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Negotiating the Literati Landscape Tradition: A Study of Bingyi's "The Shape of the Wind"

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Abstract: In this paper, I explore Bingyi's dialogue between the Chinese landscape painting tradition and her identity as a Chinese contemporary female artist. For this purpose, I analyse the ink scroll and art performance "The Shape of the Wind in the Fuchun Mountains" that was exhibited in Berlin in 2012. Firstly, I provide a historical overview to acknowledge how the genre of landscape painting has evolved throughout the centuries, to finally emerge as one of the most distinguished traditions in Chinese art. Secondly, I delve into Bingyi's video performance "The Shape of the Wind" to understand how she negotiates the literati landscape painting tradition. In such a manner, the artist embraces the Daoist implication within *shanshui and* radicalises it in her contemporary performative artistic process. Through this paper, my aim is not only to shed light on Bingyi's art practice, but also to spark interest in the works of contemporary female artists, which, despite being embedded with ground-breaking research, often remain overlooked.

Keywords: Bingyi, The Shape of the Wind, Literati Landscape, Daoism, Contemporary Art, Art Performance, Chinese Contemporary Art

Introduction

In the elaborate dance between tradition and modernity, Chinese art has undergone a radical evolution since the encounter with Western art and the race to modernization, which materialised with the end of the Qing Dynasty (1912) and consequently culminated in the second half of twenty-century China.[1] Chinese contemporary art has drifted so far from its historical roots that discerning the influences between Western and Chinese contemporary art has become a challenging undertaking.[2] In this day and age, artists from Mainland China engage in current artistic approaches, such as performance — Xiao Lu, Zhu Yu, Zhang Huan — photography — Ren Hang, Luo Yang, Yijun Liao — and so forth. However, the urge to reconnect with the past that had been disrupted by the relentless pursuit of progress and industrialization, notably during and after the Cultural Revolution (1966 –1976), is evident in the efforts of certain contemporary Chinese artists. In fact, they seek to engage with and negotiate traditional art practices and media. Among these, Huang Bingyi is one of the most fascinating exponents.

[1] Tan, "Landscape Without Nature," 226.
[2] Chang, "Tradition in Transition," 14.

Huang Bingyi was born in 1975 in Beijing, China, but moved to the US after graduating from high school to pursue university-level education in biomedical and electronic engineering. After that, she changed her path to undertake a Ph.D. in Art History and Archeology at Yale University, from which she graduated with a dissertation concerning the art of the Han Dynasty in 2005.[3] Eventually, she decided to embark on her artistic journey as an architectural designer, writer, curator, cultural critic, and social activist.[4] In spite of being a multi-faced artist who engages in various techniques and media, such as oil painting, architectural installation, performance art, and filmmaking, she is best known for her ink paintings.[5] Drawing from the literati landscape paintings, Bingyi skillfully negotiates and resizes the literati art practice, which is conventionally regarded as a 'male tradition,' to fulfil her artistic need. First, she aims to record both the climatic and topological nuances of both the natural and urban landscapes or the microcosmic world.[6] Additionally, she seeks more personal freedom, aiming to transcend assumptions related to age and gender.[7]

In this paper, I explore Bingyi's dialogue between the Chinese landscape painting tradition and her identity as a contemporary Chinese artist. The focus is on her ink scroll and art performance titled "Shape of the Wind in Fuchun Mountains," which was exhibited in Berlin in 2012. This artwork is deliberately divided into two parts to reference both the renowned "Dwelling in Fuchun Mountains" by Yuan Dynasty painter Huang Gong-Wang and the post-war division between East and West Berlin.[8] Therefore, I first introduce the Chinese tradition of landscape painting from a historical viewpoint, while also focusing on the social and Daoist/Buddhist implications inherent in this genre. Secondly, I analyse the video performance that documents the making of the ink scroll "The Shape of the Wind in Fuchun Mountains." This study aims to better understand the elements inherited from the landscape painting tradition and Bingyi's negotiation of Chinese landscape paintings — also known as *shanshui* 山水 (mountains and waters), — commonly considered a pictorial male tradition.

Bingyi and The Literati Tradition of Landscape Painting

Gender biases have always existed and still persist in the art world today. Compared to a traditional Chinese setting, where artistic practices were exclusively male traditions to which women did not have access,[9] the contemporary art scene has certainly become more diverse and inclusive. Nevertheless, Bingyi's identity as a contemporary female artist still occupies a somewhat ambiguous status. She is regarded as an intruder within a genre that has always belonged to the literati tradition and is still considered a male tradition.[10] Far from being a feminist tool to assert her identity as a female artist,[11] Bingyi's engagement with the Chinese landscape painting tradition finds its roots in the artist's academic journey and personal exploration of art. Her ultimate artistic purpose revolves around the idea that art serves as a means to embody eternity.[12]

[3] Bingyi, "The Artist at Work."
[4] Bingyi. "Introduction."
[5] Bingyi. "Introduction."
[6] INK studio. "Biography."
[7] Guest, "(In)visible Ink," 7.
[8] Guest, "(In)visible Ink," 7.
[9] Fong, "Images of Women," 22.
[10] Guest, "(In)visible Ink," 3, 7.
[11] Guest, "(In)visible Ink," 8.
[12] Guest, "(In)visible Ink," 8.

From 2007 onwards, Bingyi has actively showcased her installations and paintings in the US, South Korea, Spain, Belgium, Canada, Hong Kong, and China.[13] Throughout her artistic journey, she has consistently pursued a practice of embodiment, which is evident in the integration of the techniques of ink and performance in her artworks ─ a unique fusion of the traditional artistic medium of brushwork and contemporary performative elements. Bingyi does not intend to confine her artwork within the traditional parameters of landscape painting, whether referring to the Western concept of the "sublime vista" or to the Chinese water ink tradition. Therefore, it is essential to acknowledge her art as embedded within the Daoist and Buddhist implications that hold significance in the genesis of the landscape tradition in China. By deploying performances that are reminiscent of Daoist rituals, Bingyi embodies the interplay between Heaven and Earth, infusing her art with profound meaning.[14]

Originating in the Wei-Jin Period as a genre connected to the intellectuals' culture,[15] the Chinese landscape painting tradition, also known as *shanshui*, evokes different meanings and interpretations depending on the historical context. The initial artistic form of landscapes can be traced back to the domain of poetry[16] — the so-called 'metaphysical poetry' (**Figure 1**)[17]— and concerns the Buddhist and Daoist practices related to meditation and spiritual rituals.[18] During that time, it was not a clearly established genre, nor was it a means for attaining spiritual fulfilment or an overarching theme until the late Tang period.[19] Wang Wei (699 – 759) stands as one of the most influential literati artist from the Tang Dynasty who introduced a poetic dimension to landscape paintings, thereby elevating the status of painting to the elite realm.[20] Landscape paintings, akin to poetry, didn't aim for a precise portrayal of nature but sought to evoke the powerful energy inherent in nature through dynamic and deliberate brushstrokes.[21] The emergence of landscape as a dominant artistic expression, especially for the literati class, developed and consequently peaked under the Song Dynasty.[22] In a more liberal and advanced context, art began to thrive among the middle class, scholars and officials, serving as a means to construct social identities.[23]

Figure 1. Feng Chengsu. Copy of *Lanting Xu* (Preface of the Orchid Pavilion, detail). The original was composed in 353 CE by Wang Xizhi, this renowned calligraphy work serves as a pillar example for the metaphysical poetry genre. Tang Dynasty, Ink on paper. 26,4 cm – 650 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing. Wikimedia, public domain.

[13] White Rabbit Gallery, "Bingyi."
[14] Guest, "Between Heaven and Earth."
[15] Kang, et al, « Chinese Landscape Painting, » 1.
[16] Hinton, "The Tao of Painting."
[17] Nozomi Waku. "Metaphysics and Metaphysical Poetry in the Eastern Jin Dynasty," 234.
[18] Thorp and Vinograd, "Chinese Art & Culture," 243.
[19] Ning, "Landscape Painting in the Tang Dynasty," 161–163.
[20] Alfreda Murck. "Su Shi and Zhao Lingrang: Brush Ideas of Wang Wei," 3.
[21] Yimeng Zhang, Shuangyi Cui. "Reclusive Dwelling Schema of Chinese Landscape Painting: Narrative Medium, Visualisation, and Implication." 530–531.
[22] Sturman, "Landscape," 182.
[23] Powers, "Artistic Status and Social Agency," 358–361.

Landscape painting underwent a significant evolution during the Song Dynasty, driven by various factors. Contrary to the 20th-century Western expectations of a stereotypical China living in harmony with nature,[24] the Song empire was actively exploiting nature to fuel both the economy and urbanisation, thus contributing to what is now termed 'environmental despoliation' (**Figure 2**).[25] This context adds depth to the significance of landscape paintings. They were not only a representation of experienced nature, but also served as a form of escape from the urban environment where the majority of artists and scholars used to lead their lives.[26] Moreover, naturalism gained an ever-growing relevance in the literati circle during the Song Dynasty as a genre expressing the intellectuals' thoughts and emotions.[27] According to the "literati theory," it was not the verisimilitude to be sought, but the manipulative visualisation of the naturalness *ziran* 自然 (literally self-so, natural)[28] as "a vehicle for expressing dimensions of the self," which aimed at demonstrating the ethical superiority of the masters' subjectivity and, concurrently, rejecting the taste of the imperial court.[29]

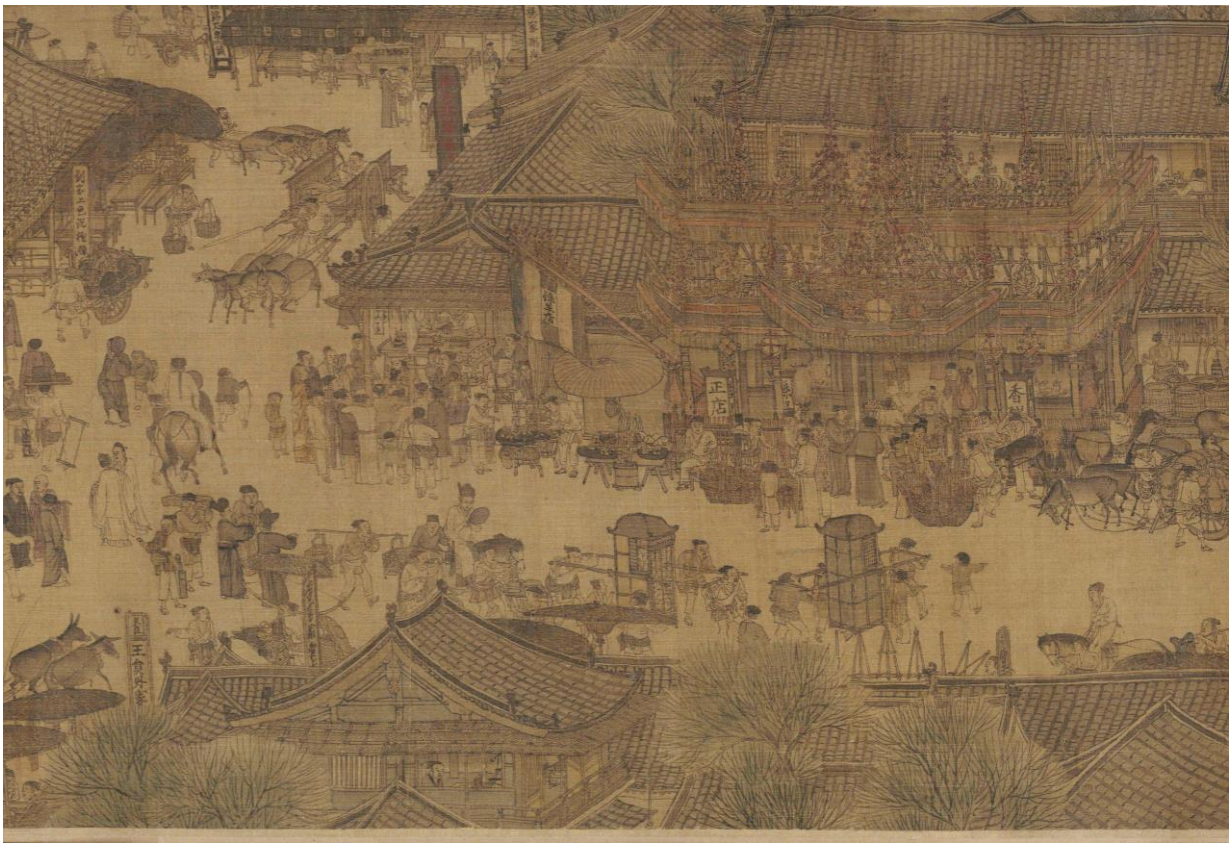

Figure 2. Attributed to Zhang Zeduan, *Along the River during Qingming Festival* (detail, section 1). Northern Song Dynasty, 12th century. Handscroll, ink and colour on silk. 24.8 x 528.7 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing. Wikimedia, public domain.

[24] Hudson, "Placing Asia in the Anthropocene," 951.
[25] Thorp and Vinograd, "Chinese Art & Culture," 242.
Tan, "Landscape Without Nature," 224–225.
[26] Thorp and Vinograd, "Chinese Art & Culture," 242.
[27] Powers, "Artistic Status and Social Agency," 362.
[28] Thorp and Vinograd, "Chinese Art & Culture," 243.
[29] Sturman, "Landscape," 186–187. Powers, "Artistic Status and Social Agency," 362.

The genre of landscape paintings transitioned from the principles of *qi* 其 (originality) and *shi* 实 (substantial) in the Song and Yuan dynasties to the more abstract form under the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. This shift marked an emphasis on attaining a 'dynamic momentum' through brushwork and the manipulation of *xushi* 虛实 (emptiness-substance), thereby allowing space for the artists' self-expression.[30] Despite being steeped in Neo-Confucianism principles of morality and order, this furthermore demonstrates that the Daoist implications associated with the *shanshui* genre persisted over the centuries.[31] As a matter of fact, the *Xushi* technique embodies the fundamental elements of *wu* 無 (absence) ─ representing the void ─ and *you* 有 (presence) ─ constituted by the ink brushes — which are rooted in Daoist/Ch'an cosmology.[32] Moreover, this technique involves the interplay between the ever-changing transformation of the *yang* (陽, male presence that fills the void) emerging from the *yin* (陰, female principle of emptiness),[33] thus reflecting deeply rooted Daoist and Buddhist beliefs.

To conclude, landscape painting continued to symbolise "both the cosmic principle and the ideal social order that manifests it,"[34] capturing the consciousness of the painter dwelling at the cosmological origin-moment as a meditation practice.[35] For this reason, Daoism places high value on the connection between the artist's body and *shanshui*, considering them not only as spiritually linked, but also as physically analogous representations of the universe.[36] In the following sub-chapter, I will explore Bingyi's art practice to better understand how she incorporates Daoist principles into her artistic process to negotiate the literati landscape tradition.

Bingyi's "The Shape of The Wind": A Critical Analysis

In Bingyi's video performance documenting the making of "The Shape of The Wind," a 160-metre-long ink scroll that is now preserved in the St. Johannes-Evangelist Church located on the Art Mile in Berlin-Mitte, the Daoist implication becomes apparent right from the beginning of the video performance.[37] The video opens with Bingyi igniting pieces of paper while recounting the story of Huang Gongwang's renowned painting "Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains" (**Figure 3)** which shares the same mountain setting as Bingyi's contemporary artwork. Standing before a small bonfire, Bingyi proceeds to explain the history behind the masterpiece by the Yuan Dynasty painter.

Huang Gongwang dedicated years to depicting his idealised vision of the Fuchun Mountains through distant applications of ink and water. In the video, Bingyi affirms that "when the collector died, he wanted to take the painting with him. For him, the painting became complete only in the fire."[38] However, Huang's nephew, Wu Jing'an, defied the aunt's wishes and managed to save the painting just in time, though it was already engulfed in flames and subsequently torn in two.[39] Bingyi further explores the significance of fire, describing it as "the Chinese understanding of the spirit [and] the best expression of material's transformation into

[30] Kuo, "Emptiness-Substance: Xushi," 337–338.
[31] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Song-Ming Confucianism."
[32] McMahon, "The Sign System in Chinese Landscape Paintings," 65.
[33] Hinton, "The Tao of Painting."
[34] Tan, "Landscape Without Nature," 225.
[35] Hinton, "The Tao of Painting."
[36] Liu, "Redefining Shanshui," 2–3.
[37] INK Studio, "Bingyi: Shape of the Wind."
[38] INK Studio, "Bingyi: Shape of the Wind," 0:43–0:55.
[39] China Online Museum (COM), "Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains."

spirit."[40] The element of fire not only serves as a reference to Huang Gongwang's renowned *shanshui* of the Fuchun Mountains, but also plays a role in creating the ink for Bingyi's landscape artwork. In fact, she made it by mixing the carbon remnants of the burnt paper with water to create the ink that was then applied to the 2.65-meter-wide and 160-metre-long rice paper that was unfurled atop the Fuchun Mountain.

Bingyi's incorporation of references to Huang Gongwang's "Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains" and the elemental forces of water and fire showcases her profound understanding of the essence of the landscape painting tradition and its Daoist implications. In particular, she highlights the significance of the ability of water and fire to best express the *qi* 氣 (energy) that permeates materiality in a constant state of transformation, which nevertheless remains invisible to the naked eye.[41] Building upon Jin Hao's insights into landscape paintings, Bingyi extends and radicalises the understanding of capturing the *qi* in the artwork. According to Jin Hao, "Reality means that the forces of both the spirit *qi* and the substance are strong. If the spirit is conveyed only through the outward appearance and not through the image in its totality, the image is dead."[42] By creating ink from burnt pieces of paper mixed with water and then sprinkling it onto the rice paper with the help of the wind, Bingyi transcends the traditional notion of capturing the *qi* through imagery alone. She embraces the elements of fire and wind as mediums through which the harmonious interaction of *yin* and *yang* is manifested, allowing the spirit *qi* to manifest itself.[43]

Figure 3. Huang Gongwang (1269–1354). *The Remaining Mounting*, part of *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*. Yuan Dynasty, 14th century. Handscroll, ink on paper. 33 x 639.9 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing. Wikimedia, public domain.

[40] INK Studio, "Bingyi: Shape of the Wind," 1:02–1:11.
[41] Hinton, "The Tao of Painting".
[42] Sturman, "Landscape," 183.
[43] Wang, "Kundao 坤道," 279–280.

Figure 4. INK Studio. “Bingyi: Shape of the Wind 丨 冰逸：风的形状,” YouTube Video 3:08. Bingyi skilfully alludes to the Chinese landscape tradition within the video composition, utilising a 16:9 display aspect ratio to evoke the length and form reminiscent of the traditional ink scroll. URL: *https://www.youtube.com*

Figure 5. INK Studio. “Bingyi: Shape of the Wind 丨 冰逸：风的形状,” YouTube Video 5:10. In this particular frame, we witness Bingyi during the creation of "The Shape of the Wind," as she pours a mixture of carbon and water-based ink onto the rice paper scroll that is directly unfolded on the surface of the mountain.

Figure 6. INK Studio. “Bingyi: Shape of the Wind 丨 冰逸：风的形状,” YouTube Video 6:10. Bingyi crafts the majestic landscape painting, moving almost like a dance as she pours the ink onto the rice scroll, allowing the topography of the mountain to emerge organically.

In the second part of the video, the scene shifts to the Fuchun Mountain where the process of creating the ink scroll unfolds.[44] Once again, the viewer is immersed in the landscape tradition through the visual composition of the video, which alternates between a display aspect ratio of 16:9 to narrower rations reminiscent of traditional ink scrolls (**Figure 4**). The paper scroll is unfurled directly on the mountain, with Bingyi dispersing the mixture of carbon and water onto the rice paper surface (**Figure 5**). This method creates spontaneous patterns and shapes, which are further developed and enhanced by the interplay of wind currents and the cracks and the texture of the underlying soil. Instead of employing a traditional inkbrush, Bingyi uses her body, the wind, and the soil to capture the essence of the landscape's topography, a technique that recurs throughout her body of work. Notable among her earlier landscape paintings are "Cascade" (2011) and "Journey to the Centre of the Earth," where she employed the same *modus operandi* as "Shape of the Wind" — unrestrained and expressive gestures on a magnificent scale always to depict landscape paintings. [45]

> *"What is your embodiment? What is your medium?" It was completely inside of me, completely contained…*[46]

By employing these unconventional techniques and engaging with the natural elements, Bingyi pushes the boundaries of traditional landscape painting, infusing her works with a sense of dynamism, spontaneity, and a profound connection to the environment that finds its roots in the Daoist beliefs (**Figure 6**). In spite of usually being associated with the literati tradition and Confucianism as the genre of *shanshui* peaked during the Song Dynasty, which was embedded in Neo-Confucianism values, landscape paintings still shared a deeper bond with ancient Chinese Daoism.[47] The body assumes a crucial relevance in the Daoist practices and, consequently, this is still evident in the technique of landscape paintings. Instead of the meticulous brushwork, which was fundamental for the achievement of certain aesthetic criteria and to comply with the intellectuals' taste and virtue,[48] Bingyi directly embodies the medium needed for the art-making process, thus elevating the latter to the spiritual practice: "*It is the universe working through me, and sometimes it is that space between the human and God's hand*."[49]

In "Shapes of the Wind" (1015), Bingyi becomes one with the mountains, and together they create a landscape painting that is not mediated by the human mind, hence experiencing a spiritual wholeness with nature. By embracing a non-anthropocentric viewpoint, rooted in Daoist cultivation practices, Bingyi challenges the creative agency of nature and enables the artist to merge with the natural world. The distinctions between the artist, the medium, the subject-object, and the performance become blurred. Her approach clearly resonates with the Daoist notion of the body and nature, in which both the *qi* resides and continues its ever-stopping transformation, and the ultimate purpose of landscape painting that is to "overcome physical limitations to join in great unity with the Dao" to "transform the mundane human body into the macrocosmic body."[50] Bingyi becomes one with the mountains, and together they create a landscape painting that is not mediated by the human mind, hence experiencing a

[44] INK Studio, "Bingyi: Shape of the Wind," 2:11.
[45] Guest, "Between Heaven and Earth."
[46] Guest, "Between Heaven and Earth."
[47] McMahon, "The Sign System in Chinese Landscape Paintings," 64.
[48] Ning, "Landscape Painting in the Tang Dynasty," 176–177.
[49] Guest, "Between Heaven and Earth."
[50] Liu, "Visualizing the Invisible Body," 4.

spiritual wholeness with nature.[51] In such a manner, the contemporary artist is not only able to negotiate a traditionally male practice, but she is also, and more importantly, capable of reaching the goal of the Taoist cultivation to activate the unifying primordial *qi* within the body. This is only possible only by being aware of the latter's presence and enhancing the balanced interaction between *yin* and *yang.*[52]

Conclusion

This paper examines how Chinese contemporary artist Bingyi negotiates the literati landscape tradition through her creative process by analysing the video performance "The Shape of the Wind in the Fuchun Mountains." In the first part, I provide a historical overview to better understand how the *shanshui* genre has evolved throughout the centuries to emerge as one of the most distinguished Chinese art traditions, which is still acclaimed all over the world today. Sprung from the early Six Dynasties and closely linked to the Daoist/Ch'an meditation practices, the ink landscape painting tradition further developed from the late Tang period and reached its peak with the Song[53] when it became a tradition circumscribed to the literati for them to create a distinct social identity and represent their minds and taste.[54]

Nevertheless, the Daoist/Ch'an implications of *shanshui* remained a fundamental part of the tradition as a visualisation of nature intended not as a realistic portrayal of natural landscapes, but as *ziran.* Landscape painting is aimed at grasping both the awareness of the master and the cosmological interaction between *yin* and *yang* that are invisible to the eye, but visible through the endless transformation of the *qi* within nature which is rendered by the brushwork and *xushi* to attain this dynamic momentum.[55] In spite of *shanshui* being traditionally a male genre, since women did not have access to education and the literati sphere,[56] Bingyi negotiates the landscape tradition by gravitating towards the Daoist implication to the extent that she could be referred to as a Daoist practitioner herself. Her artwork "The Shape of the Wind" not only pays homage to the Yuan master Huang Gongwang's renowned painting "Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains," but it also establishes a profound connection to it. This is evident in the choice of the location where she sets the video and the creation of the 160-metres-long landscape scroll.

Bingyi employs a unique approach in depicting the scroll through burnt pieces of paper mixed with water and her whole body as tools. During this process, she intentionally eliminates any form of manipulation in portraying the landscape. The mix of burnt paper and water, dispersed by the wind, naturally stains the rice paper scroll, allowing the texture of the mountains underneath to emerge organically (**Figures 2 and 3**). In this artistic practice that is rooted in Daoist principles, there are no discernible human traces. Bingyi, in her harmonious alignment with the mountains, becomes one with nature, thus embodying the ultimate purpose of the Daoist cultivation. By achieving this unity, she successfully recognises the *qi* within the body and nature, and their interconnectedness and perpetual transformation.

To conclude, Bingyi negotiates the landscape tradition by embracing the Daoist implication within *shanshui* that she radicalises in her performative artistic process. For this reason, the artist herself takes some distance from the genre connected to the literati sphere that was

[51] Shaw, "Buddhist and Taoist Influences," 186.

[52] Wang, "Kundao 坤道," 279.

[53] Sturman, "Landscape," 182.

[54] Sturman, "Landscape," 186–187.

[55] Kuo, "Emptiness-Substance: Xushi," 337–338.

[56] Fong, "Images of Women in Traditional Painting," 22.

nevertheless related to Neo-Confucianism values. In an interview, she explains that her work is "a ritual I perform between Heaven and Earth. I am not a Shaman, I am just a human, but this ritual is relational between the universe and the individual, it is a kind of sublime. It is intentionally primal. It raises questions about the fundamental being – what is pain, what is suffering, what is loneliness?"[57] Bingyi's art practice not only paves the way for new possibilities within the landscape painting genre by wholeheartedly incorporating a holistic approach throughout her creative process. It also serves as a dynamic dialogue between contemporaneity and the rich tapestry of the Chinese tradition.

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Images

Figure 1. Feng Chengsu. Copy of *Lanting Xu* (Preface of the Orchid Pavilion, detail). Tang Dynasty, Ink on paper. 26,4 cm – 650 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing. Wikimedia, public domain.

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Figure 6. INK Studio. "Bingyi: Shape of the Wind 丨 冰逸：风的形状," 6:10.

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