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One-Stroke and Spiritual Encounter in Shitao's Landscape Practice: A Comparative Visual Interpretation of *Landscape of Pure Sounds* and *Landscape Hanging Scroll*

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Abstract: Shitao's Treatise on the Philosophy of Painting positions "One-Stroke" (*yi hua*) as essence (*ti*) and "Spiritual Encounter" (*shen yu*) as function (*yong*), forming a unified ontological and practical framework (*ti yong yi ru*). Addressing the persistent gap between theoretical interpretation and visual analysis in existing scholarship, this paper conducts a comparative study of two stylistically divergent masterpieces, *Landscape of Pure Sounds* and *Landscape Hanging Scroll*, across three key dimensions: compositional governance, brush and ink techniques, and spiritual convergence. The analysis reveals that the relationship between essence and function manifests in two distinct creative modalities. The former utilizes a dense style (*fanmi*) to demonstrate how "One-Stroke" governs all painterly laws, achieving structural order through compositional tension. Conversely, the latter employs a loose style (*shufang*), showing how "Spiritual Encounter" guides objects to manifest spontaneously, achieving liberating freedom where both painterly laws and the self are transcended. These complementary works demonstrate a profound structural elasticity within Shitao's theory where governance and freedom harmonize. "Traces of Transformation" (*ji hua*), as the physical manifestation of essence and function in brush and ink, serves as the ultimate foundation for their unification, establishing a reciprocal interpretive framework that offers an integrated pathway.

Keywords: Shitao; One-Stroke; Spiritual Encounter; Essence-Function Relationship; *Landscape of Pure Sounds*; *Landscape Hanging Scroll*

1. Introduction

The transition between the Ming and Qing dynasties witnessed profound social restructuring and turbulent intellectual currents, which split the painting world into the orthodox archaistic school represented by the "Four Wangs" and the individualist reformist school led by Shitao and Bada Shanren (Wu, 2014). Among the reformists, Shitao (1642–1707) was not only an exceptionally accomplished painter but also a profound theorist whose treatises deeply influenced subsequent generations. His Treatise on the Philosophy of Painting (*Hua Yu Lu*) establishes "One-Stroke" as its core category, constructing a comprehensive art-philosophical system that encompasses ontology, creative theory, and methodology. In his discourse, "One-Stroke" is regarded as "the foundation of all existences, the root of all phenomena," possessing both metaphysical and physical significance. In his ideological framework, it represents both the primordial origin of cosmic creation and the practical principle of "a single brushstroke" governing all painterly laws

in artistic creation. Furthermore, Chen (2010) examined the significance of Shitao's "One-Stroke" theory from a broader perspective of critical history, arguing that it, along with categories such as "vital resonance" (*qiyun shengdong*) and "untrammelled class" (*yipin*), constitutes the core conceptual chain of Chinese painting criticism.

Building upon this, Shitao further proposed the theory of "Spiritual Encounter" (*shen yu*) in the chapter "Mountains and Rivers": "Mountains and rivers are born of me, and I am born of mountains and rivers. Mountains and rivers encounter my spirit and become transformed into traces" (Shi, 2007). Shitao's concept of "Spiritual Encounter" draws from rich intellectual lineages; previous scholars have interpreted it through various lenses, including Daoist philosophy (Zhuangzi's concept of "spiritual encounter"), I Ching studies (the theory of Yin-Yang mutual resonance), and Chan Buddhism (the theory of self-nature). Rather than reiterating the conceptual genealogy of this term, this paper focuses directly on the essence-function (*ti-yong*) relationship between "Spiritual Encounter" and "One-Stroke" practice.

"One-Stroke" and "Spiritual Encounter" are not two parallel theoretical propositions; rather, they exist in a unified relationship of essence and function (*ti yong yi ru*). Categorizing "One-Stroke" and "Spiritual Encounter" as an essence-function relationship is not an external philosophical graft but is grounded in the internal logic of Hua Yu Lu. In the chapter "On One-Stroke," Shitao explicitly states that "One-Stroke is the foundation of all existences, the root of all phenomena," establishing the ontological essence (*ti*). In the chapter "Mountains and Rivers," he employs the phrase "encountering the spirit and transforming into traces" to reveal how this ontology is concretely realized in creative activities, marking the unfoldment of function (*yong*). "Essence" without "function" remains suspended in abstraction, while "function" without "essence" falls into chaotic disorder. Therefore, adopting this entry point is not a pre-established presupposition but an analytical path extracted from the text itself. It is precisely this essence-function relationship that simultaneously endows Shitao's creative theory with both governance and freedom. Governance stems from the ontological power of "One-Stroke," while freedom arises from the immediate opportunity of "Spiritual Encounter". The following analysis of the two artworks aims to demonstrate how these two forces find concrete practical expression in different stylistic modalities.

A survey of current scholarship indicates that research on Shitao is predominantly concentrated on textual interpretations of his painting theories. Overall, however, existing studies exhibit a relative disconnect between theoretical exposition and artwork analysis. Theoretical research frequently privileges conceptual tracing and philosophical deconstruction, whereas artwork analysis often stays confined to stylistic descriptions and technical breakdowns, lacking an integrated perspective that bridges the two.

This paper comparatively analyzes these two masterworks not by arbitrary choice, but because they represent: they were created during different phases of Shitao's artistic career, representing his "dense" (*fanmi*) and "minimalist" (*jianyue*) styles respectively. This stylistic counterpoint reflects not merely differences in visual appearance, but divergent approaches at the creative level. They present two distinct operational paths of the "One-Stroke" theory within painterly practice. Based on this, this article intends to approach the subject from three dimensions—compositional governance, brush-and-ink execution, and the mechanism of "Spiritual Encounter"—to elucidate the dual modalities of Shitao's landscape creation theory through the bidirectional mutual verification of visual reading and theoretical interpretation. Methodologically, this study adopts comparative visual analysis and textual hermeneutics to interpret how Shitao's theoretical propositions are materially articulated through painterly practice.

2. Landscape of Pure Sounds: The Governing Practice of "One-Stroke"

Landscape of Pure Sounds (see Figure 1) is an ink-on-paper hanging scroll (102.5 cm × 42.4 cm), currently housed in the Shanghai Museum. While its precise execution date remains unconfirmed, Yang (2003) posited that it was painted during Shitao's Xuancheng period (between 1666 and 1680). This painting stands as a representative masterpiece of Shitao's exploratory artistic phase, showcasing a characteristically "dense" (*fanmi*) style: towering cliffs, grotesque pines, cascading waterfalls, bamboo groves, waterside pavilions, and plank pathways are intricately interwoven, rendered with uninhibited and dynamic brushwork. Confronted with such a densely populated composition, the viewer must first resolve an intuitive question: why does the composition feel entirely uncrowded despite the extreme density of the depicted scenery?

At the very beginning of the chapter "On One-Stroke," Shitao declares: "In primordial antiquity, there was no law; the primordial simplicity was unscattered. Once the primordial simplicity scattered, law was established. Where did law originate? It was established upon One-Stroke" (Shi, 2007). This proposition elevates "One-Stroke" to the height of cosmic ontology and the ultimate origin of painting. It does not merely signify a technical concept of a single brushstroke or ink mark; rather, One-Stroke is the root of all things, the root of brush and ink, and the root of the painter's own self-nature. All landscape compositions, texture strokes (*cunfa*), and atmospheric expressions originate from it.



Figure 1 Shitao, *Landscape of Pure Sounds*, ink-on-paper, 102.5 × 42.4 cm, currently held at the Shanghai Museum

When discussing composition in the chapter "Pathways," Shitao proposes the method of "truncation" (*jiequ*). Its essence lies not in the physical dimensions of the framed scenery, but in whether the truncated segment possesses an inherent, complete visual order. *Landscape of Pure Sounds* captures a section of deep mountains, secluded pavilions, and waterfalls slicing through forests. Various natural forms are compressed into a vertically elongated pictorial space, yet they do not infringe upon one another. The reason lies in Shitao's deployment of a primary visual axis traversing the entire painting, which assigns each element its proper place.

The primary visual axis of the painting is the waterfall. Positioned slightly to the left of the central vertical axis, it originates from the upper cliffs, tumbles down vertically, cascades through bamboo groves and pavilions, and plunges into the mountain streams and deep pools at the very bottom. This waterfall functions as a spatial hinge: it bisects the composition into left and right mountain clusters, while its downward vertical kinetic energy links the upper, middle, and lower visual registers. These comprise the distant mountains and steep cliffs above, the waterside pavilions and dense woods in the middle, and the winding streams and slopes below. The so-called "truncation method" achieves its concrete spatial realization along this axis of the waterfall: instead of using one side of the mountain as the governing element, the waterfall serves as the vertically penetrating axis, integrating the opposing left-right landmasses and the deep vertical scenery into a singular spatial rhythm.

Yet, interpreting this waterfall solely through spatial composition is insufficient. We must further interrogate: at the exact moment Shitao put brush to paper, how did this waterfall "happen"? In the chapter "The Movement of the Wrist," Shitao emphasizes that "if the wrist is not empty, the painting cannot be right" (Shi, 2007). This implies that the trajectory of every line is not merely the result of visual arrangement, but the direct product of wrist movement. He did not simply "draw" a waterfall; rather, by continuously modulating pressure and speed through his wrist, he generated a continuous energetic flow (*qimai*) that permeates the entire painting. Consequently, the vertical kinetic energy of the waterfall is not only visual but also somatic.

The brushwork characteristics of the waterfall axis align with the creative principle emphasized by Shitao in "The Movement of the Wrist"—where the mind commands the wrist, and the wrist directs the brush. The reason this single stroke can govern the entire painting is that it represents a continuous, uninterrupted act of writing that unifies mind, wrist, and brush, rather than a segmented depiction of external forms. Originating from this initial stroke, the surrounding rocks, vertical spaces, varied ink tones, and rhythmic textures naturally unfold along the momentum of this brushstroke.

Notably, the reason this stroke carries such a powerful governing force is precisely that it is, in essence, an instance of "Spiritual Encounter". Inferring from the visual effects, the primary line of the waterfall was not pre-outlined with fine lines and then filled with ink; instead, it was executed in a top-down, continuous movement with the wrist constantly adjusting pressure and speed. Its vertical kinetic energy can permeate the entire painting precisely due to this "single downward stroke" calligraphic execution. In this regard, the generation of the waterfall is less a "depiction" of an object and closer to a somatic act of "writing".

If the "truncation method" represents the governance of space, then the organization of lines constitutes the governance of the viewer's visual movement. The linear system of *Landscape of Pure Sounds* is renowned for its density, but density does not equal chaos. Among these interlacing lines, several groups of relationships provide a structural framework for the entire painting.

First is the vertical penetration of the waterfall axis, which constitutes the most governing vertical brush momentum in the entire painting.

Intersecting with the vertical movement of the waterfall axis are the contour lines of the mountains on the left and right sides. These contour lines are either steep or meandering, exhibiting a vertical yet non-linear trajectory; their staggered correspondence provides a sense of stability on both sides of the vertical axis in the upper space.

The third set of critical linear currents comes from the pine trees and the plank bridge: several grotesque pines in the middle extend horizontally from the mountain mass, and the plank bridge is also thrown horizontally across the stream. Their horizontal extension cushions the vertical kinetic energy of the waterfall, causing the painting's rhythm to alternate between the vertical and the horizontal.

The interwoven relationships of these linear currents are not designed to guide a fictional "eye-tracking" path. Here, the viewer's attention is not dragged continuously along a single line, but instead encounters a structural equilibrium established by multiple parallel threads. As Han (1987) noted, "First, one must harmonize the vital energy into a single breath, avoiding rigid divisions into three tiers or two sections. One must strike boldly to reveal the strength of the brush. Thus, even when entering thousands of peaks and tens of thousands of valleys, no vulgar traces remain". These diverse linear directions—downward and horizontal, vertical and twisting, rapid and lingering—are governed by "One-Stroke" within the same pictorial space. Their completion does not rely on a "relay" of adjacent lines, but on the mutual references established across space. This is the concrete formal operation of "managing the one from the myriad," which instantiates the principle that "the one generates the myriad, and the myriad returns to the one".

Turning to the brush and ink, this painting relies heavily on wet brushwork (*shibi*), with ink tones characterized as "dense, heavy, and moist". Shitao's ink application is spontaneous and unconventional, seamlessly combining dry, wet, thick, and thin applications to create a dripping and ever-changing ink landscape. As Pang (2016) analyzed, the fusion and infiltration of ink and water generate layered gradations that capture the nebulous atmosphere of mountains and rivers and the vastness of heaven and earth. In most sections of the painting, there is a moist, bleeding transition between thick and thin ink, where the thick ink gradually dissolves into the wet wash, and the wet wash supports the structural framework of the thick ink.

This is most vividly demonstrated at the junction between the main body of the waterfall and the rocks on both banks. The rock cliffs on both sides of the waterfall are textured with thick, wet strokes to render their shaded sides, but as they approach the plunging water, the textured ink marks gradually turn faint and moist. Rather than stopping abruptly, they seem to dissolve naturally, as if permeated by mist and water vapor. The waterfall itself uses negative space (*liubai*) to indicate its form and faint ink to suggest its kinetic momentum. No isolating boundary line exists between the thick ink of the rocks and the negative space of the waterfall. The waterfall does not merely "pass through" the rocks; rather, its dynamic momentum and the solidity of the rocks are co-generated within the same field of soaking, shifting ink tones.

This embodies another dimension of "One-Stroke" governance: it does not seek uniformity at the expense of difference, but rather maintains opposing elements—thick and thin, dynamic and static, bone and flesh—upon the same organic generative substrate during the execution of brush and ink. "For since the primordial simplicity scattered, the law of One-Stroke was established. Once the law of One-Stroke was established, the myriad things manifested" (Shi, 2007). After the law is established, the myriad things are no longer shackled by it; instead, they manifest spontaneously within their intrinsic relationships. Hence, "The ultimate person has no law; it is not that there is no law, but that having no law as law constitutes the supreme law" (Shi, 2007).

3.Landscape Hanging Scroll: The Untrammled Unfolding of "Spiritual Encounter"

If *Landscape of Pure Sounds* demonstrates how "One-Stroke" governs all things through resilient energetic currents, *Landscape Hanging Scroll* (see Figure 2) provides a starkly different creative vision. Regardless of its compositional choice, brush-and-ink language, or visual effect, this work comes closer to a relaxed creative process that allows objects to manifest themselves spontaneously.

Landscape Hanging Scroll, ink-on-paper, is housed in the Palace Museum. Although it bears no explicit date, based on its style and colophons, it is deduced to have been executed after the 1690s, belonging to Shitao's mature phase (Han, 1987). The painting utilizes wet brushwork to depict rolling mountains, clusters of trees, flowing streams, and thatched huts, portraying the idyllic lifestyle of a recluse. A poem inscribed in running script complements the imagery,

creating a unique semiotic space characteristic of this work. Unlike the dense interweaving of *Landscape of Pure Sounds*, this painting presents an entirely different countenance: the brushwork is loose and untrammled, and the artistic flavor is detached and elegant. If the former shows how "One-Stroke" governs all things through a flexible energetic current, this work demonstrates how "One-Stroke" allows all things to manifest spontaneously within relaxed freedom.

As Shitao's comprehension of traditional painting and life deepened, his style gradually diverged from the aesthetic tendencies of his Xuancheng and Nanjing periods, shifting toward a pursuit of "bold and uninhibited" aesthetics (Li, 2010). In the 1690s, Shitao traveled north to Yanjing (Beijing), where he encountered the Northern Song landscape tradition. *Landscape Hanging Scroll*, created during this period, is intimately connected with the scenery and atmosphere of the Beijing suburbs; its minimalist composition reflects Shitao's absorption and transformation of the Northern Song painterly spirit. Throughout *Hua Yu Lu*, Shitao repeatedly asserts that "having no law as law is the supreme law". This indicates that the minimalist approach of "suggesting abundance through scarcity" (*yi shao sheng duo*) in *Landscape Hanging Scroll* was not an accidental stylistic fluctuation, but a conscious ontological inquiry into painting during his mature period.

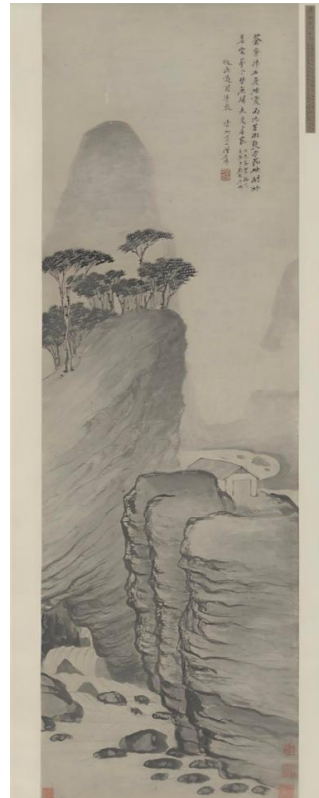


Figure 2: Shitao, *Landscape Hanging Scroll*, ink-on-paper, dimensions to be determined, currently housed in the Palace Museum.

Unlike *Landscape of Pure Sounds*, which governs the entire canvas via a top-down waterfall axis, this *Landscape Hanging Scroll*, created during Shitao's later years when he settled in Yangzhou, does not originate from a continuous vertical axis, but from a misty, ethereal mountain contour. In the chapter "Mountains and Rivers," Shitao remarks, "Mountains and rivers encounter my spirit and become transformed into traces, which ultimately return to the Great Dadi" (Shi, 2007). This painting serves as a concise visual encapsulation of this statement.

Here, "Spiritual Encounter" manifests in a modality completely distinct from the former work. If the "Spiritual Encounter" in *Landscape of Pure Sounds* is embodied in the immediate resonance between the body and the mountains at the moment of brushing—where the vertical momentum

of the waterfall is the painter's somatic response to mountain torrents—then the "Spiritual Encounter" in *Landscape Hanging Scroll* demonstrates that the painter relinquishes the stance of governing the mountains through deliberate brushwork, allowing the brush to wander freely on the paper so that the form of mountains and rivers "spontaneously" emerges through the natural bleeding of ink.

The piece is executed entirely with wet washes, epitomizing this natural ink infiltration. Shitao once observed, "The splashing of ink via the brush is spiritual; the directing of ink via the brush is divine," which serves as a vivid illustration of the principle: "Operate the ink, do not let the ink operate you; master the brush, do not let the brush master you" (Zhu, 2002). The contours of cliffs, the postures of tree clusters, the mountain streams, and the thatched huts among crags all surface naturally amidst the dripping ink, devoid of deliberate carving. The mountain silhouettes are swept with light, pale ink without definitive or forceful boundary lines; the groves are rendered with scattered, loose dots, seeking spiritual resonance (*yizuo*) rather than formal verisimilitude.

At first glance, this loose execution appears to abandon the law of "One-Stroke". In reality, however, every free brushstroke is itself an immediate manifestation of "One-Stroke" in the present moment. Rather than seeking freedom outside of "One-Stroke," Shitao releases "One-Stroke" from the tension of governance, letting it fulfill itself in the immediacy of each stroke. This represents another modality of "One-Stroke established within Spiritual Encounter": instead of binding the canvas with a single energetic pulse, every stroke becomes an independent spiritual encounter and a One-Stroke. No single stroke is meant to "carve out" an object; rather, during the painter's spiritual communion with mountains and rivers, "Spiritual Encounter" guides him to stop precisely where he ought to stop. Consequently, "simplicity" becomes the fruit of spiritual encounter rather than a preconceived blueprint. This loose, spontaneous brushwork infuses the work with the pure, untrammelled delight of a recluse.

The Northern Song landscape tradition that Shitao encountered during his northern journey to Yanjing was originally renowned for its rigorous laws of "capturing momentum from afar and substance from up close". While absorbing the spirit of Song paintings, Shitao dismantled their rigorous precision through his "untrammelled loose style". As Dai (2026) pointed out, Shitao "premised his work on the transformation of the natural aesthetic spirit, establishing an object-relation between painterly language and natural philosophy through brush and ink". The rocks and mountains under his brush are not imitations of Northern Song paradigms but immediate spiritual reactions when his "mind" confronted the mountains of the Beijing suburbs. Those seemingly careless sweeps of pale ink on the canvas stand as proof that the painter welcomed the mountains with a mind of "emptiness and stillness" (*xujing*), allowing the landscape to self-generate within the brush and ink.

The theory of "Spiritual Encounter" assimilates the Daoist principles of "spontaneity" (*ziran*) and "non-action" (*wuwei*), while integrating the active, striving spirit of the Confucian subject, with both dimensions ultimately materializing within the "One-Stroke" theory.

This precisely outlines the creative theory underpinning *Landscape Hanging Scroll*: the striving mind does not disappear; instead, it transforms into an active "relaxation," relinquishing obsession with rigid laws to let all things flow spontaneously from the "One". "One-Stroke" no longer oversees the whole in a highly controlled manner; rather, it incarnates as the immediate moment of every freely falling stroke. Each stroke is a spontaneous generation of "One-Stroke". Unlike *Landscape of Pure Sounds*, where lines are woven into a tight structural whole, these strokes fulfill themselves independently within loose, echoing correspondences. The distinction between the two approaches is not a matter of hierarchy but of divergent practical paths: the former achieves an order where myriad laws converge into one through structural tension, while

the latter achieves a liberating freedom where both laws and the self are forgotten through loose spontaneity.

Viewed from this perspective, *Landscape Hanging Scroll* is not a negation of *Landscape of Pure Sounds*, but its complement. Viewed together, they construct a complete picture of the "One-Stroke" theory in painterly practice: "One-Stroke" can both govern all existences within layered interweavings and let all things manifest spontaneously in casual, uninhibited strokes. The coexistence of these two approaches reveals the profound structural elasticity at the heart of Shitao's creative theory.

4. Conclusion

"One-Stroke" serves as essence (*ti*), the ultimate fountainhead of all painterly laws; "Spiritual Encounter" acts as function (*yong*), the pivotal mechanism through which "One-Stroke" operates within creative activities. The two works vividly illustrate two distinct manifestations of this essence-function relationship.

Landscape of Pure Sounds drives essence through function. The perceptual experience of encountering mountains and rivers drives the full operation of painterly laws. Within the single stroke of the waterfall, "Spiritual Encounter" acts as the driving force, while "One-Stroke" serves as the form. Thus, essence is perceived within function, and essence manifests through function.

Conversely, *Landscape Hanging Scroll* encompasses function within essence. Painterly laws recede into an implicit substrate, carving out space for spiritual communion; the loose spontaneity of the brushwork represents the immediate generation of "One-Stroke" in the present. Thus, function is contained within essence, and function is accomplished through essence. This interplay of manifestation and concealment, release and restraint, directly validates the statement in the introduction: "One-Stroke is established within Spiritual Encounter, and Spiritual Encounter operates within One-Stroke".

These dual practices ultimately achieve unity within "Traces of Transformation" (*ji hua*). The "Traces of Transformation" mentioned in Shitao's dictum "mountains and rivers encounter my spirit and become transformed into traces" refers precisely to the physical marks of brush and ink left on the paper—the concrete creative reality jointly accomplished by "One-Stroke" and "Spiritual Encounter". In *Landscape of Pure Sounds*, "Traces of Transformation" is the process wherein sensibility and law strike a balance amid mutual agitation, discovering their precise form on the paper. In *Landscape Hanging Scroll*, "Traces of Transformation" represents the process where sensibility naturally settles onto the paper after formal laws recede. Every visible brush mark on the canvas stands as the sole evidence of the co-presence of essence and function. Without essence, Spiritual Encounter has nothing to stand upon; without function, One-Stroke has no way to operate.

The chapter "Mountains and Rivers" in Hua Yu Lu states: "Mountains and rivers command me to speak on their behalf" (Shi, 2007). Behind this act of "speaking on behalf of mountains and rivers," "One-Stroke" sets the tone for the landscape, while "Spiritual Encounter" breathes soul into the brush and ink. "Speaking on behalf of them" rather than "speaking of oneself" constitutes the deep logic of the co-presence of "One-Stroke" and "Spiritual Encounter".

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