




# The Formation and Significance of Ni Zan's Landscape Painting of "One River, Two Banks"

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## ABSTRACT

In his painting practice, Ni Zan gradually developed his personal "One River, Two Banks" landscape schema. His representative works, such as "Autumn Clearing over a Fishing Village (Yuzhuang Qiuji Tu)" and "The Rongxi Studio (Rongxi Zhai Tu)", clearly demonstrate the tripartite composition: a slope in the foreground, a river in the middle, and mountains in the background. Vertically, this composition incorporates Ni Zan's understanding of previous landscape and embodies the essence of traditional schemas. Horizontally, it represents both an adaptation and an innovation of contemporary artistic achievements. Previous studies on Ni Zan's paintings have mostly focused on the evaluation of traditional Chinese painting language, while paying less attention to the patterns of his paintings and the relationship between the patterns and their meanings. Based on extensive research of Ni Zan's literature, this article starts from the iconic "one river, two banks" composition that Ni Zan established in the middle and late period of the Yuan Dynasty, analyzing its origin, the way it was followed, and the relationship between the pattern and its meaning expression. By using methods such as literature investigation, image analysis, and comparison of Chinese and Western cultures, it provides a detailed interpretation of Ni Zan's paintings, transcending the traditional Chinese painting evaluation vocabulary. The formation of this schema and its use of pictorial elements possess an inherent visual rationality, which aptly conveys Ni Zan's unique personal spirit, making it a classic example of the integration of subject and object.

**Keywords:** Schema; Composition; Evolution; "One River Two Banks"; Significance.

## INTRODUCTION

The typical features of Ni Zan's landscape paintings are often one or two low earthen slopes in the foreground, three or five withered trees, interlaced with an empty pavilion, a flat slope in the foreground, and a large lake in the middle, without a single stroke, extremely spacious, ethereal and illusory, secluded and vast as shown in [Figure 1](#). From his "Six Gentlemen (Liu Junzi Tu)" painting in 1345, Ni Zan frequently used this composition in his later paintings and gradually formed the "One River, Two Banks" schema with a distinct personal style. "From around 1360 to 1380, during these 20 years, Ni Zan's paintings constantly repeated a simple composition formula. The design arrangement of the picture was far more than the variation of the subject, as if it were a landscape that did not actually exist, and its constituent elements were endlessly rearranged and recombined (Cahill, 2018).



Figure 1. Autumn Clearing over a Fishing Village by Ni Zan (Yuzhuang Qiuji Tu).

Ni Zan undoubtedly achieved great success in painting, but what made him so obsessed with the schema of "One River, Two Banks"? What was the basis behind his choice of form? James Cahill noted, "He repeats the same picture not because he is overly fascinated by the scene, but because he is detached from all the mountains and waters. "The essence of Ni Zan's landscape painting, as recognized by Chinese painting critics, lies in his 'plainness' (Cahill, 2009). James Cahill's assertion points out that the essence of Ni's painting lies in his subjective "plainness", affirming the decisive role of his inner subjectivity in the external form of painting. However, regardless of the subjective state, in painting it must be expressed through the objective form of the painting itself. One general answer to the question of why Ni Zan repeatedly uses the same picture is that the schema meets the formal characteristics he needs to express his individuality. Therefore, it is of great significance to examine why Ni Zan stubbornly repeated the use of this schema and how it embodies his spiritual traits in the study of the schema itself.

In the study of Ni Zan's paintings, traditional Chinese painting evaluation focuses on the assessment of his aesthetic system, that is, this set of vocabulary aims to evaluate how "plainness" Ni Zan's paintings are, but it cannot explain the connection between his "plainness" and the form of the paintings. "One River, Two Banks" is a classic painting style of Ni Zan. Its formation first involves the inheritance and development of the style, and then the unique personality of Ni Zan's association with natural objects. This important aspect lies in how schemas play the role of a bridge within it and how they strongly express Ni Zan's inner spirit? In the literature review section of this article, it is indicated that the research methods of Western science have expanded the study of traditional Chinese painting, as well as the current issues in the research of Ni Zan's paintings. Through image theory, form analysis and other methods, a detailed interpretation is provided for the generation background, source of the schema, and the relationship between the schema and its connotation of the "One River, Two Banks" schema. Thus, the close association between this classic schema and its connotation is demonstrated. By analyzing the historical process of the formation of the "One River, Two Sides" painting style, we can understand the underlying logical relationship behind this evolution, thereby clarifying the connection between this composition form and the meaning it intends to convey. The scientific interpretation of this style can break through the traditional Chinese evaluation model and enhance our understanding of Ni Zan's works on a broader scale.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Intervention Of Western Research Methods In The Study Of Traditional Chinese Paintings

Ni Zan, one of the "Four Great Masters of the Yuan Dynasty", was one of the most representative literati painters at the end of the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) and the beginning of the Ming Dynasty. He enjoys a high reputation in the history of traditional Chinese painting and is an important painter in the history of traditional Chinese painting criticism. In traditional Chinese painting criticism, a consensus has been reached on Ni Zan's evaluation with "reclusion" as the main aesthetic appearance, and a series of evaluations are based on this. Traditional Chinese painting criticism emphasizes aesthetic taste but does not focus on external formal factors, which is a characteristic of Chinese painting criticism. With the opening up of modern China, a group of foreign

scholars of Chinese culture have entered the field of Chinese painting research, such as Sullivan, Siren, Ropp, Wen Fong, and James Cahill (Silbergeld, 2014). They have opened up new perspectives for the study of Chinese painting with scientific research methods, thus bringing the study of traditional Chinese painting to a new level. The research on Ni Zan's paintings is no longer limited to the level of aesthetic criticism (Gombrich, 2004). The intervention of methods such as iconography has made it possible to study the relationship between the emotions and patterns in Ni Zan's paintings (Law, 2024). "The problem of form in painting and sculpture" is an important work by the German Hildebrand. In the book, he pointed out that the purpose of the artist's work in representing space and form is to guide the viewer to a certain definite psychological image. He pointed out the relationship between concept and form in the fine arts (Von Hildebrand et al., 1907). Under the influence of Western painting research methods, the composition factors of Ni Zan's painting patterns have also attracted widespread attention and produced many achievements.

### **The Identification and Origin of Ni Zan's "Stylized" Composition**

In his works such as "Chinese Painting: A Pictorial History" and "The Compelling Image: Nature and Style in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Painting", James Cahill has repeatedly mentioned that Ni Zan constantly repeated the same patterns in his works, and this stylized pattern has transcended the image itself, being an external manifestation of his individual spirit (Cahill, 2018). Hao Cao in his paper "Not Resembling in Ni Zan's Landscape" discussed the issue of stylization in Ni Zan's paintings. He argued that considering the changes in Ni Zan's living environment, it would be far-fetched to simply categorize his paintings as "stylized". He took Ni Zan's "Dwelling in the Bamboo and Waters (Shuizhu Ju Tu)" and "Autumn Forest and Wild Scenery (Qiulin Yexing Tu)" as examples and pointed out that these two works did not exhibit such "stylized" characteristics. The establishment of Ni Zan's "One River, Two Banks" painting pattern was largely formed after he was struck by natural disasters, heavy taxes, and failed in his official career in his early years, and returned to his residence in Taihu Lake in his later years, combining the natural landscape of Taihu Lake. He believed that this pattern was the result of natural realism, and the motivation for his creation was not to piece together a fictional fantasy world from independent objects without support (Cao, 2021). From the continuous hints in James Cahill's works, it can be seen that he pointed out the "stylized" pattern style in Ni Zan's late paintings, but he did not elaborate much on the connection between this pattern and his unique personality (Aitken & Wang, 2018). However, Hao Cao in his article denied the term "stylized". The so-called stylization of an image is relative to the changes in nature. For Ni Zan, the stylization of his works indicates that the composition method of his images is fixed, that is, he does not seek changes in the objects. The essence of his works lies in the "unspoken meaning" beyond the painting and the conceptual aspects. The formation of the "One River, Two Banks" pattern must have been influenced by the vast natural landscape of Taihu Lake. However, the extremely wide middle part of the river in this pattern is not something that can be easily reflected in a person's natural perspective. That sense of loneliness and solemnity in the picture cannot be achieved without a unique individual spirit.

To sum up, the current research on Ni Zan's paintings has gradually shifted from the traditional Chinese painting evaluation model to the formal analysis of painting patterns, which is conducive to a deeper understanding of the manifestation of the inner meaning of Ni Zan's paintings. However, to gain a more profound understanding of Ni Zan's paintings, it is necessary to conduct a more in-depth analysis of the "one river, two banks" pattern and understand the relationship between his pattern and his concepts. There is still room for expansion in the following aspects: first, there is a lack of diachronic tracking of the evolution process of the "one river, two banks" pattern, especially the details of the style transformation from the early to the late period; second, the visual presentation and psychological space mechanism of this pattern need to be more clearly explained; third, it is necessary to conduct a micro-examination in combination with the regional culture and social context of the Jiangnan area in the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) to reflect the deep background of the generation of this pattern.

The intervention of Western research methods has enabled the study of Ni Zan's paintings, especially in terms of the transition from the "elegance and refinement" in the schema to how to reflect "elegance and refinement" (Elkins, 2010). The "two banks, a river" painting schema was a recurring schema in Ni Zan's mature period. His paintings were constantly imitated by subsequent generations, but none of them could capture the essence. Fundamentally, this is because the form of Ni Zan's paintings is deeply related to the meaning they convey, and the inherent directionality of this schema is something that other later generations find difficult to imitate (Henderson, 2007). Therefore, analyzing the connection between the schema and the meaning of Ni Zan's paintings is an important way to understand his paintings.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a multi-method integrated research approach, aiming to comprehensively reveal the generation mechanism and deep meaning of Ni Zan's "one river, two banks" pattern. It specifically includes the following three core methods:

### Image analysis method

Drawing on Erwin Panofsky's three-level theory of iconology, this method conducts a layer-by-layer interpretation of representative works by Ni Zan from various periods, such as "Dwelling in the Bamboo and Waters (Shuizhu Ju Tu)" and "Autumn Forest and Wild Scenery (Qiulin Yexing Tu)", "The Painting of Tranquil Abode (An Chu Zhai Tu)" and "Six Gentlemen (Liu Junzi Tu)". It objectively describes the constituent elements in Ni Zan's paintings, such as the near trees, empty pavilions, the blank water area in the middle, and how it interacts with the distant mountains (Sullivan, 2007). It realistically reflects the changes in the pattern in different periods. In the stage of iconographic analysis, through the description in the previous stage, the internal possibilities of the changes are analyzed. By identifying the symbolic meanings of various elements in the painting within the traditional literati painting tradition, the correlation with Ni Zan's unique personality is revealed, such as the empty pavilion symbolizing "waiting but not being met" and the withered trees representing firmness and perseverance (Duan, 2018). In the iconological interpretation stage, combined with Ni Zan's life, inscriptions, poems, and the context of the times, the cultural value and spiritual demands hidden behind the "one river, two banks" pattern are revealed, such as the reflection of unique life circumstances and the pursuit of the "Quiet Retreat" realm.

### Composition and Form Analysis Method

The analysis of pattern style and form is the most important method used in this study and is an important manifestation of breaking through the traditional Chinese evaluation methods. By comparing the compositional changes in Ni Zan's works from different periods (such as from the 1340s to the 1370s), the evolution trajectory of the "one river, two banks" pattern is sorted out (Brokaw, 2005). At the same time, it is compared horizontally with the landscape compositions of other members of the "Four Masters of the Yuan Dynasty" such as Chao Meng-fu, Huang Gongwang, and Wu Zhen, highlighting the unique points in spatial handling and brushwork language of Ni Zan. Analyzing the changes in the spatial and positional relationships of various elements in the "one river, two banks" pattern, analyzing how he influenced the rhythm and psychological feelings of the picture, and how the "Dry Brush and Light Ink" technique served the "Sparse and Tranquil" aesthetic, and the disruption of the traditional landscape concept of "Recreational and Comfortable" by the horizontal division structure.

### Literature Review Method

This method examines Ni Zan's artistic practice within the specific historical and social structure of the Yuan dynasty. Combining relevant historical materials, such as the poems, letters, and books in Ni Zan's "The collection of Qingxi Pavilion" (Qing bi ge ji), analyzing his self-expression and emotional state. The impact of the wars and chaos in the late Yuan on the lives and mentality of literati, etc., on the formation of his painting pattern. This method aims to answer: What is the underlying meaning behind the vast and distant realm embodied by the stylized "one river, two banks" pattern? How does it respond to the survival predicament of intellectuals at a specific historical moment?

Through the cross-application of these methods, this study strives to go beyond a single form or spiritual interpretation, constructing a comprehensive explanatory framework that integrates visual structure, individual experience, and historical context, thereby more deeply understanding why the "one river, two banks" pattern by Ni Zan became an immortal classic in the history of literati painting.

## RESULTS

### The Background of the Generation of the "One River, Two Banks" Schema

The emergence of each schema must follow certain rules. It is an inheritance and evolution based on the schema of previous paintings. Gombrich's "Schema and Correction" focuses on the correction and innovation of the schema of the previous painting by subsequent forms of painting (Chernyakevich, 2023). His theories and methods are generally recognized by the academic community and have been widely applied to the study of traditional Chinese painting. Modern scholars such as Fong Wen, Wu Hong, Shi Shouqian, etc., applied the methods of stylistics and form analysis to their own works and achieved a great deal. Based on this, the author can conclude that Ni Zan's painting schema must exist in the sequence of inheritance of traditional painting schema, and the "One River, Two Banks" schema commonly used in his later paintings must also embody the spiritual



characteristics of traditional schema.

### The Formation of the Tripartite Schema

Ni Zan's "One River, Two Banks" composition, with a near view of slopes, rocks and trees, a middle view of a wide river and a distant view of mountains, is a standard three-part schema, which has accumulated rich experience in the development of Chinese landscape painting. Fong Wen, when discussing the pictorial expression of Chinese landscape painting, said that "the first major composition invention of early Chinese landscape painting was the overlapping triangle —symbolizing depthc (Fong, 2017). He pointed out three basic composition styles, First of all, Sitting Serenely at the Foot of the Mountain (Shandi Qing Zuo Tu), which was painted on a pipa in the 8th century and is now housed in the Shosoin in Nara, Japan. On either side of the lofty central mountain in the painting are two smaller mountains. The composition is divided into three layers: water and reeds in the foreground, two seated figures looking up in the middle, and rising peaks in the background. The second composition style is shown in another 8th-century painting, Falcon and Duck (Sun Ya Tu), which is in the collection of the Shosoin. It is a panoramic view from front to back that is horizontally divided into three layers. The third pipa painting in Shosoin is the Tiger Hunt (Lie Hu Tu), which combines the vertical elements on the left and the horizontal elements on the right to create a valley scene (Fong, 2017). Fong Wen attempts to place the development of early landscape painting in a sequence of different patterns through the combination of three different patterns. It is not difficult to see that the assumptions of his theory and the examples he uses prove that the tripartite composition was widely used in early landscape paintings.

In the practice of landscape painting, the author takes the transformation of landscape painting by Wang Shizhen of the Ming Dynasty as an example to look at the changes in the schema of early landscape painting.

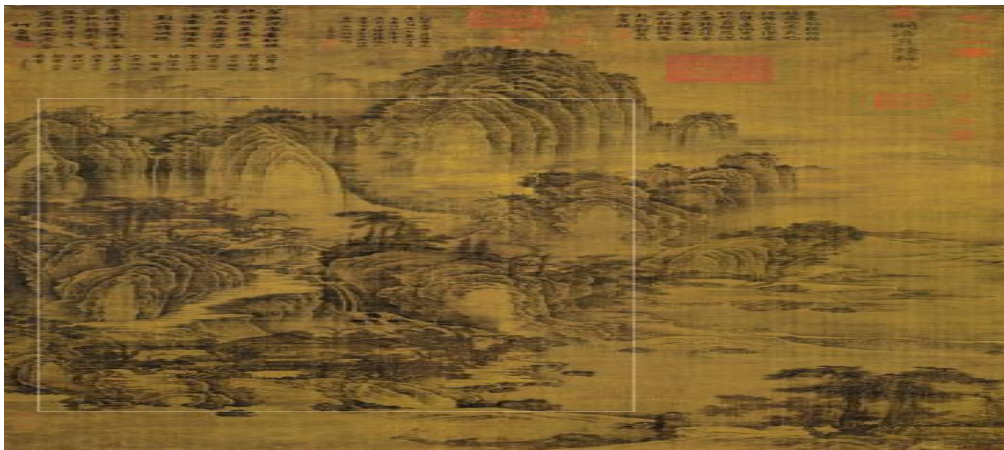


Figure 2. Landscape of Mount Kuanglu (Kuanglu Tu)



Figure 3. Ma Yuan, Rustic Dancing to Celebrate a Bumper Harvest (Tage Tu)

He said, "The evolution of Chinese landscape painting passed through several key transitions: from the Two Lis (Li Sixun, Li Zhaodao), to Jing Hao, Guan Tong, Dong Yuan, and Ju Ran; then to Li Cheng and Fan Kuan; next to Liu Songnian, Li Tang, Ma Yuan, and Xia Gui; and finally to the masters Huang Gongwang and Wang Meng." (Peng, 2009) Landscape painting to the Great and Small Li Generals is the transformation of landscape painting from naivety to maturity. From Jing, Guan to Dong, Ju, there is a change in the grand and expansive style of landscape painting. Since Li Cheng, Fan Kuan, the schema structure of landscape painting has been more streamlined than that of the previous Five dynasties. The schema expression is no longer the panoramic composition of the Five Dynasties as shown in Figure 2, the orientation of the schema cutting intention expression is more definite, and the organization of the schema elements is more orderly. Fan Kuan's "Traveler in the Western Mountains (Xishan Xinglu Tu)" depicts the lofty terrain of Mount Hua, and Li Cheng's "Clearing after Snowfall over Temple and Hills (Qingluan Xiaosi Tu)" depicts a corner of the stream and mountain. By Guo Xi, he established this order in the form of theory and proposed the Three Distances Principle (high distance, level distance, and deep distance). In terms of composition, the characteristics of the tripartite composition gradually emerged at this time. In Fan Kuan's travel picture, it was composed of three parts: the mountain and rock in the foreground, the forest and temple in the middle, and the main peak in the foreground (Kindall, 2009). The landscape schema of the Northern Song Dynasty is more like a cut from the schema of the Five Dynasties, as if it were a partial depiction of the panoramic landscape schema. In contrast to the tailoring of the Northern Song landscape, by the time of Ma, Xia in the Southern Song Dynasty, the landscape was further streamlined, known as "a corner of Ma, half of Xia". The more concise the composition, the more distinct the order of the composition. Take Ma Yuan's "Rustic Dancing to Celebrate a Bumper Harvest (Tage Tu)", Figure 3, as an example. The tripartite composition of the figures in the foreground, the mountain temple and trees in the middle, and the distant mountains in the foreground is orderly. The small landscape paintings of Li Tang, Liu Songnian and others are mostly simple and concise in composition, and the use of the three levels of the composition is very proficient. In the organization of the elements in the picture, whether in front, middle and back or left, middle and right, the picture can be in a state that is both stable and varied.

The configuration of "three" elements constitutes a stable form, distinct from that of a single point or a two-point line. When a sequence reaches "three", it means there are more possibilities. On the one hand, it can remain in a state of simple order, and on the other hand, it can also deduce more variations. In traditional Chinese culture, "three" does not merely mean three; it represents more possibilities, as the Tao Te Ching says, "The Tao gives birth to one; one gives birth to two; two gives birth to three; three gives birth to all things." (Laozi, 2009) three-layered structure of landscape painting had developed and been widely used by painters in the Song Dynasty. The changes in landscape painting in the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) were mainly reflected in the expression of the picture, "the content or intrinsic meaning of landscape painting changed. From then on, pictorial art became a mental art that transcended representation" (Loehr, 1970). In terms of schema, because of the demands of painting during this period in terms of expression and depiction of specific subjects, the evolution of schema was more inclined towards a freer interception of tradition.

Ni Zan's composition featuring a single layer of foreground, a middle layer of river, and a distant layer of mountains follows a three-part structure. This reflects the wisdom of traditional Chinese culture and also has a historical lineage in its pattern. This pattern not only meets the requirement for a simple form of the work but also takes into account the possibility of multiple perspectives. With the establishment of Ni Zan's "One River, Two Banks" composition style, this three-part structure has endured through the passage of time and has already deeply integrated into the painting expressions of literati and scholars (Yip, 2022). It has provided indispensable conditions for the dissemination of Ni Zan's paintings.

### **The Popularity of Riverside Landscape Paintings**

The patterns of Chinese landscape paintings, based on the objects they depict, can be classified into two types: those depicting the grand mountain ranges in the north and those depicting the riverside landscapes in the south. During the Ming Dynasty, Dong Qichang classified landscape paintings into two schools - the Northern School and the Southern School, reflecting his understanding of the differences between the two styles of landscape painting. The early forms of landscape paintings, from Li Sixun and Li Zhaodao of the Tang Dynasty to Jing Hao and Guan Tong of the Five Dynasties, and even many landscape painters of the Northern Song Dynasty, mostly focused on depicting the landscapes of the north. In terms of composition, they adopted vertical layouts to showcase the grandeur of the northern landscapes, such as Jing Hao's Taihang Mountains and Guan Tong and Fan Kuan's Guan-Shan and Shaanxi landscapes. Among the landscape painters of the Five Dynasties, there were also those who depicted the southern landscapes as their main theme, such as Dong Yuan. His works like "The Xiao and Xiang Rivers (Xiaoxiang Tu)" and "Waiting for Crossing In Summer (Xiajing Shankou Daidu Tu)" depicted the natural scenery of the south. Dong Yuan's works received high praise in the history of painting. Shen Kuo in "Dream Pool Essays (Mengxi Bitan)" commented on him: "mostly depicting the real mountains of Jiangnan, not particularly sharp strokes." "From a distance, there are many different kinds of objects, but from a distance, the

scenery is bright and beautiful, and distant thoughts are like seeing a strange place"(Shen,2017, p.191). The composition of Tung Yuan 's landscape painting, the use of hemp-fiber texture strokes (Pima Cun) and dot-pattern wrinkles (Dianzi Cun), appropriately represents the unique features and appearance of the southern landscape, which is rich in grass and trees and crisscrossing rivers and lakes. As a result, in the subsequent spread of southern landscape painting, TungYuan's schema became the main object of emulation and was placed in a very high position by later Dong Qichang in his theory of the Northern and Southern Schools (Burnett, 2023).

With the southward movement of the Southern Song regime and the rise of southern scholars' paintings, landscape paintings with the aesthetic orientation of Jiangnan scholars and the characteristics of Jiangnan region were constantly flourishing. The unique riverside landscape painting of the Jiangnan region gave rise to a new schema style in the Yuan Dynasty, and the "One River, Two Banks" schema developed in this soil.

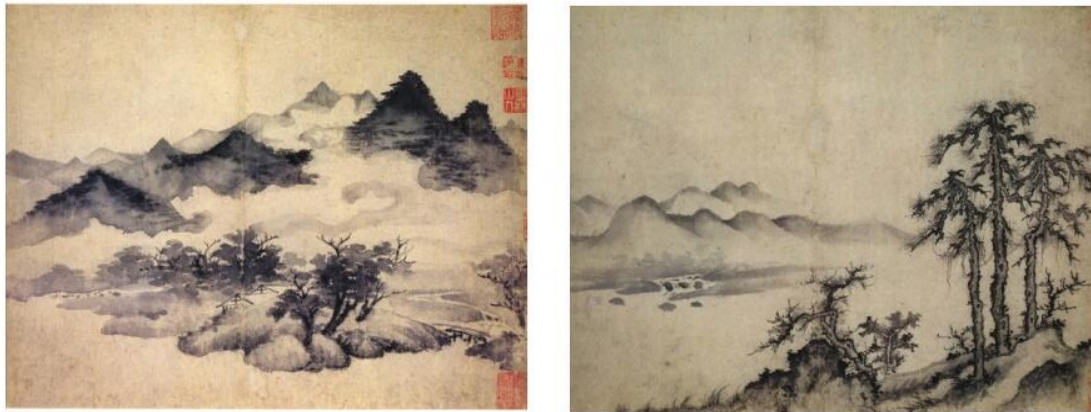


Figure 4. Wang Meng, Xishan Xinglü (Traveling in the Mountainous Areas)

Dynasty, and the "One River, Two Banks" schema developed in this soil. Guo Xi of the Northern Song Dynasty proposed the classic "Three Distances Principle" in his "The Lofty Message of Forests and Streams (Linquan Gaozhi)": "Looking up at the mountain from the foot of the mountain, it is called high distance; From the front of the mountain to the back of the mountain, it is called deep; "Looking from a nearby mountain to a distant one is called a level distance"(Guo, 2002). In Han Zhuo's "The Complete Collection of Landscape Painting (Shanshui Chunquan Ji)", it is also proposed that "where there is a wide expanse of water near the shore and a vast expanse of distant mountains, it is called vast expanse; There is a misty and distant place where wild waters are separated and seem not to be seen. The most distant and faint scenery is called secluded and distant." (Han, 2002) From Guo Xi's high, deep, and flat, to Han Zhuo's broad, mysterious, and secluded, it can be seen that in the aesthetic taste of landscape paintings, there is a transition from the expression of the towering mountains in the north to the expansive and vast landscapes in the south. Guo Xi's "three perspectives" reflect the grandeur and majesty of the northern mountains, while Han Zhuo's "three perspectives" embody the misty and indistinct landscapes of the Jiangnan riverbanks. Huang Gongwang, who was slightly older than Ni Zan, said in his "Secrets of Landscape Painting (Xie Shanshui Jue)": "The distance that is connected from the bottom is called flat distance; the distance that is separated from the near is called broad distance; the distance that is transported from outside the mountains is called high distance" (Huang, 2009). Judging from Huang Gongwang's level distance and wide distance, it is already the composition pattern embodied in Ni Zan's painting style (Silbergeld, 2016). Theory is a reflection of painting practice, and from the continuous interpretation and development of the "Three Distances Principle" since Guo Xi, we can see the changing process of landscape in its schema and aesthetic. The spread and development of the tripartite composition and the three-distance method undoubtedly laid the theoretical foundation for the formation of Ni Zan's landscape painting schema.

### Characteristics of the Times and Ni Zan's Choices

Huang Binhong once said, "While Tang paintings laid the foundation, Song paintings captured the essence, Yuan paintings achieved a sublime distillation. After the Yuan dynasty, it is like adding water to wine; the later the age, the more water is added (Yu, 1954). In his view, the development of painting by the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) was already at the end of its heyday. Judging from the painting schema of the Yuan Dynasty, it was indeed a period when various painting styles gathered, new painting styles were taking shape, and the once mainstream painting styles had not yet vanished. In "History of Chinese Painting (Zhongguo Hui hua Shi)", Wang Bomin, after discussing the Four Masters of the Yuan Dynasty, also pointed out different forms of style painting such as Zhao and Qian's green and blue style, Mi's cloud-and-mountain school, Li (Cheng) and Guo (Xi) style, and architectural painting (Yu, 1954). Ni Zan's "One River, Two Banks" schema emerged in the context of a time when styles were



abundant, and the seemingly concise Ni Zan painting style was also the result of his subjective choices and continuous innovations.

There are not many accounts about Ni Zan's study of painting, but from some documents, one can get a glimpse of the general course of his study of painting. One of the poems reads, "When first I learned to wield the brush with grace, I thought all things should in my paintings find their place. Through countryside and town I'd rove and peer, And treasure all I saw for my sketchbox here (Chen, 2004). It shows that his early study of painting was not as simple as his later years, but rather focused on likeness and had a subjective intention to explore physics. According to some records in "Calligraphy and Painting Boat on the Qinghe River (Qinghe Shuhua Fang)", Ni Zan had quite a few works in other styles. For instance, his "The Lion Grove Garden (Shizilin Tu)" following Jing and Guan's methods: "This 'Lion Grove Garden,' born of my collaboration with Zhao Shanchang, is a faithful heir to the tradition of Jing and Guan, a realm that transcends the vision of Wang Meng." (Zhang, 2009) TungYuan's Colored Landscape Painting: "Among Ni Zan's colored landscapes, the shade of the mountains and valleys is the best, followed by the water bamboo in the east of the city. Wang Tingwu shows a small frame of Ni Zan's residence in the east of the city, full of green and blue, all by TungYuan. (Zhang, 2009) "Spring Mountains in the Mist (Chunshan Lanai Tu)", "The beautiful Ni Zan painting is not yet dry. A pillar of the sky leans against the cold. A beauty is separated only by a light mist. A frontal view in a three-foot picture. Yuan Zhen, this painting has entered the room of Juran again, saying that two meters are not enough" (Zhang, 2009). Zhang Chou said, "It is beyond two meters." Later, he said, "Those who look at the paintings of the cloudy forest and seek their vitality should be crowned with the mist of the spring mountains. There is no need to say that the paintings are full, but the drying, locking, splashing and dyeing are even more extraordinary." (Zhang, 2009) From the records, it can be seen that Ni Yunlin also used a two-Mi's ink painting technique to create works. "There are two figures in the thatched pavilion, with very fine lines on their faces, not compared to the wild autumn forest." (Zhang, 2009) According to Zhang Chou's account, Ni Zan also had landscape paintings with background figures. The depiction of the figures in his paintings was much more detailed than that in the existing "Autumn Forest and Wild Scenery (Qiulin Yexing Tu)".

Although Ni Zan did not have any direct works to prove the origin of his paintings, his close friend Wang Meng, who was also one of the Four Great Masters of the Yuan Dynasty, left behind works imitating those of various schools. In his "Streams and Mountains in the Wind and Rain (Xishan Fengyu Tu)" as shown in [Figure 4](#), there are pictures painted using different techniques such as Mi's cloud mountain style and Li (Cheng) and Guo (Xi) style. On the one hand, this indicates the popularity of this kind of imitation. On the other hand, it confirms the fact in "Calligraphy and Painting Boat on the Qinghe River (Qinghe Shuhua Fang)" that Ni Zan copied the works of various schools. Without further information about his early study experiences, as James Cahill says, we can boldly assume that what he gained came from his collection and was guided by friends of the same period, such as Huang Gongwang. According to "Calligraphy and Painting Boat on the Qinghe River (Qinghe Shuhua Fang)", The collection of Ni Yunlin's Qingbi Pavilion included works such as Wang Xianzhi's "Goddess of the Luo River" in thirteen lines, Jing Hao's "Autumn Mountains," Li Cheng's "Dense Forests and Distant Peaks," Dong Yuan's "The River God's Wedding," Li Gonglin's "Diagram of the Three Purities," Mi Fu's "Sea and Mountain Retreat," and Ma Hezhi's "Illustrations of Six Odes from the Minor Court Hymns." This set of fifteen scrolls constituted the pieces that Ni Yunlin would regularly unfold and appreciate in his daily life (Zhang, 2009). Beyond calligraphic works, Ni Zan's Qingbi Pavilion collection included pieces by Zhang Sengyou, Wu Daozi, Jing Hao, and Li Cheng, etc. The works are not limited to what Dong Qichang later called the Southern School (Nan Zong) of painting, and the styles range from the mountains and waters of the south to the high mountains and great rivers of the north. This list of collections is in line with the style of Ni's paintings recorded above, and it can be basically concluded that Ni Yunlin's early painting style was quite broad and not limited to the simple and plain style we see later.





Figure 5. Chao Lingjiang, Tao Qian Appreciating Chrysanthemums (Taoqian Shangqiu Tu)

From Ni Zan's early paintings with a wide range of strokes to his later more stable and simple style, it can be shown that, on the one hand, this style, as a means, can appropriately reflect the self that Ni Zan intends to express. On the other hand, the confirmation of this style reflects Ni Zan's understanding of traditional landscape painting and his inheritance of a certain traditional schema.

As mentioned above, before the matured painting style was formed, Ni Zan had extensive traditional painting experiences. These experiences provided technical preparations for the formation of his "One River, Two Banks" style. In his study of various different styles of painting, Ni Zan became familiar with various different painting languages and structural patterns, as well as different expressions in different situations. This was the necessary preparation for Ni Zan's paintings to evolve from complexity to simplicity, providing conditions for him to condense concise yet expressive painting forms.

## DISCUSSION

Ni Zan's "One River, Two Banks" composition, as a unique and representative layout in traditional Chinese landscape painting, did not emerge by chance but is deeply rooted in the long history of Chinese landscape painting. From the early three-section composition to the evolution of painting styles during the Song and Yuan dynasties, the formation of the "One River, Two Banks" composition is the result of the continuous inheritance, development, and innovation of traditional landscape painting techniques and aesthetic concepts.

Firstly, the three-section composition was widely applied and developed in early Chinese landscape paintings. Fang Wen's analysis of the three basic composition styles in early landscape paintings shows that this layered structure not only provided a stable framework for the paintings but also offered artists a rich space for expression. By the Song Dynasty, with Guo Xi's proposal of the "Three Distances" theory and its further expansion by Han Zhuo, the aesthetic taste of landscape painting gradually shifted from the grand and majestic mountains and rivers of the north to the vast and distant riverbanks of the south, laying the theoretical foundation for the emergence of Ni Zan's "One River, Two Banks" composition.

with the southward shift of the Southern Song Dynasty's capital and the rise of Jiangnan culture, landscape paintings featuring the riverbanks of Jiangnan began to gain popularity. The works of painters like Dong Yuan provided important references and sources of inspiration for later artists. Against this backdrop, Ni Zan absorbed and integrated the artistic achievements of his predecessors, combined with his own unique perception of nature, and formed the distinctive "One River, Two Banks" composition. This composition not only retains the essence of traditional landscape painting but also reflects his personal style innovation, embodying the artistic ideal of Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) literati to pursue spiritual freedom and individual expression.

Ni Zan's own artistic practice and extensive learning experiences also provided the necessary preparation for him to establish this composition. Although his early works were diverse in style, through the learning and



Figure 6. Ni Zan, Dwelling in the Bamboo and Waters (Shuizhu Ju Tu).

exploration of various painting techniques, he gradually found the most suitable form to express his emotions and thoughts - that is, depicting a serene and distant atmosphere with simple and clear brushstrokes, thus completing the transition from complexity to simplicity. Ni Zan's "One River, Two Banks" composition is not only an inheritance and development of traditional Chinese landscape painting but also an important milestone in his personal artistic exploration. It embodies the wisdom of generations of painters and has influenced later generations with its unique artistic charm.

### Schema Convention

#### Early-stage Schema

According to Dong Qichang, Ni Zan's Pingyuan was studied under Chao Ta-nien. "Chao Ta-nien's Pingyuan is strikingly similar to the Right Censor, elegant and natural, truly a Song Dynasty scholar-official. This school was also said to be Ni Yunlin, but Yunlin was no match for his meticulous work, and he was superior to his desolate and ancient style." (Dong, 2007) See Chao Ta-nien's "Tao Qian Appreciating Chrysanthemums (Taoqian Shangqiu Tu)", as depicted in Figure 5, and Ni Zan's two works "Dwelling in the Bamboo and Waters (Shuizhu Ju Tu)" as shown in Figure 6, and "Pine Grove Pavilion (Songlin Tingzi Tu)" at the ages of 38 and 49 (Huang, & Hao, 2009). Some similarities can be observed in the formal composition of the works. Both pictures depict a corner of the lake by the river, and in terms of composition elements, the dense forest and pavilions are close to the riverbank, and behind the wide water surface, distant mountains can be seen.



Figure 7. Dong Yuan, Xiao Xiang Landscape (Xiaoxiang Tu), Chinese Landscape Painting



This combination of three elements, with trees and houses as the main subjects of the picture, complemented by distant mountains, and then adjacent to the riverbank to add to the charm of the picture, is a composition that has been commonly used since the Yuan Dynasty, especially frequently used in small landscape paintings. From the composition of Ni's paintings, it can be seen that the pattern has been passed down in an unbroken line. From the perspective of the pavilion, the picture shows the flowing river nearby and the distant mountains and reverie in the distance, reflecting the literati and officials' closeness to nature, their detachment from the world and their boundless reverie about life in the Peach Blossom Spring. The interplay between the pavilion and the trees in the foreground is a form that has been commonly used in mature landscape painting, but by Ni Zan, this interplay relationship has become more refined. The early paintings of Ni Zan focused on the patterns of traditional landscape painting, reflecting the remnants of his early copying and learning. Close-up trees in small landscape paintings, or three or five of them. Or one or two, or two or three standing side by side, the positions are staggered and varied. There can be two or three types of trees, mainly in the depiction of leaves, showing sufficient formal variations to support the main part of the picture. The richness of the trees in the foreground of Ni Zan's early landscape paintings comes from his understanding of tradition. Compared with his later works, the trees are more simple, discarding the pursuit of form and emphasizing the experience of brush and ink in combination with the object, ultimately achieving the purpose of expressing the individual's unique aesthetic

From a schematic perspective, the early paintings of Ni Zan, such as "Dwelling in the Bamboo and Waters (Shuizhu Ju Tu)" and "Pine Grove Pavilion (Songlin Tingzi Tu)", although they have shifted to the vertical composition style that he usually uses, the motivation for this transition is unknown. However, it has had a crucial influence on the schematic style of his mature works. The schematic style of his early works did not possess the simplicity, vastness and solemnity of the later "One River, Two Banks" style. It was more like a direct borrowing from natural landscapes and had numerous connections with the traditional landscape painting schematic style.

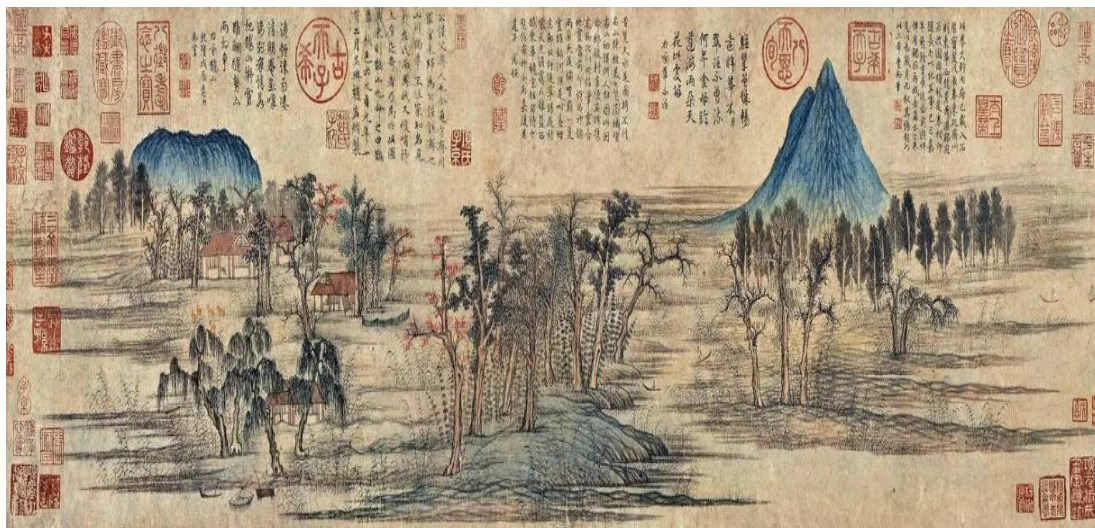


Figure 8. Zhao Mengfu, Autumn Colors on the Qiao and Hua Mountains (Quehua Qiuse Tu)

The detailed and dense woods and the comprehensive depiction of rocks reflect Ni Zan's spirit of applying knowledge to practice. The distant hills in the works did not distance themselves from the nearby trees, but rather presented the landscape scene from a natural perspective. If Ni Zan's early works were placed in the sequence of art history, there would not be the present "Ni Zan" in the sense of art history, because his earlier works did not possess the uniqueness of the significance in art history. The solitary and simple character displayed in the mature works of Ni Zan holds a unique and irreplaceable position in the transmission of art history. This character not only stems from his high refinement of the language of brushwork, but is also reflected in the philosophical construction of the picture space, thus becoming a theme that later generations have continuously studied and explored.

### Change from Long Scroll Format to Vertical Composition

It is also obvious that Ni Zan differs from Chao Ta-nien in terms of the composition of his existing works. The plain landscape composition of Chao Ling-jang's "Tao Qian Appreciating Chrysanthemums (Tao Qian Shangju Tu)" was quite common during the Song and Yuan Dynasties. One of the innovations of Ni Zan's composition seems to be that he transformed the long scroll's horizontal composition into a vertical composition that is wide up

and down. "Ku Jinzhong wrote on Ni's painting: 'At first, he followed TungYuan's style; in his later years, his painting became more refined, but his calligraphy was not(Dong, 2007).



Figure 9. Ni Zan, Autumn Forest and Wild Scenery (Qiulin Yexing Tu), Partial

TungYuan was listed by Dong Qichang as a master of the Southern School (Nan Zong) of landscape painting, and all Jiangnan landscape paintings, especially those depicting riverside landscapes, were influenced by TungYuan. Compared with the towering and huge landscape paintings in the north, the southern landscape paintings represented by TungYuan, (see Xiao Xiang Landscape (Xiaoxiang Tu)) as depicted in Figure 7, mainly adopted the plain and distant landscape of the long scroll. This was determined by the natural landscape of the south, and on the other hand, the long scroll was also a form often used in the paintings of the Five Dynasties. But long scroll forms were also used to depict northern landscapes, such as Li Cheng's "Dense Forests, Distant Peaks (Maolin Yuanxiu Tu)", the anonymous "Pavilions and Towers in Jiangshan (Jiangshan Louguan Tu)", the Qingli "A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains (Qianli Jiangshan Tu)", and Li Tang's "Late Spring to Early Summer at the Riverside Buddhist Temple (Changxia Jiangsi Tu)". Generally speaking, the grand mountains and hills of the north are more suitable for vertical composition to show their lofty features. The horizontal composition of northern landscape paintings, on the one hand, should satisfy the depiction of the giant landscape, and on the other hand, should satisfy the form of a long scroll. As a result, the long scroll form of northern landscape painting is more grand and expansive in composition than the vertical composition. As for TungYuan's long scroll painting of the southern riverbank, the scene depicted is also of the grand and expansive category, with the characteristics of The Times. The "One River, Two Banks" schema that Ni Zan often uses is more of a vertical composition. Ni was more inclined to express the depiction of a single scene to convey his inner feelings. As mentioned earlier, since the Five Dynasties, landscape patterns have become more concise, no longer emphasizing the vast realm, and the evolution of later patterns is more like a partial extraction of previous patterns. The emphasis is on the upward, discarding the grand and expansive, and focusing on the conveyance of mood and charm



Figure 10. Zhao Mengfu, Two Pines in a Distant Landscape (Shuangsong Pingyuan Tu)





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Figure 11. Ni Zan, The Painting of Tranquil Abode (An Chu Zhai Tu)



Figure 12. Fisherman's Retreat on Dongting Lake by Wu Zhen.(Dongting Yuyin Tu)

This tendency is very obvious when comparing the patterns of Ni Zan and TungYuan. Ni's schema is more like a transformation of Tung's schema, which is a result of the "fashion" of The Times. On the other hand, was it because Ni Zan's own ability to depict was insufficient to handle the vast and expansive themes that he had no choice but to adopt the form of simplified schema? The author believes that such an assumption is more likely. This assumption is not a negative negation of Ni's painting. It is certain that the level of painting cannot be judged by the complexity of the patterns. As mentioned earlier, in the era and social environment in which Ni Zan lived, his early learning of painting must have been extensive. His early paintings were more elaborate and focused on objects, while his later paintings were more concise and refined, indicating that after making many attempts and corrections to tradition, he finally established this concise style. In his reply to Chang Tsaozhong, it is written: "I have been commissioned to paint 'The Shanyuan Landscape' for Chen Zijing, and I accept this task with the utmost respect. However, while confined in the city, I felt troubled and utterly uninspired. It was only after seeking solace in the quiet countryside that I could truly contemplate the essence of Shanyuan. Yet, the skill required to render its scenery in full detail and convey its subtle beauty is something I possess not." (Peng, 2009) After finding his own style and appearance, Ni Zan freely said that he "depicted the scenery, but I couldn't do it," and his words seemed to foreshadow his later view of 'free and spontaneous brushstrokes. But was this seemingly casual remark a predicament that Ni Zan faced in his early study of painting? Among the existing works, there are no other styles of Ni Zan that have survived. Is it that his paintings are so stable and uniform, or is it that Ni Zan, who has an obsession with cleanliness, refuses to let his works come to light? Regardless of the outcome, based on the existing transmission of Ni Zan's works, it portrays an aloof and meticulous scholar figure. And his vertical composition style and the vast and distant space satisfy his inner pursuit of a serene state.

### The Influence of Chao Meng-fu's Schema

The development of landscape painting, from the pictographic motifs of mountains and trees to the creation of illusory Spaces, went through a long process from the end of the Han Dynasty to the beginning of the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) (about the 3rd to the late 13th century AD). At the end of the 13th century, Chao Meng-fu achieved a complete retro-movement (Fong, 1976). Chao Meng-fu mentioned in a postscript to a scroll that "painting is valuable If there is no ancient charm, it is of no avail (Zhang, 2009). At the beginning of the Yuan Dynasty, Chao began to advocate "antiquity", raising the banner of tradition and integrating the style of painting that was overly demanding in terms of the inheritance and origin of painting. Starting from the aesthetic tastes of the literati and scholar-officials, he put forward the proposition that "if there is no ancient flavor, it is of no benefit", which was highly praised by the literati and scholar-officials of the Yuan Dynasty. Chao's style also became an object of emulation for later painters. Since the Tang and Song dynasties, the literati, scholar-officials and painters have all attached great importance to tradition, and Chao Meng-fu's "ancients" have more transformed into the painter's emphasis on previous painting practices.

Chao Meng-fu "Autumn Colors on the Qiao and Hua Mountains (Quehua Qiuse Tu)" (Figure 8), using the composition pattern of the distant landscape, this painting was commissioned by a friend based on the real landscape. The composition of the picture is closer to the real scene with more variations. James Cahill believes that the forest in Ni Zan 'Autumn Forest and Wild Scenery (Qiulin Yexing Tu)', Figure 9, is "a translation of the large forest in the middle of Chao Meng-fu's Autumn Colors on the Qiao and Hua Mountains (Quehua Qiuse Tu)" (Cahill, 2009). There are certain similarities in the shape of the trees and the way of brushwork in Ni Zan's "Autumn Forest and Wild Scenery" compared with Chao's. Given Chao's influence in the Yuan Dynasty, Ni Zan's borrowing of his paintings can also be seen as a matter of course and in line with The Times. However, there is more than one piece that proves the influence of Chao's paintings on Ni Zan. Another painting by Chao Meng-fu, "Two Pines in a Distant Landscape (Shuangsong Pingyuan Tu)" Figure 10, is more inclined to the characteristics of Ni Zan's "One River, Two Banks" schema. The Li (Cheng) and Guo (Xi) style of the plain landscape, with its sparse brushstrokes, highlights the will of the literati. The whole picture delicately depicts the two pine trees in the lower right corner, complemented by short trees and huge rocks on the left and right, and then constitutes the main part of the picture. Behind the foreground is a vast river, followed by distant mountains outlined in more casual lines. This tripartite composition pattern is close to the one used by Ni Zan. The corresponding work of Ni Zan, "The Painting of Tranquil Abode (An Chu Zhai Tu)" (Figure 11), seems to be a copy of Chao's "Double Pines in the Distance" in terms of composition, except that the positions on the diagonal have been swapped. One can't help but wonder if Ni Zan had referred to Chao's painting when creating this picture? Long scroll forms are not common in Ni Zan's paintings. Judging from the poem inscribed on the painting, "The Painting of Tranquil Abode (An Chu Zhai Tu)" seems to have been a popular work of his during his wandering and dwelling. But from this work, it can be seen that Ni Zan's painting style was influenced by the painting schools of his time. During this period, there were also works of this composition such as Chien Hsuan's "Waiting for the Ferry on an Autumn River (Qiujiang Daidu Tu)" and "Secluded Dwelling (Youju Tu)", all of which adopted the composition of the river on both sides either diagonally up and down or left and right.

From the works of Chao Meng-fu and those of his contemporaries, we can see that Ni Zan's painting style was greatly influenced by them. However, when we look at the connotations ultimately reflected in his paintings, his works and those of his contemporaries demonstrated completely different realms. The essence of traditional Chinese literati painting lies in the expression of the painter's subjective world. From the above works, we can see that Chao Meng-fu's "Autumn Colors on the Qiao and Hua Mountains (Quehua Qiuse Tu)" depicts the natural scenery of Qie Mountain and Huashan in the suburbs of Jinan. Although Chao was an important inheritor of literati painting, his works still had a strong naturalistic flavor, that is, his paintings were based on the description of natural scenes. The "Two Pines in a Distant Landscape (Shuangsong Pingyuan Tu)" painting even had strong hereditary factors. The two pine trees in the work clearly drew inspiration from Li Cheng and Guo Xi, which is evidence of the transmission of Li and Guo's painting style in the Yuan Dynasty. If Ni Zan's early works still had strong hereditary factors and relied on natural scenes, the most significant feature of his mature painting style in his later years was its formulaic nature, that is, the "identical scenes he repeated". Ni Zan's works did not rely solely on depicting natural objects. The simplified composition, trees, and rocks in the works were mainly intended to reflect his subjective world. Therefore, the painting style of Ni Zan's works was not merely a copy or simple excerpt of previous classic works, but a re-creation of the style. The simplicity of Ni Zan's style was not the abandonment of traditional styles, but the recombination and integration of personal temperament, which was his final choice after countless trials and errors. From the result of historical inheritance, his subtraction of traditional styles undoubtedly achieved great success.

### Evolution of the Schema and Expression of the Implications

The creation of new schemas is the result of the constant collision and correction of the painter's "pre-existing schema" with the natural environment in which the painter lives, and the result of the painter's personal spiritual characteristics constantly seeking external form expression. The schema that Ni Zan repeated in his later years was because the schema itself appropriately expressed Ni Zan's individual spirit. On the one hand, Ni Zan's self-personality plays a major role in constantly reconciling the "preconceived schema". On the other hand, the schema he ultimately chose had the external formal characteristics that expressed his personality.

#### Psychological Factors

"Ni Yunlin had serious psychological flaws and the potential impact these flaws had on his painting art (Shanghai Chinese Painting and Calligraphy Publishing House, 2005). The psychological flaws that Liu Weidong referred to were manifested in many aspects in Ni Zan. First of all, he had a life full of misfortunes and was in a time of turmoil. In his later years, he wandered aimlessly. Ni Zan was born into a reclusive family, and because his ancestors were diligent in making a living, the Ni family was relatively well-off. His father died at an early age and he was raised by his half-brother. At the age of 28, his elder brother and stepmother died one after another, and Ni Zan, who "did not care about wealth and honor", was forced to operate. "The world he lived in was unpredictable and full of changes. Those who were worthy of his relationship were all in trouble in the wars that followed, selling their houses and abandoned their land, and had nowhere to hide." (Shanghai Chinese Painting and Calligraphy Publishing House, 2005) Ni Zan was a wise man of his time, hidden in the world and indifferent to the marketplace. He did not feel humble because he was in the foreign Yuan Dynasty. (See Mr. Ruan Pu, Research on "Ni Zan's Character and Painting Style (Ni Zan Renpin Yu Huapin Yanjiu)") On the contrary, he had the idea of being loyal to the Yuan family, and resisting the Ming Dynasty (Shanghai Chinese Painting and Calligraphy Publishing House, 2005) because of the turbulent times. Ni Zan resisted Zhang Shicheng and witnessed the tribulations suffered by some of his friends and scholars in the early Ming Dynasty, which gave him a sense of detachment from the world. In his Qingbi pavilion, there is a poem that reads: "The realms of life and death, destitution and attainment, and the fields of profit and harm, slander and fame — from the perspective of one with an obstructed mind, there appears to be unbearable sorrow. From the perspective of one with a liberated mind, they seem hardly worthy of a laugh. Why? Because even this body is not something I truly possess, how much less could that be said for matters external to it?" (Ni, 2010) Second, Ni Zan has a strong fastidiousness about cleanliness, which is an inherent factor in his clean and simple style of painting. In the epitaphs written by his friends after his death, Ni Zan's obsession with cleanliness is mentioned in several places. Wang Bin of Changle said that Ni "had an obsessive cleanliness, washing his hands and face dozens of times daily and frequently dusting his ceremonial garments. He regularly cleaned the trees and rocks surrounding his study pavilion." Zhou Nanlao 'refined and clean', Zhang Duan 'has an obsession with cleanliness... when flowers and leaves fall, they are picked up with long poles for fear of being contaminated by human feet.' (Ni, 2010) "From the perspective of experimental psychology theory, the material elements of form and color have a corresponding relationship with human psychology, and the artist selects form, color, material objects, etc. according to the principle of psychological isomorphism." (Kandinsky, 2003) Ni Zan's life experiences and his unique personality together form the inner foundation of his painting, and on this basis he also builds his unique schema.

Art is the embodiment of emotions, and it is the external symbol of human emotional expression. The late stylized artistic patterns of Ni Zan aim not at the natural world itself, but at highlighting the individuality of the self. The trees in the foreground of Ni Zan's works are personified selves, reflecting his individuality in a chaotic world. The nearby lakeside, swaying in the wind without being disordered, with the meticulous brushstrokes, seem to be exquisite ornaments on his body. Looking afar at the mountains and rivers, it portrays the integrity and cultivation of a scholar.

#### Inscription Source

"Gestalt research, however, claims that the world and the situation people face have their own characteristics, and that these characteristics can only be grasped by perceiving them in the right way, and that the activity of viewing the world is proved to be an interaction between the nature of the external objective thing itself and the nature of the viewer." (Arnheim, 1998) The objective scenes of nature can be combined in endless ways, and the painter's ultimate choice is subject to the eye that is driven by the inner self to watch. The landscape schema of "one river and two banks" formed by Ni Zan in his middle and later years is the result of the constant interaction between his internal factors and external scenes, and the constant correction of his "preconceived schema". As mentioned earlier, northern giant barrier landscape paintings are mostly vertical compositions to show the towering mountains in the north. Southern landscape paintings often feature horizontal compositions, depicting the crisscrossing riverbanks of the Jiangnan landscape. By the Yuan Dynasty, there were also painters of Ni Zan's



time who used vertical composition to depict southern landscapes. Taking the Four Masters of the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) as an example, Wu Zhen and Wang Meng had many paintings with vertical composition, such as Wu Zhen's "The Fisherman (Yufu Tu)" and "Fisherman's Retreat on the Dongting Lake (Dongting Yuyin Tu)" (Figure 12). But Wang Meng and Huang Gongwang's vertical compositions mostly depicted high mountains and great rivers, and there were few paintings that only depicted fishing villages along the riverbank. Therefore, Gao Juhan pointed out that Wu Zhen had also used the style of Ni Zan from the same period (Cahill, 2009). Compared with Ni Zan's paintings, Wu Zhen's works are more diverse, with more variations and closer to the objective, with a strong flavor of the water towns of Jiangnan. In contrast, Ni Zan's paintings carry a distinct personal character, which is conveyed through the object rather than the object itself. Li Zehou, in light of the characteristics of the Yuan Dynasty, believes that Ni Zan's paintings are a kind of "realm of self". Ni Zan's use of vertical composition to depict the lake scenery of Jiangnan can more appropriately express his inner self. There are no towering mountains in Ni Zan's paintings. The vertical composition he uses, by elongating the middle part of the river water, aims to lift up the entire picture. One result of this lengthening of the river is that it is different from the previous horizontal composition where the trees and pavilions in the foreground overlap with the rocks in the distance. The trees in Ni Zan's foreground are usually displayed in a solitary manner at the very front of the picture, with a pool of water in contrast to the trees and pavilions, leaving an unadorned blank space on his canvas.

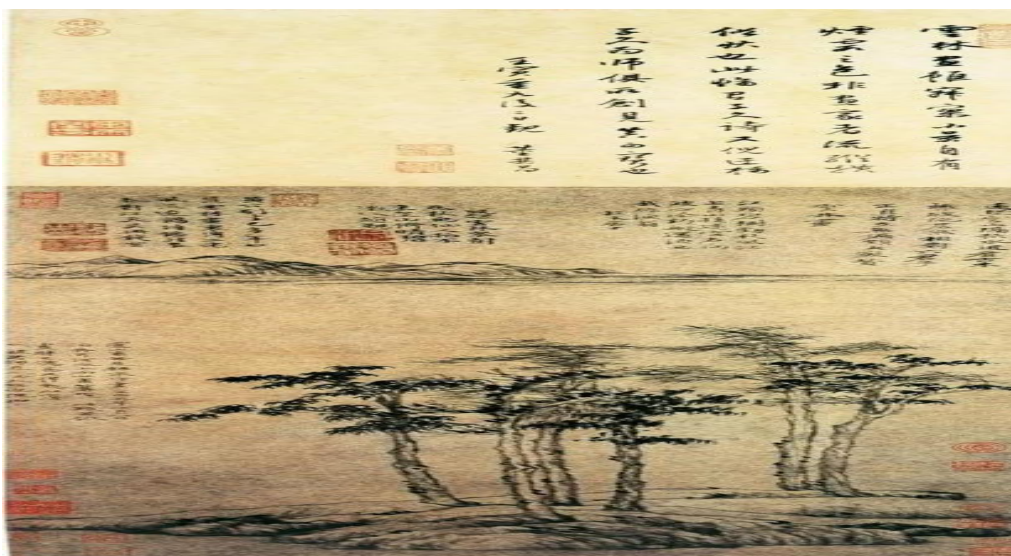


Figure 13. Six Gentlemen (Liu Junzi Tu) by Ni Zan



Figure 14. The Rongxi Studio (Rongxi Zhai Tu) by Ni Zan

"Blank space reservation (Liubai)" is the essence of Chinese painting. In the early qing dynasty, Da



Chongguang said in "The Art of Painting (Huaquan)" : "it is difficult to depict an empty scene. The real scene is clear and empty, and the spirit cannot be depicted. The real scene is forced and the spirit is created. The positions are jarring; where there is a painting, it is superfluous. The interplay of the real and the illusory gives rise to the wonderful realm where there is no painting." (Da, 1982) this large blank space, first of all, highlights the ethereal quality of Ni Zan's painting. Wang Bomin, on the beauty of the emptiness in Ni Zan's paintings, pointed out, "Ni's paintings are empty, and there is a spirit in the air; Ni's sparseness is delicate in its sparseness. This kind of sparse landscape of his is the beauty beyond the image. The painter writes beyond the image, and the viewer perceives beyond the image. This emptiness in painting is like a lute player grasping the sound beyond the strings or a poet grasping the realm beyond the words, because the aesthetic realm of art is infinitely vast." (Wang, 1995) Without this part of the blank, this kind of spaciousness and simplicity would not be produced. On the other hand, because of the blank background of the trees and pavilions in the foreground, the image features of the trees in the foreground are strengthened. Since Guo Xi of the Song Dynasty, "the great mountains are the masters of all mountains, so they are distributed with the secondary hills, forests and gullies as the masters of the near and far, big and small, and the image is like a great ruler standing in the sun, and a hundred branches running to the court..." (Guo, 1983) Metaphorical representation of the scenery in the mountains as it is. This metaphor was further developed in the Yuan Dynasty, and the trees depicted by Ni Zan were the embodiment of scholars and wise men. Take his "Six Gentlemen (Liu Junzi Tu)" [Figure 13](#) as an example. The six trees in the painting, pine, cypress, camphor, nanmu, locust and elm, stand tall and upright at the very front of the picture. Huang Gongwang's inscription on the painting reads: "I wish that the clouds and mountains are separated by autumn waters, and when I look closely at the ancient trees with their trunks, they stand upright and unbiased against the six gentlemen." It indicates that the six trees in the painting are like the six gentlemen, and that is why the painting got its name. Looking at the trees in the foreground of Ni Zan's paintings, they are all bright and upright, as if they were the embodiment of Ni Zan's self-image, as if each painting were a metaphor for his own existence. Dong Qichang said that he could not paint figures in his fifty years later, but "I am glad to have Yuan Zhen in front to protect my shortcoming." (Dong, 2007) However, it is not known that Ni Zan's landscape paintings do not need to depict people; the trees in the paintings are people.

### Schema Generation

This "Six Gentlemen (Liu Junzi Tu)" [Figure 13](#), created in 1345, is an early representative of Ni Zan's creation of the "One River, Two Banks" schema. The repeated use of this schema in the later period proves that this attempt was successful for Ni Zan. In contrast to his later work, "The Rongxi Studio (Rongxi Zhai Tu)", it is obvious to see the differences in the depiction of Ni Zan's painting. Just as his poem says, "In my early studies, I painted all things as they appeared. Traveling through cities and fields, I stored all observations in my brush." In his later years, he questioned Fong Ya: "Which is false, which is true? The ink spring gathers drops, embodying boundless springtime." (Sheng, 2006) In the illustration, the trees in the foreground are depicted more simply, discarding the elaborate depiction of tree species. The trees are more concise, outlined with lines and dotted with dots. In his early landscape paintings, the hemp-fiber texture technique inherited from TungYuan, which in his later period has evolved into the characteristic folded-belt texture strokes (zhedai cun) with horizontal and vertical brushstrokes. The late work "The Rongxi Studio (Rongxi Zhai Tu)" by Ni Zan, as a representative of his mature paintings, better reflects the overall appearance and style of Ni Zan's works, and is more individualized in the language of brush and ink.

Ni Zan's paintings are composed vertically, which inevitably requires the arrangement of objects in an up-and-down direction, thus naturally creating a parallel composition pattern. In fact, throughout his actual painting production, from his early to late works, Ni Zan was constantly reinforcing this parallel schema feature. See "The Rongxi Studio (Rongxi Zhai Tu)" [Figure 14](#), which uses enhanced horizontal lines on the edge of the slope in the foreground and in the foreground. A picture is a balance produced by the interaction of the elements within it, and different forms of lines and brushstrokes create different sensations of balance. The picture is composed of two sets of balance lines up and down and left and right. The horizontal line, which Kandinsky regarded as "cold and flat form the tone of the horizontal line, which can be said to express the infinite, cold possibilities of movement in its simplest form." (Kandinsky, 2003) Ni Zan's extensive use of horizontal lines in his later paintings reflects the interaction between his inner self and the picture, as well as his inner needs. "A man who is constantly engaged in pursuit and movement always tries to organize the conflicting forces that constitute his state of life and to bring them to the best possible balance." (Arnheim, 1998) On the contrary, for Ni Zan, his own experiences of accidents and his inherent personality led him to devote his entire life to pursuing a balanced and stern painting style. In traditional Chinese painting criticism, there were no interpretations regarding forms such as lines and blocks. However, the aesthetic beauty exhibited by the painting elements in terms of form is common. The frequent use of horizontal lines in Ni Zan's paintings proves his need to focus on expressing tranquility in his paintings. The interpretations of painting forms by Western scholars like Kandinsky are intuitive, and their theories can also be

universally applied to the interpretation of Chinese paintings, thus providing a more intuitive understanding of the composition of Ni Zan's painting styles.

"When painting the forest of clouds, one should use the side brushstrokes, with some light and some heavy, not the round brushstrokes. The best part is the delicate and sharp brushstrokes. In the style of the Song academy, all use rounded texture strokes; The North garden is slightly elongated, so it is a small variation. Ni Yunlin, Huang Ziji and Wang Shuming all originated from Beiyuan, so they all had side strokes, and Yunlin was particularly famous." (Dong, 2007) Dong Qichang pointed out that Ni Yunlin, Huang Ziji and Wang Shuming all originated from Beiyuan, but judging from the mature paintings of Ni Zan and Wang Meng, they have developed in two opposite directions. The pursuit of brushwork in painting is a great contribution of calligraphy to painting. In the theory of calligraphy, it has long been proposed that "those who are good at brushwork have more bones, and those who are not good at brushwork have more flesh. Those with more bones and less flesh are called sinew calligraphy, and those with more flesh and less bones are called ink pigs. "Those who are strong and rich in tendons are holy; those who are weak and lack tendons are sick." (Yang, & Hou, 1998) However, Ni Zan did not inherit this tradition in his painting. Instead, he developed his brushwork in the opposite direction. The root cause is that heavy brushstrokes do not fit his simple style, which is demanded by his inner spirit. Ni Zan evolved the hemp-fiber texture stroke from TungYuan into a folded-belt texture strokes (zhedai cun)s (zhedai cun) dominated by horizontal and vertical lines. This side brushstroke is not entirely painted, but more like a texture stroke that is pulled out by the side brushstrokes. It can be seen that in his later paintings, Ni Zan had completely moved away from the technical requirements and entered a form of control that was mainly based on the perception of the picture. This kind of feeling is an awareness of the "force" in the picture, a natural outpouring that comes from within and is expressed on the tip of the brush. When the young Wu School Shen Chou copied Ni Zan with his somber brushwork, he would unconsciously say, "It's overdone again, it's overdone again." (Dong, 2007, p.164) It is known that Ni Zan's paintings are not brushstrokes but paintings of the heart.

The essence of art does not lie in the object itself, but in the way it expresses the creator's inner spiritual realm and life experience through the object. Ni Zan depicted the desolate scene with extremely simple brushstrokes. The emptiness and loneliness in his paintings were not a mere depiction of nature, but the externalization of his inner image. When Shen Zhou imitated Ni Zan's works with a rich and profound brushstrokes, he finally understood the sparse and elegant style of Ni Zan's painting and the lofty realm it represented. When Shen Zhou constructed his own works using the same pattern, the appearance he presented was completely different from that of Ni Zan. The landscape paintings in his works had a somber and heavy appearance, and the figures in the paintings were fishing alone on the river, reflecting Shen Zhou's own realm and understanding. Traditional Chinese literati paintings represent the creator's own spiritual realm, and the manifestation of this spiritual realm requires an external painting form. The painting pattern serves as a bridge between the natural object and the painter's inner spirit. When the painting form of a work approaches the concept it intends to convey infinitely, this work will generate tremendous energy. The success of the "One River, Two Banks" pattern not only distinguishes Ni Zan's paintings from other classic works in history, but also appropriately reflects Ni Zan's vast, calm, and solemn aesthetic needs, and expresses the painter's unique personality.

## CONCLUSION

"There is no art tradition that insists on the spontaneous need for inspiration as much as the ancient Chinese art tradition, but it is there that we find reliance on Acquired vocabulary." (Gombrich, 2004, p.109) This tradition of "acquisition" is particularly prominent in the schema inheritance of Chinese painting. Ni Zan's schema innovation was undoubtedly successful. The "One River, Two Banks" schema fulfilled his inner spiritual requirements of simplicity, plainness and vastness. In terms of the composition of the schema and the order of the picture, it was integrated with its own internal elements, pushing the aesthetic realm of traditional landscape painting to a new height. "He developed Chinese literati painting to an unprecedentedly perfect form, adding a strange luster to Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) painting and ancient Chinese painting," said Chen Chuanxi. (Chen, 2001, p.302). The realm of Ni Zan's paintings, in the final analysis, is conveyed through the planar graphic language. His successful painting practice affirmed and developed the schema of "One River, Two Banks". The tripartite composition has a deep traditional foundation and embodies the wisdom of traditional landscape in the organization of elements in the picture. In his own painting practice, Ni Zan repeatedly used this pattern, affirmed this concise composition method in the history of painting, and combined with his unique personal understanding, pushed this simple pattern to the extreme. In subsequent paintings, such as Shen Chou and Dong Qichang, they kept trying on this schema, combining their different personality traits and constantly giving it new forms and appearances.

The traditional Chinese painting evaluation focuses on Ni Zan's unique personality and the interpretation of

the form expression of the paintings. However, it fails to effectively explain the connection between his personality and the pattern form. This article, through the generation process of the classic pattern "One River, Two Banks", elaborately interprets how Ni Zan borrowed the experience and history of traditional Chinese painting, step by step, combined the traditional patterns with his own unique personality, and created this distinctive painting form. The pattern "One River, Two Banks" not only contains the wisdom of traditional Chinese painting patterns but also has the commonality reflected in the form itself. This commonality has a broader form significance and is applicable not only to traditional Chinese painting but also to a wider range of two-dimensional plane patterns. In this sense, it has the applicability of multiple theoretical interpretations. Western painting theories are more intuitive. This article, by using some Western painting theories and research methods, can more easily see the relationship between the form of Ni Zan's paintings and their expressive content. The interpretation of Ni Zan's paintings requires the interrelation of multiple disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and painting form analysis. The scope and dimensions of the research need to be further expanded. Because traditional Chinese literati painting is an art with Chinese unique materials such as brush and ink as the medium, this art itself has extremely special characteristics. When Western painting theories are involved in the research of Chinese painting, there will be many inapplicable problems because traditional Chinese painting with brush and ink as the medium has a huge expressive dimension, and this dimension far exceeds the scope covered by Western painting theories. Regarding Ni Zan's painting patterns, the mountains and trees in his paintings are closely related to the brushstrokes and ink used in the painting process. The light or heavy strokes will reflect different psychological expectations and effects. The traditional Chinese painting evaluation has an important characteristic, which is to provide aesthetic evaluations but without specific content orientation. In the theoretical level, to clarify the form of traditional Chinese painting should have a longer way to go. Due to the factors of the author's own research perspective and other reasons, this article is more like a stimulus to draw more attention, hoping that more scholars will participate in the related research to achieve greater results.

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#### ETHICAL DECLARATION

**Conflict of interest:** No declaration required. **Financing:** No reporting required. **Peer review:** Double anonymous peer review.