

# Exploring Cosmic Consciousness in Fan Kuan's 'Travelling amid Mountains and Streams'

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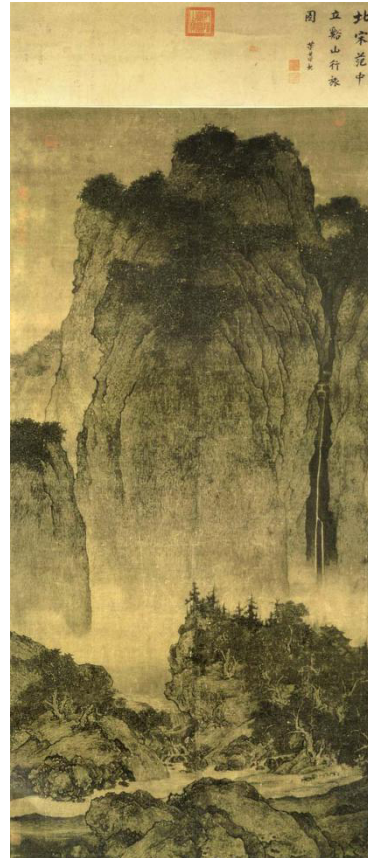
## **Abstract:**

Although Chinese landscape painting shares the same English name as European landscape painting, Western landscape painting is influenced by the modeling principle and Western classical philosophy. And few Western landscape paintings exist that depict the great landscapes. In China, by contrast, in the Northern Song Dynasty, landscape painting reached an unprecedented height. Therefore, this paper posits a hypothesis: the great landscape consciousness in the Northern Song Dynasty landscape painting is also influenced by Chinese thought; more specifically, it was influenced by Zhuangzi's cosmic consciousness. First and foremost, this paper determines the specific meaning of cosmic consciousness by exploring and sorting out previous literature. Secondly, this paper analyzes the specific historical background of the Northern Song Dynasty to explore the influence of the trend and fashion of The Times on the formation of the "great landscape" phenomenon. Then, this paper explores Fan Kuan's image and his creation process to connect with the cosmic consciousness reflected in this process and makes an in-depth analysis of the painting. Fan Kuan's choice of painting methods and the sharp contrast between the smallness of the person and the enormity of the mountains that he intentionally depicted produced the same effect: they highlight the grandeur of the natural scenery and embody the cosmic consciousness expressed by Fan Kuan—just like Zhuangzi's cosmology, he can calm down and understand the thoughts of the mountains to achieve the ideological realm of "the unity of heaven and man" in China.

**Keywords:** Cosmic consciousness; Chinese landscape painting; Travelling amid Mountains and Streams; Fan Kuan; Northern Song painting.

## 1. Introduction

While numerous studies have examined the aesthetic attributes or composition of Northern Song Dynasty landscape paintings, such as the analyses by Meng Jinhua and Wang Yuzhen regarding the new ideological form established in the Northern Song Dynasty landscape paintings on the giant barrier composition, there is a paucity of research addressing the factors that influenced the prevalent depiction of „great landscapes“ in these artworks [1]. This study will address this gap by concentrating on the prosperity and development of landscape painting during the Northern Song Dynasty. This study is significant for examining the factors that shape the „great landscape consciousness“ reflected in Northern Song Dynasty landscape paintings. It primarily addresses the specific implications of cosmic consciousness, the juxtaposition of Chinese and Western landscape painting, historical context, Fan Kuan himself and his creative process, picture analysis, and the validation of cosmic significance. Literature analysis is employed to examine and review pertinent resources and texts. This method’s value is in its ability to examine the thesis from several aspects, ensuring comprehensive and extensive investigation. Simultaneously, the authority and authenticity of the chosen literature can guarantee the profundity of the investigation, facilitating its advancement and the lucidity of the conclusion. The primary objective of this study is to establish that the great landscape consciousness of Northern Song Dynasty landscape painting was influenced by Zhuangzi’s cosmological view. To accomplish this, the paper analyses Fan Kuan’s cosmological viewpoint through the deliberate choice of painting techniques and the pronounced size contrast between human figures and mountains in the artwork *Travelling amid Mountains and Streams* (Figure 1), thereby affirming the alignment of his cosmic consciousness with that of Zhuangzi.



**Fig. 1 Travelling amid Mountains and Streams**

## 2. Concept

### 2.1 Cosmological View

Zhuangzi, a thinker, philosopher, and litterateur from the middle Warring States period and a representative of the Taoist school, posits that the universe is boundless in space and eternal in time, while human existence is constrained and finite. In comparison to the boundless world, human existence is minuscule. In Peripateticism, Zhuangzi used the viewpoint of celestial entities to emphasise the vastness of the universe by surveying it from above [2]. This view of the universe reflected in the painting is the consciousness of “great landscapes”. Influenced by Zhuangzi’s cosmic consciousness, how to show the discussion of the landscape stretching for thousands of miles in the size of the space in the painting declared the maturity of this painting theory after the “three distance method” was proposed by Guo Xi [2].

### 2.2 Chinese Landscape Painting

Sharing the same name as “landscape painting” in English,

Chinese “landscape painting” is often confused with European “landscape painting” in concept. While landscape paintings of the latter occasionally feature mountains and rivers, the majority focus on portraying flat terrain (cities, towns, fields, or points of interest), as opposed to the “great landscape” of the former. This outcome is attributable not only to the modelling principles, such as head-up and focal perspective, but also to the impact of Western classical philosophy. Western philosophy highlights the distinction between subject and object. When the observer admires the exquisite beauty of nature, a clear conflict arises between the observer and the observed. The Western cosmological perspective of “the separation of heaven and man” and “mind and matter observing one another” fosters an aesthetic inclination towards the external; concurrently, European maritime culture underscores the domination of nature and prioritises reality and rationality [2, 3]. Consequently, Western painting regards the accurate depiction of objective objects as its artistic standard, aligning with Constable’s assertion: “Landscape painters must traverse the field with a respectful mindset towards nature, and they must examine nature with the earnest and committed disposition of scientists [4].” Confronted with the actual landscape, the painter seeks an optimal angle after establishing a fixed position; although the scenery offers a degree of selection, the line of sight remains within a defined range and does not stray excessively, akin to “photography” [3]. The realistic and objective painting style constrained European landscape painting from depicting subjects from a top-down perspective without advanced technologies, such as helicopters, thereby limiting its capacity to create expansive and profound panoramic landscapes. Why is China able to produce “great landscape” paintings despite its lack of required technology?

The pinnacle of ancient Chinese painting is attributed to the Song Dynasty, particularly renowned for its landscape painting during the Northern Song period. At this juncture, one may enquire: What factors contributed to the emergence of “great landscape consciousness” in Northern Song Dynasty landscape painting? Is it analogous to the development of elements in European landscape art, which is similarly shaped by the cosmological perspective of its culture? The great landscape consciousness of Northern Song Dynasty landscape painting was influenced by Zhuangzi’s cosmological view.

### 3. Historical Background

#### 3.1 The Rise of Painting in the Song Dynasty

After the mid-10th century, the Song Dynasty unified the country, ending the 50-year separation of the five dynas-

ties. During the early Song Dynasty, many policies facilitated the revival of agriculture and handcraft industries, leading to a wealthy urban commercial economy that created favourable conditions for painting’s advancement [5]. During the early Song Dynasty, the emperors established the Hanlin Painting Academy and invited renowned artists from across the nation to join, offering substantial wages for their service as imperial painters [5]. Outside the academy, civilian painters walked among the mountains and rivers, or through the streets, with subtle observations to depict the human world.

#### 3.2 The Origin of “Monumental Landscape Painting”

Fan Kuan’s *Travelling amid Mountains and Streams* is a representative of monumental landscape painting. “Monumental” refers to a specific compositional approach in landscape painting. The painting’s central composition’s towering peak dominates the canvas, imparting a feeling of the imposing nature of steep mountains and formidable energy. The painting of *Kuang Lu* (figure 2.) by Jinghao, a painter of the Five Dynasties, is the originator of the “monumental” landscape. A cluster of summits encircles the principal peak, enhancing its magnificence.



Fig. 2 Kuang Lu painting

The emergence of monumental landscape painting is closely related to the dense population in the Song Dynasty and people’s need for relaxation. Ichisada Miyazaki, a Japanese Oriental historian; Hsieh Newa, a renowned 20th-century French sinologist; and several other academics regard the Song Dynasty as a precursor to modern

civilisation in literature. Kaifeng, the capital of the Northern Song Dynasty, boasted a population of approximately one million inhabitants. During the same period in other countries, specifically prior to the 13th and 14th centuries, Florence emerged as the most populous city in the 13th century, with over 90,000 inhabitants, while Milan, with a population nearing 90,000, was the largest city in Europe. Bianliang in the Northern Song had a population of several hundred thousand, whereas Lin'an in the Southern Song had a population of 2.5 million, which was 25 times that of Florence. Consequently, the Northern and Southern Song Dynasties of China may be regarded as the earliest instances of urban modernisation. Nonetheless, the high population density posed a challenge: Upon completing their arduous daily labour, the inhabitants of the Song Dynasty found their capital city to be congested and cacophonous, depriving them of relaxation and enjoyment. Were it contemporary, individuals would desire to travel to the adjacent countryside for exploration. Conversely, individuals of the Song Dynasty, with less advanced transportation methods, employed a similar approach: they created great landscape paintings and displayed them in their homes, reclining in bed to admire these artworks. When individuals recline in bed and gaze upwards towards the mountains, the intricacies of the temple building become visible, combined with the striking visual effect of the monumental landscape painting, alleviating their exhaustion. Monumental landscape painting has emerged as a new artistic movement.

## 4. Picture Analysis

### 4.1 Fan Kuan Himself and Creating Process

Fan Kuan, the representative civilian painter of the Northern Song Dynasty, also known as Zhongzheng and Zhongli, hails from Shaanxi Huayuan (present-day Tongchuan Yaozhou District, Shaanxi) and is a master of landscape painting from the Song Dynasty [5]. In his youth, Fan Kuan exhibited a mild and generous disposition, characterised by calm and rational speech; nonetheless, his demeanour was coarse and undisciplined, and he maintained a lifelong affinity for alcohol [6]. Nonetheless, Fan Kuan exhibits outstanding rigour in his painting. He is diligent, pragmatic, and inventive. Fan Kuan's landscape painting was influenced by the Five Dynasties painter Jing Hao and the early Song dynasty master Li Cheng. Li Cheng, a descendant of the Tang Dynasty, had been in Chang' for generations and excelled in landscape painting with light ink, a skill he inherited from his familial heritage [5]. Under their guidance, Fan Kuan's artistic abilities advanced swiftly. During his educational journey, Fan Kuan came

to understand that "the teachings of predecessors stem from their surroundings; it is preferable to study the style of masters rather than nature itself; acquiring knowledge about nature is inferior to understanding the particulars within [6]." He frequently ventured alone into the mountains for extended periods of time without returning home to fully understand the mountains' genuine visage. He climbed Qinling Huashan Mountain and meticulously examined the terrain's characteristics. To comprehend the authentic essence of nature, he withdrew to Zhongnan Mountain, spending his days amidst the mountains and rivers, scrutinising his surroundings and exploring nature's allure. Fan Kuan predominantly resided in Shaanxi during his secluded existence, and the distinctive geography of the Loess Plateau influenced his singular painting style. The painting brush, characterised by its majestic and robust qualities, predominantly depicts the grand and austere mountain.

Fan Kuan traversed the mountains, perceiving the natural landscape from a dynamic vantage point rather than a static perspective. He selected the optimal vantage point by surveying the entire mountain. After obtaining a comprehensive impression, he used his imagination to envision a perspective from the clouds, achieving a bird's-eye view of the mountain and its natural landscape, akin to a bonsai. This method, known as the "big view, small method," allowed him to grasp the overall situation in his painting. The scatter perspective observation method is employed to examine a scene, focussing on an image. This dynamic viewpoint for observation is sometimes referred to as the removal method. This approach of observation and scene-setting in Chinese landscape painting uniquely integrates emotion with scenery, effectively enlivening the essence of Chinese landscape painting known as "artistic conception."

### 4.2 Analysis of Artistic Works

At first sight of this painting, there is nothing more astonishing than seeing enormous mountains that occupy two-thirds of the picture and seem to rise out of the mist, standing steadily with great momentum. The peaks are angular, harsh, and cold. The distribution of lush trees on the top of the mountain does not make the temperament of the mountain a little soft but aggravates the sense of alienation. On the right side of the picture, against the heavy contrast of the mountains, a very thin waterfall slopes down, adding movement to the quiet atmosphere and then rising into a hazy fog. Slowly and unwillingly, the eyes moved down the picture, only to find something else splendid. Under the mountain, huge rocks protrude, and the trees stand tall and straight. A boulder lies at the

bottom of the frame, seemingly blocking the view but only partially covering the path. Paths run through the picture from east to west. A train of donkeys carrying loads, spurred by two travellers, moved slowly from right to left. The stream rushes out from the left and right slopes in the middle, exposing half of the temple ridge on the right side of the hill, deep in the thick woods. A walking monk makes his way to worship along the mountain path of this stream. This painting, known as “the first Song painting,” is Fan Kuan’s *Travelling amid Mountains and Streams*, a classic of the panoramic landscape painting of the early Song Dynasty and a representative work of “great landscapes” [7].

## 5. Discussion

Examining the artistic approaches employed by Fan Kuan in his portrayal of rocks reveals that he was “building” the terrain rather than merely “depicting” it. In the same attempt to depict nature, different artistic techniques can achieve different painting styles and present different natural looks in different paintings—the difference and creativity of which reflect the painter’s “build” of nature—that is, a unique landscape painting world that includes initiative, personal consciousness of the painter, and does not completely rely on natural appearance.

In Fan Kuan’s perspective, the rocks on the Loess Plateau are robust and substantial, as depicted in Figure 3. Previous “accumulations” failed to accurately depict these rocks, prompting Fan Kuan to develop the “rain accumulation,” which maintains the aesthetic of his landscape painting with its “thick peaks and strong potential.” Fan Kuan’s landscape exhibits a profound sense of vitality within the “structure” of these approaches: “The line resembles iron bars, the accumulation mirrors iron nails, the mountain appears as iron casting, and the tree embodies iron pouring [8].” Fan Kuan’s accumulation technique, known as “rain spots,” creates linear and rigid iron lines by aggregating clusters of points, akin to the density of raindrops. Rain spots intermixed with brief sliver accumulation, resembling hail combined with rain, accentuate the mountain’s texture significantly. Fan Kuan’s ink accumulation technique similarly produces a large grey impression by repetitive application of ink. He initially delineated the house with boundary lines, then applied ink cages, and painted the mountain with ink cages after the house was completed. The mountain rocks exhibited distinct convex and concave features, with varying shades of ink; the concave areas were markedly deep, while the convex regions were notably light. The leaves around the trees and the ink exhibit distinct qualities, collectively evoking a sense of melancholy and simplicity. Mi Fu examined

Fan Kuan’s landscape picture, stating, “The summit of the mountain is conducive to dense forests, yet it has since become desiccated and aged [8].” Fan Kuan favoured depicting deep mountainous forests; the dark, substantial foliage enhances the gravity of the composition.

Consequently, through the techniques of rain and ink accumulation, Fan Kuan delineated the Yin and Yang of the rock, distinguishing the sunlit and shaded sides, and rendering a texture that is as sombre as the nocturnal mountain, thereby accentuating the mountain’s steepness and solidity while emphasizing its grandeur and magnificence.



**Fig. 3 Accumulation methods used on the top of the mountain**

When dealing with the relationship between man and landscape, Fan Kuan presents a sharp contrast, as is shown in Figure 4. From the picture as a whole, the first thing that can be noticed is the landscape. After lamenting the grandeur of the landscape, only through careful observation can we see Fan Kuan’s portrayal of the characters. For example, after zooming in, the figure in the lower right corner is even lower than the branches of the trees behind it, only about half the height of the boulder. To be sure, Fan Kuan deliberately highlights the grandeur of the mountain and the smallness of the man.



**Fig. 4 Fan Kuan’s portrayal of the characters and the sharp contrast between the size of characters and landscapes**

Zhang Huai articulated in *The Pure Complete Works of Landscape-The Later Preface* that man’s “heavenly machine” signifies the inherent essence bestowed by “Tao.” Since that time, landscape painters embody a spirit of co-existence with all elements in their mental representations, while their pen and ink encapsulate the essence of heaven

and earth, reflecting the artist's awareness and responsiveness to the transformations in nature. Furthermore, the Northern Song Dynasty calligrapher Huang Tingjian asserted, "Desire is beneficial in the pen when it is virtuous in the heart." Landscape painting embodies a predominant consciousness of profound spirit and charm, transcending external disturbances of the objective image, thus revealing the authentic temperament of ink writing.

Consequently, in this painting, both the unique techniques employed by Fan Kuan and the juxtaposition with the triviality of humanity accentuate the majesty of the mountains and rivers. The visitor perceives not the typical natural scenery but rather the manifestation of Fan Kuan's authentic character and spiritual ideology, liberated from the outward distractions of the objective image. This picture reveals that Fan Kuan perceives the universe as expansive and deserving of reverence. In his admiration for the exquisite beauty of nature, he is prepared to relinquish worldly pursuits, possessing a pure heart to comprehend nature, lament the creator's enchantment, and ultimately "resonate with the mountains," therefore attaining the state of "the unity of heaven and man [9]."

Prior to the emergence of literati painting during the Southern Song Dynasty, Lou Yue asserted in his *Attack on the Wei Collection inscriptions*: "Fan Kuan's painting is unparalleled [10]." Following the observation of the imitation, certain paintings have not only forfeited the majestic grandeur characteristic of Fan Kuan's mountainous landscapes but have also adopted an air of coquetry.

Landscape is subjective and differs among individuals, as well as being a reflection of cosmological concepts.

## 6. Conclusion

The results of this study are Fan Kuan's painting *Traveling amid Mountains and Streams* emphasises the grandeur of mountains, which is precisely the consciousness of great landscapes reflected in Zhuangzi's cosmological view; thus, further research conclusions are drawn: The great landscape consciousness of Northern Song Dynasty

landscape painting was influenced by Zhuangzi's cosmological view. This study offers numerous valuable references for future research in this area, primarily focusing on the factors that contributed to the development of the great landscape consciousness in Chinese landscape painting. Future studies should focus more on other paintings that clearly reflect the great landscape consciousness, to confirm the influence of cosmic consciousness on the great landscape painting. Alternatively, they could analyze typical landscape paintings from other cultures, delving deeply into the role of thought in shaping its characteristics.

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