archaistic landscape painting was sharply concentrated on the Southern School as the orthodox tradition. This emphasis is clearly reflected in the artists' creative practices and the inscriptions they left on their works. Dong Yuan and Ju Ran, the foundational figures of the archaistic tradition from the Five Dynasties and Northern Song periods, established the Jiangnan landscape paradigm, which became the core influence on the techniques and aesthetics of later literati painting.^[11] The "Four Masters of the Yuan Dynasty"—Huang Gongwang, Ni Zan, Wu Zhen, and Wang Meng—represent the pinnacle of this archaistic tradition. Building upon the foundations laid by Dong Yuan and Ju Ran, they further refined the brush and ink language of literati painting. Among them, Huang Gongwang's use of "subtle ink washes" and his "sturdy, yet profound" style were especially revered by Ming-Qing painters, including Wang Yuanqi. Huang's *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*, presented as a handscroll, depicts the landscape along the Fuchun River. Through layers of delicate ink washes, the painting evokes a profound, misty atmosphere. The economy of brushwork, coupled with the vitality of its spirit, set a canonical standard for later generations of literati painters.

Dong Qichang reshaped the history of literati painting by focusing on the archaistic tradition of the Southern School. Through the deliberate exclusion of Zhao Mengfu and the inclusion of Ni Zan, he established the framework of the "Four Masters of the Yuan Dynasty", thereby purifying the lineage of the Southern School. Zhao Mengfu's eclectic style, which incorporated imperial court influences, stood in contrast to Ni Zan's "exquisite" approach that aligned more closely with the traditions of Dong and Ju. This shift solidified the Southern School's position as the orthodox path, making Dong, Ju, and the "Four Masters of the Yuan Dynasty" the unshakable core paradigms for archaistic painting in the Ming and Qing periods.^[12] Throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties, literati painters upheld the Southern School as the orthodox tradition, limiting their archaistic studies to this lineage and deliberately excluding the imperial court style of the Northern School. This selective approach preserved the defining characteristics of literati painting, such as its "scholarly refinement" and "pleasures of brush and ink", ensuring the purity and continuity of the tradition. This orientation is particularly evident in the works and writings of Wang Yuanqi. In his *Random Notes from the Rain Window*, he asserts that "a painting must be grounded in the style of Dong Yuan and Ju Ran, aiming for a unified, harmonious whole and a majestic, powerful grandeur... The Four Masters of the Yuan Dynasty privately revered them as their teachers and inherited their tradition".^[13] Wang regarded Dong Yuan, Ju Ran, and the "Four Masters of the Yuan Dynasty" as the core representatives of the Southern School tradition. He believed that only by following their example could one truly grasp the essence of literati painting's brushwork and aesthetic significance. In his artistic practice, Wang Yuanqi never adopted techniques associated with the Northern School, such as meticulous outlining or vivid coloration. Instead, he consistently grounded his work in the brush-and-ink language of the Southern School, drawing inspiration from Ni Zan's "free, spontaneous brushwork", and Wang Meng's "unraveling texture strokes", the latter of which was used to depict mountains and rocks. This commitment to the Southern School be-

came a widely accepted principle in the archaistic practices of Ming-Qing literati painters, ultimately establishing it as the dominant tradition within Chinese landscape painting.

2.3 The Cultural Imperative of Archaism

The choice of archaism among Ming-Qing literati painters emerged as a multifaceted response to the complex demands of cultural inheritance, technical refinement, aesthetic expression, and social recognition. From an art-historical perspective, this practice was not merely a repetition of classical brushwork, but rather a profound reorganization of traditional techniques and a dynamic evolution of aesthetic concepts, which collectively redefined the historical relationship between the artist, the artwork, and nature.

Traditional Chinese culture places great emphasis on the concept of "passing on the flame", symbolizing the continuity of knowledge and tradition. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, a period marked by profound societal transformations, China faced significant political, economic, and cultural challenges. Thinkers such as Gu Yanwu and Huang Zongxi, critical of the rigidity and emptiness of contemporary Neo-Confucianism, turned to ancient texts as a foundation for reform. Gu Yanwu, for example, championed the philosophy of "applying knowledge to governance", conducting thorough research into ancient institutions and cultural traditions. He integrated these insights with contemporary social realities to propose a series of constructive reforms. Similarly, Ming-Qing landscape painting mirrored this approach. Mi Fu, in his *History of Painting*, praised Dong Yuan for his "simplicity and naturalness, a quality not found in the Tang Dynasty",^[14] emphasizing that such distinctive artistic traits could only be preserved through the practice of imitation and inheritance. A prime example is Wen Zhengming's *Five Ridges*, where the "straight strokes" on the mountain surfaces clearly trace their origins to Dong Yuan's *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams*. Meanwhile, the mountain forms and the near-ground trees are modeled after Wang Meng and Wu Zhen, respectively. It is through this meticulous inheritance of techniques from past masters that the artistic legacies of Dong Yuan, Huang Gongwang, and others have endured, ensuring the unbroken continuity of the landscape painting lineage. By adapting classical brushwork in innovative ways, Ming-Qing artists accomplished a creative, yet faithful, transmission of tradition.^[15]

Aesthetic and spiritual needs were deeply intertwined, with the Southern School's emphasis on "simplicity and naturalness" and "subtlety and depth" striking a profound resonance with the Ming-Qing literati's pursuit of a "lofty and sincere" character. As such, archaism became a vital means of spiritual expression and fulfillment, closely tied to the natural landscapes and cultural textures of the Jiangnan region. The aesthetic essence of the Southern School was deeply rooted in the natural landscapes and cultural fabric of the Jiangnan region. Misty rains, winding waterways, and lush vegetation provided the perfect backdrop for the ink techniques that defined this style. Artists who lived and worked in Jiangnan became key practitioners and guardians of this aesthetic tradition, with archaism serving as a vital means of spiritual expression and a reflection of regional identity. Dong Qichang's influential theory of the "Southern and Northern

Schools”, drawing upon Chan Buddhist concepts, elevated Huang Gongwang’s “simplicity and naturalness” as the highest ideal of literati artistic pursuit, profoundly shaping the trajectory of later generations of painters.

In literati circles, archaism became a symbol of cultural identity, with mastery of the Southern School tradition and the ability to emulate classical models serving as key indicators of cultural sophistication. By the early Qing, Dong Qichang’s evaluative framework had become deeply ingrained, with the orthodox school, represented by the “Four Wangs”, establishing itself as the artistic benchmark due to their mastery of archaic techniques. In literati gatherings, the creation of archaic works became a key cultural activity, allowing painters to demonstrate their understanding of classical brushwork and secure their place within the core cultural sphere.

3 Three Categories of Archaistic Painting

The practice of archaistic painting is not a monolithic or fixed form; rather, it is a comprehensive system developed through sustained artistic exploration, centered on three core modalities: “literal imitation”, “interpretive imitation”, and “appropriative imitation”. These three categories are mutually reinforcing and interconnected, both within the artworks themselves and in the accompanying inscriptions. Each modality carries distinct artistic goals and characteristics, while collectively advancing the central pursuit of “drawing from the past to create the new”. Together, they fully embody the profound mastery and systematic thinking inherent in archaistic art.

3.1 Literal Imitation: Adhering to Principles, and Passing Down the Artistic Legacy

Literal imitation centers on the accurate restoration of ancient painting techniques and formal structures. It emphasizes the meticulous replication of key elements such as composition, brushwork, and coloration, aiming to engage with the principles and spirit of the ancient masters. Through this approach, the transmission of traditional artistic heritage is ensured, making it the “foundational method” in the practice of archaistic art. In archaistic creation, by adhering to principles, literal imitation involves meticulous reproduction of the compositional logic, brushwork techniques, and color paradigms of ancient masters. This approach faithfully captures the formal characteristics and artistic essence of the original works.

Wang Yuanqi's *Handscroll in the Manner of Huang Gongwang's "Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains"* (1703) is a classic example of literal imitation, directly modeled on Huang Gongwang's *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* (the "Wuyong Shi" version).^[16] (Fig.2) In terms of brushwork, Wang faithfully applies Huang Gongwang's signature “Pima Cun (hemp-fiber texture strokes)”, using fine, elongated strokes in layers to replicate the rich texture of the Fuchun Mountain rocks. The tree trunks are outlined with “Xiezhua Zhi (crab-claw branches)”, their strong yet restrained lines reflecting Huang's characteristic approach of “simplicity and naturalness”. The coloration follows the traditional principle of “gradating from light to dark, from wet to dry”.

Wang begins with light ink washes to establish the outlines of the landscape, progressively deepening the ink in key areas—such as the junctions between rocks and the nodes of tree trunks—creating a rich, layered ink effect that mirrors the “lush ink tones” of Huang Gongwang’s *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*. The composition adopts Huang’s “panoramic long-scroll format”, with a clear spatial progression: from the foreground’s rocks and trees, to the middle ground’s river and islets, and finally to the distant mountains enveloped in mist. This distinct spatial layering and smooth rhythm closely reflect the original’s sense of “a thousand miles within a foot”.



Fig. 2. *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* (Detail). Handscroll in the Manner of Huang Gongwang's "Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains" (Detail)^[16]

3.2 Interpretive Imitation: Drawing from the Ancients while Fusing One's Own Insight

The essence of interpretive imitation is not confined to the mechanical copying of ancient works but lies in understanding the techniques and artistic principles of the past, then infusing them with the artist's own interpretation of brushwork and aesthetic expression. The goal is to “imitate the spirit rather than the form”. Such works often draw from the tradition of the “Four Masters of the Yuan Dynasty”, with a particular reverence for Huang Gongwang. Through the process of “imitating the old masters to apprehend their underlying principles”, artists forge innovation. In this approach, personal experiences, emotional reflections, and artistic philosophies are embedded within the painting, with ancient techniques and compositions serving merely as a vehicle for self-expression.



Fig. 3. "Autumn Mountains" in the Manner of Huang Gongwang, in Color^[17]

As a result, these works bear a strong personal signature. For instance, Wang Yuanqi's *"Autumn Mountains" in the Manner of Huang Gongwang, in Color* (1713), inspired by Huang Gongwang's *Autumn Mountains*, exemplifies "interpretive imitation". (Fig.3) Wang had never seen the original work but understood it through oral accounts from his grandfather, Wang Shimin. His inscription reads: "I do not know how the original's brushwork or spirit appeared, but with my own brush, I express my own intent. In this process, there is inevitably a sense of distant tranquility and quiet contemplation." This clearly reflects his artistic philosophy of "prioritizing the spirit over the form".^[17] In the *"Autumn Mountains" in the Manner of Huang Gongwang, in Color*, Wang Yuanqi draws on Huang Gongwang's signature "Pima Cun (hemp-fiber texture strokes)", yet intentionally tempers the original's delicate, filament-like lines and layered washes to create a more forceful and vigorous manner. He described his brush as being "like a vajra pestle", delineating the contours of mountains and rocks with bold, weighty strokes that embody his distinctive style of "monumental strength and dynamic rhythm".^[18] Employing the light ochre palette, dominated by ochre and pale ink tones, the painting achieves the subtle harmony of "color within ink, and ink within color".



Fig. 4. The *Canglang Pavilion* (Poetry and Painting Handscroll)^[19]

The Canglang Pavilion (Poetry and Painting Handscroll) (Fig.4 & Fig.5) was created by Wang Yuanqi in the thirty-seventh year of the Kangxi era (1698) during his period of mourning for his father in Suzhou, at the request of Song Luo, the Governor of Jiangsu. Commissioned two years after Song Luo's restoration of the Canglang Pavilion (1696), the scroll, although based on Wang Yuanqi's firsthand observations of the newly renovated garden, deliberately refrains from literal depiction. Instead, it draws on the spiritual essence of Su Shunqin's *Record of the Canglang Pavilion* from the Song Dynasty, blending the landscape paradigms of Yuan artists Ni Zan and Huang Gongwang. This approach subtly reflects Wang Yuanqi's philosophy of reconciling official duties with the ideals of scholarly retreat.^[20]



Fig. 5. The *Canglang Pavilion* (Poetry and Painting Handscroll) (Detail)^[19]

Wang Yuanqi's theory of "the Dragon Vein's Opening and Closing", articulated in his *Random Notes from the Rain Window*, is fully realized in this scroll. Treating the

mountain topography as the “Dragon Vein” and the spatial arrangement of elements as the “Opening and Closing”, Wang seamlessly integrates personal expression into technical details, achieving a creative harmony where brushwork serves the artist's inner vision.^[21] The scroll employs a syncretic brushwork style, blending Ni Zan's sparse technique with Huang Gongwang's substantial one. The pavilions, pillars, and sparse willows along the shore are rendered in Ni Zan's “sketchy and spontaneous” manner—bold, simple lines with minimal texture, capturing the scholarly elegance of his style. In contrast, the rock formations are painted using a variation of Huang Gongwang's “Pima Cun (hemp-fiber texture strokes)”, with powerful, central-axis brushwork akin to a “vajra pestle”. The strokes are layered from the base to the peak, with clear veins and a grand presence. This method avoids the “undue austerity” of Ni Zan's style and mitigates the “ponderousness” often found in Huang Gongwang's brushwork. The entire scroll is suffused with light ochre washes, evoking the warm, mellow texture of autumn forests and streams. The Su Zimei Shrine, accentuated with a deeper ochre, becomes the focal point of the composition. The willows, pavilions, and roof tiles are lightly brushed with delicate stone green, maintaining a refined aesthetic while subtly guiding the viewer's gaze—from the mundane city walls to the spiritual realm of the landscape. This nuanced interplay of color creates an emotional journey that gradually elevates the viewer from the ordinary to the transcendent. Although a handscroll, the composition unfolds a coherent spatial narrative through the “ebb and flow of the dragon vein”. It begins with mist-covered trees and dwellings, transitioning through the middle section where continuous city walls create a seamless connection. At the midpoint, a small bridge leads into the garden's core, before culminating in the ethereal depiction of the Canglang Pavilion atop the mountain peak. A unique feature of the scroll is the deliberate spatial contradiction created by reversing the water flow's direction in relation to the mountain slopes, with the city walls acting as a continuous mid-ground element. This breaks the conventional mode of disengagement and spiritual excursion into nature, compelling viewers to reconsider the relationship between the depicted scene and the real world. Notably, the absence of any human figures throughout the scroll sharply contrasts with Wang Yuanqi's inclusion of figures in his *Ten Views of the West Lake*.

3.3 Appropriative Imitation: Conveying Emotion Through the Past, and Responding to the Present

The *Autumn Woods and Distant Peaks* (Fig.6) is a commissioned work by Wang Yuanqi, portraying not a realistic landscape but an idealized scene of vitality. Moving away from the traditional depictions of scholars' austerity and reclusion, this painting bursts with life. Wang departs from his customary use of dry brushwork, instead employing a more fluid, abundant application of ink, which imbues the painting with a warm, luminous quality. The seamless blending of color and ink creates a rich, layered texture, filling the composition with lush greenery and dynamic contrasts.



Fig. 6. Autumn Woods and Distant Peaks^[21]

The painting follows the classic “one river, two banks” composition typical of Ni Zan, but Wang Yuanqi’s approach goes beyond simple imitation. In the foreground, trees are placed at the center of the composition, while the mountains in the distance are layered and gradually fade into the horizon, reflecting the influence of Huang Gongwang’s style. Compared to Ni Zan’s works, Wang emphasizes the middle and distant landscapes, giving them a larger visual weight and creating a more expansive view. Additionally, the depiction of structures, such as houses and thatched pavilions along the banks, is more detailed and abundant than in Ni Zan’s compositions.

As a court-commissioned painting, Wang Yuanqi’s work was undoubtedly crafted with the emperor’s perspective in mind. His consideration of how the emperor would “view” the painting directly influenced his creative process. While drawing on the established artistic language of his predecessors, Wang also infused his work with his own innovations. He began by shaping the mountain forms with soft, wet brushstrokes and diluted ink, then added layers of blue, green, and light vermilion to texture the rocks. The vermilion, scattered throughout the handscroll, stands out, creating a vivid impression of autumn. The color palette—alternating between wet and dry, intense and subtle tones—intertwines dynamically.

4 The Cultural Value of Archaistic Painting

Archaistic painting, a key practice in the development of Chinese landscape painting, holds significant cultural value across multiple dimensions. It not only ensures the

transmission of techniques and traditions but also fosters innovation, while presenting certain limitations that warrant a critical, dialectical assessment.

4.1 Transmission of Techniques: Preserving the Legacy of Landscape Painting

Archaistic painting plays an indispensable role in the transmission of landscape painting techniques. The techniques of ancient masters, refined through centuries of practice, not only embody a profound observation of nature but also integrate the aesthetic principles of artistic expression, seamlessly blending scientific precision with artistic intuition. By carefully studying and reproducing classical works—from mastering the nuances of ink control and brushstroke texture to balancing composition and space—every detail serves as a living textbook for technical mastery. This immersive approach to technique not only lays a solid foundation for future generations of artists but also perpetually enriches and evolves the landscape painting tradition, bridging the gap between the classical and the modern.

Archaistic painting is not merely a replication; it is a profound act of inheriting and dynamically transmitting the cultural traditions of landscape painting. Through the language of brush and ink, it faithfully preserves the artistic styles, creative philosophies, and cultural essence of past masters, ensuring that the spiritual core of literati painting—“clarifying the mind to observe the Dao”—continues to transcend both time and space.

4.2 Drawing from the Past to Create the New: Forging New Aesthetic Frontiers

The core value of archaistic painting lies in blending tradition with innovation, achieving creative transformation and development. True archaistic practice involves artists thoroughly studying the techniques and styles of ancient masters, synthesizing these with their own artistic insights and contemporary sensibilities. This process results in a fresh artistic identity that fulfills the goal of “drawing from the past to create the new”. Wang Yuanqi exemplifies this approach. Drawing inspiration from Dong Yuan and Ju Ran's brushwork and integrating Huang Gongwang's compositional dynamism, he fused diverse artistic techniques into a unique style. Not only did he create the distinctive Loudong School of painting, but his compositional theory of “dragon vein” also redefined spatial expression in landscape painting, offering a new path for innovation within tradition.

Archaism in landscape painting is not merely a process of “imitating” the past, but rather an artistic strategy of “borrowing from the past to forge the future”. The brushstrokes and formal structures of ancient works serve as scaffolds, supporting the creation of new artistic expressions. At its core, this approach integrates personal insights and contemporary aesthetic ideals, fostering novel modes of artistic articulation. It is not about rigidly adhering to old forms, but using tradition as a lever to catalyze innovation in both theory and practice. As James Cahill remarks in *The Compelling Image: Nature and Style in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Painting*, “Once created, his

work could take its place as a new member within a definable stylistic series—this is a major advantage of the *fang* or ‘imitation’ mode—and at the same time, through its referential relationship to the old work, it could establish its own position within the whole course of art history.”^[22]

4.3 The Limitations of Collective Archaism

Despite its significant cultural value, the widespread practice of collective archaism during the Ming and Qing dynasties exposed notable shortcomings. Many artists at the time relied heavily on similar or identical works of ancient masters as their models, following uniform learning paths and creative methods. This led to a pervasive “sameness” in the resulting artworks. From the selection of models and tools to creative approaches and artistic understanding, there was a striking lack of differentiation among practitioners.

Walter Benjamin’s concept of “aura” in *The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction* highlights the intrinsic uniqueness of art, bound to its specific time and place.^[23] Some archaistic works, while technically faithful to the brushwork and compositions of ancient masters, fail to integrate the artist’s personal insights or innovative contributions. Consequently, many of these works lack individuality and creativity, making it difficult to develop a distinct artistic style. This not only led to periods of diminished vitality and innovation within the landscape painting tradition, but also resulted in a low “success rate” within collective archaism. Among countless imitators, only a few succeeded in transcending tradition, achieving meaningful innovation, and establishing a unique artistic style. Similar to mechanically reproduced artworks, these archaistic works function primarily as re-creations of the original, failing to convey the unique artistic spirit and cultural resonance of the source. This necessitates a more nuanced, dialectical evaluation of the cultural value of Ming–Qing archaistic painting.

5 Conclusion

Ming–Qing archaistic landscape painting should not be seen as a mere “regression” or “repetitive” copying in the evolution of art. Rather, it represents a systematic creative framework devised by literati painters to preserve cultural heritage, refine artistic techniques, and express spiritual aspirations. This practice stands in stark contrast to forgery, which is driven by financial motives. Archaistic painting is a legitimate artistic endeavor within the historical context, focused on learning from and passing down the classics, fostering innovation, and promoting cultural exchange. In contrast, forgery distorts the essence of art through intentional misrepresentation, deviating fundamentally in motivation, creative logic, and value orientation.

In contemporary cultural contexts, particularly outside China, archaistic painting is often trapped in the binary fallacy of “authentic versus inauthentic”, causing its artistic and cultural significance to be overlooked. This cognitive bias stems from a misunderstanding of the traditional Chinese approach of “learning from the past without being bound by it”. In fact, archaistic painting carries not only the brushwork techniques and compositional wisdom of past landscape masters but also embodies the deep reflections

of Chinese literati on nature, life, and culture. It serves as a vital conduit for transmitting the spiritual essence of traditional painting across time and space.

The study and reevaluation of Ming-Qing archaistic painting not only vindicate the practices of artists like Wang Yuanqi but, more importantly, offer crucial insights into the inheritance-innovation logic in traditional Chinese painting. Tradition should not be seen as a rigid, static "antique" but as a dynamic, living source that can be reactivated and imbued with new meanings. Through the in-depth study and creative transformation of classical works, Ming-Qing archaistic painting preserved the continuity of the landscape painting technique and cultural spirit, while simultaneously forging new paths for future artists to "find innovation within tradition". While collective archaism is often criticized for its uniformity and lack of innovation, these limitations are not intrinsic to the nature of archaistic painting, but rather result from the lack of artistic individuality and deep reflection among certain artists. This should not diminish the overall cultural value of archaistic painting. In contemporary artistic creation and cultural research, we should draw on the logic of balancing tradition and innovation, as exemplified by Ming-Qing archaistic painting. We should cherish the invaluable legacy of traditional painting, exploring the artistic principles and cultural meanings embedded in classical works. Simultaneously, we should avoid blind revivalism or the fragmentation of tradition. By integrating contemporary aesthetics with personal experience, we can invigorate the development of Chinese traditional painting, allowing its spiritual essence to thrive in a new cultural context.

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