

Utilizing Chinese Calligraphy Techniques to Create a Visual Feast: Wang Shu's Watercolour Paintings

Ruei-Jen Diana Fan¹, Paul Juinn Bing Tan^{2,*}

¹*Department of Early Childhood and Family Education,
National Taipei University of Education, Taiwan, China*

²*Department of Applied Foreign Languages,
National Penghu University of Science and Technology, Taiwan, China*

**Corresponding Author*

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Abstract: This article describes the works of Wang Shu, an Austrian national-level artist, who was granted this title on May 14, 1986 by Austria's Ministry of Education, Arts, and Sports after earning critical acclaim within the country. This article begins with an overview of Wang Shu as a person and the life that he led, followed by a discussion of his artistic achievements in Austria. In the main section of this article, a selection of his watercolour paintings that exhibit strong Chinese art elements (such as painting and poetry; painting and philosophy, painting and aesthetics and the flexible use of Western art materials) are further examined in detail. This article then concludes with a discussion of the links between Chinese culture and Wang Shu's watercolour paintings.

1. Introduction

Wang Shu's watercolor paintings show common scenes, they are filled with emotional expressions that are difficult to describe. He managed to convey his aloof temperament in his paintings and within the world of aesthetics. His passion for and devotion to art have contributed to remarkable achievements in his life. As the research motivation, this article begins with an elucidation of Wang Shu's life and times. Next, his artistic achievements in Taiwan and Austria are discussed. A number of his watercolor paintings with three Chinese art features (painting and poetry, painting and philosophy, and painting and aesthetics) are then selected to serve as the basis of this article. This article describes Wang Shu's path towards success in Austria and does not compare him with other watercolor artists.

Wang Shu was born in Yantai in Shandong Province during the Second Sino-Japanese War and grew up as an orphan. He returned to Vienna. After numerous strolls along the banks of the Danube, countless walks in the various parks of Vienna, and being immersed in the musical ambiance of Salzburg and Vienna, he realized that this was the artistic environment he had dreamed of for so long, so he decided to settle down in Vienna. He was adamant that paintings reflect one's self-cultivation of moral integrity and knowledge, and there was no need to imitate or plagiarize the works of others. He also openly rejected

involvement in art groups, and avoided exchanges with others. His aloof lifestyle was similar to that of a lone eagle, lofty and unyielding. He fully utilized an unrestrained style, one that allowed him "to paint freely according to one's desires, leaving no traces of ink on the landscape; to paint smoothly so that the scenes are not black." It is not difficult for one to discover his passion for rambling in nature in his paintings, which corresponds to his saying: "I enjoy greeting the wind when I am happy, I like to watch the misty mountains when I am free."

Since Wang Shu had been studying classical Chinese texts from a young age, he had a profound grasp of Chinese poetry and literature. By diligently studying art history, he realized that, as a whole, humans are just minor actors in nature, while omnipresent fluctuations in nature were demonstrated through his vision. The natural world was everything he needed to express his style of art. Wang Shu was inspired by nature, and listened attentively to the sound of the earth. He was transfixed by the ever-changing seasons, and moved by the pulse of the earth. He constantly practiced on paper and expressed his passion for art through vivid colors. Finally, he managed to create a unique style of drawing that aligned with his way of life and the needs of his soul.

Wang Shu published 14 painting and poetry collections from 1977 to 2018, and 7 poetry collections from 2001 to 2018. Hence, it can be seen that over the years, Wang Shu has not only created artworks, but also written poems. Poetic meanings can be observed in his paintings, while his paintings can be visualized in his poems. At his current age of 86, his innovative life sets him apart from common artists. He depicts China's persona in his paintings, and his poems are permeated with China's charm.

2. Reflections of Chinese Art Elements in Wang Shu's Watercolour Paintings

At first glance, his paintings are created with Western watercolor styles, but upon close inspection, there is an indescribable essence of classic Chinese traditions that touches the inner soul. Wang Shu stressed that those who engage in artistic creations should not only have solid and profound techniques and concepts in the field of art, but must apply self-learned thoughts in the fields of aesthetics, philosophy, and literature. In the main section of this article, a selection of his watercolor paintings that exhibit strong Chinese art elements (such as painting and poetry; painting and philosophy, painting and aesthetics and the flexible use of Western art materials) are further examined in detail. The following examples are reflective of his thoughts:

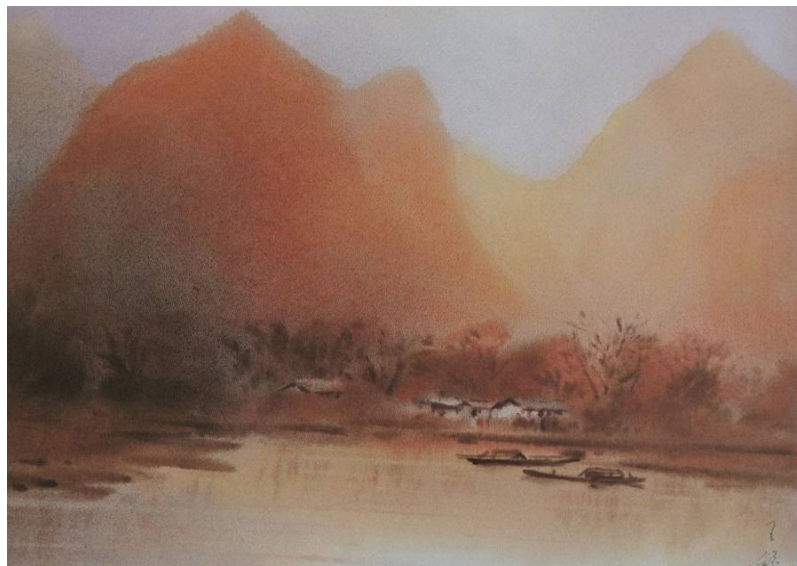


Figure 1: Wang Shu, *Tranquil Beauty on the Autumn Waters*, 1990 [1] (Watercolor on paper, 50cm x 65cm)

2.1 Paintings and poetry

When artists see majestic mountains and rivers, they will interpret such beauty through their subjective feelings and comprehension and become one with it. "These mountains and rivers are spiritually dissolved in me." Only then will these artists create vivid and moving images. Wang Shu's watercolor paintings have rich poetic flavor, as according to him, poetry and paintings are both ideal approaches for expressing his observations on everything in the universe (as shown in Figures 1).

2.2 Paintings and philosophy

When one looks at Wang Shu's paintings, it is as if one can hear the teachings of Laozi and Zhuangzi. His watercolor paintings are like alum, commanding yet soothing. Those who appreciate his paintings often think about the existence of one's disposition and life. A saying by Zhuangzi that goes "He who is nourishing his mind's aim forgets his body, and he who is nourishing his body discards all thoughts of gain, and he who is carrying out the Tao forgets his own mind [2] can be used to describe how Wang Shu does not overemphasize his relationship with other humans. The harmony between humans and nature is often expressed in Chinese art, especially in Shan shui paintings. Taoism emphasizes being one with everything, and Zhuangzi has said that Tao is everywhere.

In a certain sense, one can recall a statement by Mencius: "To completely believe in (books) would be worse than not having a (book) at all." The poem that goes along with *Romance at the Banks of the Danube* goes, "Perhaps it's the popularity, as I had the urge to follow my desire to experience a sunset at the river. The clouds looked so lovely together with the setting sun [3]." See Figure 2.



Figure 2: Wang Shu, *Romance on the Banks of the Danube*, 2009 [4] (Watercolor on paper, 40cm x 38cm)

2.3 Paintings and aesthetics

Wang Shu's paintings mostly follow the principle of qiyun, and his inner feelings are resonated in his works (Figures 3). Guo Ruoxu explained that qi is a combination of objective personalism and subjective spiritualism in the Creator's process of creation, while Xie He explained from an objective perspective that qiyun is the most essential and important spiritual element of the Creator [5]. Throughout the process of painting, Wang Shu's paintings expressed his understanding of and his self-cultivated attitude about aesthetics. The ebullience in Wang Shu's paintings is definitely from his pure soul. If he had not poured

his soul into his art, each painting would have become a blank and dull canvas, lacking in qiyun, and filled with deceitful aesthetic conceptions.



Figure 3: Wang Shu, *Birds Attracted by the Quietness of the Woods on a Tranquil Day*, 1982 [6]
(Watercolor painting, 50cm x 65cm)

3. Results and Discussion

Wang Shu is a self-taught artist who intensively studied the works of early contemporary artists such as Huang Binhong and Lin Fengmian. Afterwards, he became a master of nature paintings, and was constantly experimenting with techniques as well as delving into Chinese aesthetics, philosophy, and literature. His mastery of all these aspects enabled him to create his own unique style of painting.

Wang Shu created his own maneuverable painting board, stressed the use of water to bring out the colors, and insisted on using Chinese ink brushes and professional watercolor paints. Wang Shu is known for his watercolor paintings of lakes and misty mountains. The undulating surfaces of the lakes and the misty ambiance of the mountains are visually captivating.

4. Conclusion

Wang Shu utilized calligraphy techniques to their fullest to create a visual feast that generates a wave of emotions similar to that conveyed through dance. His expertise in and control of the roughness, subtleness, gentleness, harshness, cadence, intermittence, and flexible transition of lines can be seen in his paintings of branches and birds.

We know that the welfare and mental health of our society increasingly require art therapy. Art is a bridge between experiences and the dissemination of values and emotions, even in different cultures. It is a powerful “visual language” that provides individuals with a unique expression of personal creativity [7].

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