Spiritual Travel in Chinese Landscapes ---- Travelers Among Mountains and Streams and Murals from Yulin Caves

Ziting Liao*

Department of Art History and Art Conservation, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, K7L 3N6, Canada

Abstract. Chinese landscape painting is a non-negligible category in Chinese art history. Unfortunately, the intrinsic fragility of silk results in an obscure provenance of numerous existing silk landscape paintings from ancient Chinese art. Murals in Yulin Caves, located in the northwestern province of Gansu, China, emerge as an invaluable repository that complements these delicate silk paintings. This paper selects *The Illustration of Samantabhadra* from Caves 29 and 3 of Yulin Caves, both illustrations in caves were created after the Song Dynasty (960-1279 CE), to compare *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* (*Travelers*) painted in the 10th to early 11th century by Fan Kuan (c. 950-1032). The visual comparison involves the panoramic view and the travel theme. The comparison based on the different mediums will discuss the elimination of physical constraints through painted landscapes with the contextualization of murals in situ. Natural light will also be considered as one external factor that influences the artwork viewing experiences of audiences. Comparisons involved in this paper aim to examine the underlying relationships between Song landscape paintings and the subsequent landscape murals, extend the conventional concept of travelers in Song landscape paintings by identifying mountains in murals, and explore how landscapes in silk paintings and murals encourage audiences to experience spiritual travel.

Keywords: landscape painting, ancient Chinese, Natural Light.

1. Introduction

Chinese landscape art usually represents mountains and water. Around the ninth century, landscape paintings emerged as an independent genre within Chinese art, transcending its previous role merely as a setting for other subjects [1]. The tenth to the thirteenth centuries, corresponding to the Five and Song Dynasties, witnessed the pinnacle of development in Chinese landscape paintings [1]. Landscape paintings during the Song Dynasty profoundly influenced the depiction of subsequent landscape artworks. Unfortunately, surviving landscape paintings from their early development often suffer severe damage and frequent repainting because of the fragility of silks, resulting in difficulties in ascertaining their provenance [1]. Therefore, the relatively well-preserved Yulin Caves becomes a valuable repository that complements the obscure provenance of its silk counterparts and displays the impact of preceding silk landscape paintings. This paper will closely examine the continuity of landscape paintings during the Song Dynasty by comparing *The Illustration of Samantabhadra* in Caves 29 and 3 of Yulin Caves [Fig. 1 and 2] to *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* [Fig. 3] painted in the 10th to early 11th century by Fan Kuan.

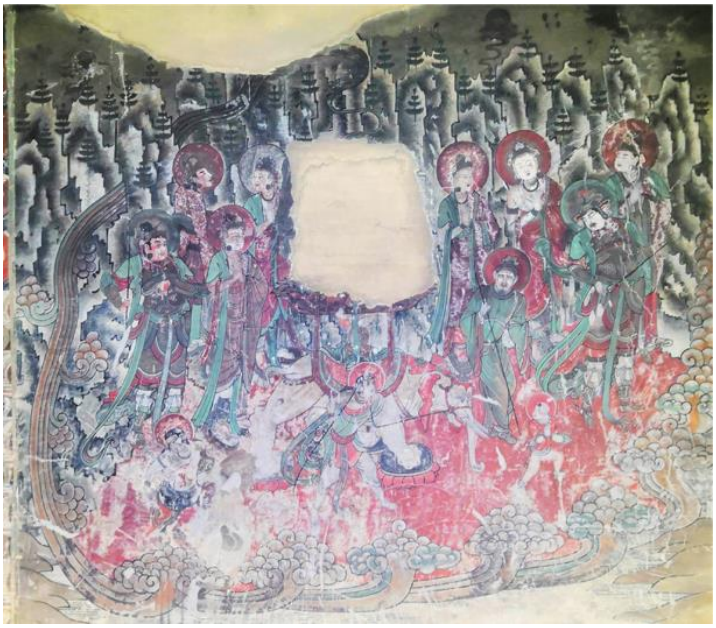

Fig. 1. *The Illustration of Samantabhadra*, Western Xia *Dynasty*, mural. Centre of the West Wall, Cave 29, Yulin Caves [2].

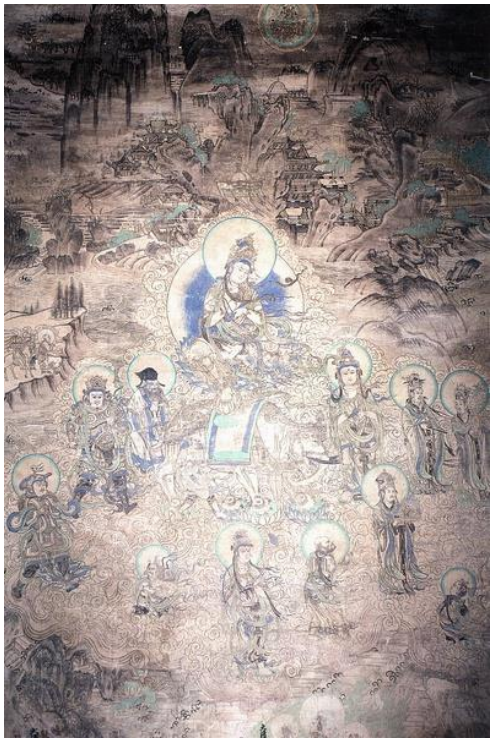

Fig. 2. *The Illustration of Samantabhadra*, Western Xia Dynasty, mural. South side of the west wall, Cave 3, Yulin Caves [3].

Fig. 3. Fan Kuan, *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams*, 10th to early 11th century, ink and colour on silk, 206.3 × 103.3 cm. Taipei, National Palace Museum [4].

Fan's work is a silk painting, prominently displaying the name of the artist and establishing its creation during the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127 CE). The determination of the provenance enables this painting to become a valuable example that displays typical artistic characteristics of landscapes in northern China. During Fan's era, recreating nature in art was considered a means to nourish people's spirits as many of them seldom experienced the true essence of nature in reality [1]. As a Daoist hermit residing far from the contemporaneous political centre, Fan's closeness to nature resonated with this spiritual yearning. Regarding murals, both Caves 29 and 3 shared one Buddhist art form named jingbian *hua*, or transformation tableau, aiming to convey Buddhist stories and concepts from sutra texts to enable wider dissemination among the general public through more vivid and accessible illustrations [5].

Cave 29, constructed in 1193 CE, is the only one in Yulin Caves with a well-defined construction date, which was during the rule of the Western Xia Dynasty (1036-1227 CE), a regime in northwestern China during the Song Dynasty [6]. Regarding Cave 3, scholars, like Sha Wutian, advocated that it was constructed during the late Western Xia Dynasty, while others, including Yang Fuxue and Liu Jing, argued for a Yuan origin [7,8]. This paper will adopt the late Western Xia, as presently employed by the Dunhuang Academy. Thus, Fan's painting represents the earliest of the three, followed by the mural in Cave 29, with the mural in Cave 3 being the most recent.

Scholars usually discuss *The Illustration of Samantabhadra* in Caves 29 and 3 together with the concurrent Mañjuśrī one. Since illustrations in the same cave display similar artistic styles, only the Samantabhadra one for each cave has been selected for the discussion. In previous studies, Huang Xiaofeng reinterpreted elements in *Travelers*, establishing a connection to Zen Buddhism [9]. Recent investigations, such as those by Yi Lingping and Yang Rui, compared the illustration in Cave 3 to various Song landscape paintings and highlighted the similarities in composition, elements, and painting techniques, illustrating the intimate artistic associations and ideological impacts of the

mainstream culture from the Song Dynasty on later cave art [10]. However, none of them comprehensively explores the profound connection between the landscape depictions in the murals and the travel theme prevalent in Song landscape paintings. Moreover, the contextualization of the murals within these caves requires further investigation, particularly in the context of Buddhist sacred mountains, pilgrimage, and spiritual journeys.

Based on these research gaps, this paper will compare *The Illustration of Samantabhadra* in Caves 29 and 3 of Yulin Caves with Fan's *Travelers* from the panoramic view, the travel theme, and the mediums. This paper will explore the artistic and thematic continuities of Song landscape paintings on later landscape murals through visual comparison and investigate the spiritual experiences of audiences within landscape paintings through the contextualization of murals in caves. In other words, this paper posits that the fundamental precondition for further understanding the mural is to place it within the original environment, or the cave in this paper.

2. The Panoramic View

Guo Xi (c. 1020-1090) was a prominent painter from the Northern Song Dynasty. *Linquan gaozhi*, or "The Lofty Power of Forests and Streams" is a compilation of Guo's reflections on landscape paintings. This treatise underscores the grandeur in natural landscapes and advocates a preliminary engagement with the panorama to capture the overarching impression and ambiance radiated by landscapes in paintings [11]. Therefore, this paper first compares artworks from the panorama, dissecting the effects of the overarching ambiance upon the interaction of spectators with artworks.

The foreground of *Travelers* depicts hillocks with trees covered above. A group of travelers weaved their way through the road between the hillocks. The middle ground depicts a stream emanating from a cascading fall located on the right of the background. This stream is rendered elusive by the misty water spray. The right portion of the stream is largely obscured by the hillock which dominates the foreground. In striking contrast, the background unveils a towering and immense mountain, dominating the upper two-thirds of the painting. Compared to the inconspicuous streams and wayfarers populating the lower third, the background mountain is like a formidable wall, blocking any view of the audience [1].

Linquan gaozhi employs personification to demonstrate the dependency relationship between the main mountain and its affiliates [11]. This relationship implies that an integrated understanding of the whole landscape hinges upon a comprehension of the impression emanating from the principal mountain. The principal mountain of *Travelers* provides an aura of majesty and unapproachability. This impression follows the description of the painter Wang Shen (c. 1048-1103) that Fan's portrayal of a colossal, vertical mountain symbolizes *wu*, or the military, suggesting heroism, courage and strength existing in nature [1].

By contrast, the mountains in the Cave 29 mural are highly geometrical. These long, stripe-like peaks present a discernible affinity in Tibetan Thangka landscapes [12]. Different from the mountain in *Travelers*, which observed different aspects of real mountains and demonstrated the artistic conception and charm of the mountains in paintings, the peaks within Cave 29, like Thangka, manifest a scant observation of nature. Rather, these peaks assume a subsidiary role to the deities they accompany.

Xie Jisheng underscored the two-dimensional spatiality within Thangka and the application of various painting techniques, such as the overlapping of forms, the modulation of colours, and the juxtaposition of contrasting colours, to create a sense of multi-dimensionality [13]. This application of various painting techniques in landscapes to create a sense of multi-dimensionality extends to the illustration in Cave 29. However, unlike chromatic peaks in Thangka, the multi-dimensionality of peaks in this mural is merely presented by ink in various levels of dilution [14]. The deliberate renunciation of chromatic diversity in favour of a concerted emphasis on ink intensity amalgamation resonates with a preference common in Song landscape paintings.

The preference for cloud depictions also unveils a discernible imprint of Chinese central plain art [12]. The strong association between clouds and mountains in Chinese central plain art, as described by Anil de Silva, serves as evidence of a big agricultural country in which the rain was a continual concern, and the mountain peaks poking through the clouds delivered rain [15]. This elucidation of rainfall implies an underlying association among all elements in nature within traditional Chinese ideologies. Therefore, the cloud portrayal in Cave 29 demonstrates, first, the importance of clouds and rain in Chinese agricultural activities and second, the coexistence and association of diverse natural elements believed in the Chinese mainstream culture, divergent from mere mountain depictions in Thangka which purely serve religion. Therefore, the landscape mural in Cave 29 displays an intriguing artistic and cultural hybridity between Tibetan Buddhist art and silk landscape paintings.

Compared to Cave 29, the representation of mountains in Cave 3 exhibits more similarities to Fan's mountain. The landscape dominates over nearly half of the composition, with the pinnacle of the principal mountain transcending the confines of the mural's boundary. Aligning with the aforementioned dependency relationship to mountains in landscape paintings, the prodigious principal mountain in the mural encapsulates the danger of climbing. Despite the imposing altitude, this mural also elicits a sense of depth.

The foreground of the landscape, which is around the middle of the whole mural, meticulously depicts water ripples and the adjacent riverbank with line drawing, one popular painting technique in Song paintings [10]. The middle ground of the landscape displays traces of human activities and is faintly shrouded by the vapour from the mountains' falls and streams. A light layer of clouds seems to hang over the mountains. The most remote mountains emerge enshrouded completely in diaphanous veils of clouds and mist and can only distinguish their contours. This manipulation of confined spatial dimensions evokes an expansive panorama, instilling a sense of boundless expanse that resonates with the overarching aspiration to convey the extensive space of nature. While traces of Fan's majestic landscapes find resonance within this mural, the topographical depth permeating the landscape offers the audience an expanded visual field with the privilege to traverse the realms of both proximity and distance within the mountainous terrain. Such a viewing process expresses a sense of welcome to explore the landscape, rather than the vision obstruction resulting from the colossal volume of the principal mountain in *Travelers*.

3. The Presence of Travelers

Xinglü, or travel is a recurrent theme within conventional Chinese landscape paintings. This theme underscores that these landscapes are not confined to static representations of nature but embody a dynamic amalgamation of human interactions. In essence, landscapes should be liveable and visitable [11]. Therefore, travelers, the participator of traveling, are one essential element in the travel theme of landscape paintings.

According to recent studies on the itinerant monk's costume in *Travelers*, this monk embodies an erudite Zen master who is seeking enlightenment by visiting renowned Buddhist mentors from various temples located in different places [9]. The challenges this monk endured during the sojourn, such as the arduous ascent of lofty mountains, function as essential tests of his devotion and deepen his understanding of Buddha's teachings.

Distinct from emphasizing human dominion over nature, Chinese landscape paintings seek the coexistence between humans and nature. To some extent, the conspicuous magnitude of the landscapes, juxtaposed with diminutive human figures, underscores the unattainability of nature. For instance, in *Travelers*, to show the tests from nature for Buddhists, compared to the background colossal mountain, Fan depicted the monk as almost invisible and the destination of this monk, the temple, was covered by trees. Therefore, the journey itself constitutes a spiritual exercise to advance Buddhist understanding instead of any physical indulgence.

Huang believed that the travelers, accompanied by laden donkeys, embodied the official transportation retinue entrusted with bulk conveyance duties in the Song Dynasty [9]. Therefore, this group traverses along the official road, conspicuously visible, while the monk selects the hidden mountain paths [9]. The stark dichotomy between the obvious official route and the hidden winding mountain path also underscores the difficulties and danger of the monk's trip. Therefore, this itinerant monk, as a symbol of Buddhists' firm belief in finding enlightenment, is confronted, firstly, by the unpredictability and dangers in nature, compelling a reckoning with his insignificance. Secondly, he endures loneliness during the quest for enlightenment and the absence of official support.

Although the illustration from Cave 29 lacks the presence of travelers, such absence should not be misconstrued as the absence of traveler participation. This paper will explain this stance in the following comparison in the part of mediums. In the current part, another point should be clarified regarding the inherent sacredness existing in Chinese landscape paintings.

Numerous scholars have contended that this mural exhibits a heritage traceable to the legacy of Nepalese-Tibetan artistic traditions [12]. Within this artistic milieu, mountains frequently acquire the sacred stature of the Himalayas, a divine abode of Buddhist revered figures [12]. Therefore, one plausible inference could be drawn connecting the mountains depicted in the Cave 29 illustration to the concept of a sacred domicile, akin to their manifestations in the Nepalese-Tibetan precedents.

Nonetheless, this paper suggests a departure from the Himalayan paradigms. The landscapes within this mural evoke Mount Emei, the sacred domicile of Samantabhadra, for three reasons. First, based on the preceding visual analysis, the landscape in this mural bears traces of ink painting influences, assimilating artistic constituents prevalent within Chinese mainstream art conventions. Additionally, the costumes adorning figures in the foreground distinctly echo attributes belonging to the central plains of China. Therefore, the Buddhist beliefs conveyed by the mural align with Han Buddhism, one that is more prevalent in the Chinese mainstream, rather than the tenets typified by Tibetan Buddhism. Second, in this mural, all figures stand atop clouds emanating from the centre of the mountain. *Huayan jing*, or "Avatamsaka Sutra" describes a sacred mountain within southwestern China, where Samantabhadra and his attendants discuss and preach Buddhist doctrines [16]. Thus, a plausible conjecture emerges as the mural portrays the sacred manifestation of Samantabhadra in Mount Emei, which is located in southwestern China. Third, the time that established Mount Emei as a sacred domicile was during the Eastern Jin dynasty, which predated the Western Xia, suggesting that the Western Xia people were aware of Mount Emei's status as the sacred domicile of Samantabhadra. Therefore, the depiction of the landscape within this mural likely signifies Mount Emei, rather than the Himalayas. The identification of the background mountain underscores the influence of the mainstream culture from the Song Dynasty on murals. It implies that the mural mountains hold equal divinity, represented even more directed and clearer sutra origins than those in silk landscapes.

Within Cave 3, the mural depicts the story of Xuanzang's pilgrimage for Buddhist scriptures in the middle of the leftmost. The depiction of Xuanzang's pilgrimage implies that this mural also adopts the travel theme populated in Song landscape paintings and displays the divinity of this travel through one story about Buddhist pilgrimage. Xuanzang and Shi Pantuo become travelers in the mural. Based on Sha's investigation of the paradigm of Xuanzang's pilgrimage, this recurring story is noted to have featured in cave art across Shaanxi province during the Song Dynasty. Hence, the emergence of Xuanzang's story in Cave 29 emphasizes the indelible imprint of the Chinese mainstream culture on the Western Xia cave in Gansu [17]. Because of the popularity of Xuanzang's illustration in China, Sha believed that Xuanzang and Shi Pantuo became a symbol to represent Buddhists' firm belief in finding the truth and enlightenment instead of the historical record of Shi Pantuo assisting Xuanzang across Yumen Pass [17]. This argument resonates with the same thesis regarding the itinerant monk in *Travelers* that travelers in Chinese art have symbolic meanings which are usually related to religious divinity.

Similar to the illustration in Cave 29, this paper argues that the background landscape in the Cave 3 mural is still Mount Emei. This stance first gains support from the parallel depiction of Xuanzang's

pilgrimage within Cave 2 in Yulin Caves which engendered an association between Avalokiteśvara and Mount Potalaka [17]. It is conceivable that the mountains within Cave 3 similarly convey the idea of Buddhist sacred mountains because of the emergence of the same Xuanzang paradigm. Furthermore, the central figure of this mural can be identified as Samantabhadra, astride a white elephant, compelling the inference that the sacred domicile depicted herein corresponds to Mount Emei. Additionally, like Cave 29, the construction time of Cave 3 chronologically distances from the Eastern Jin Dynasty, enhancing the conjecture of Mount Emei.

However, some scholars dispute the identification of the mountains in *The Illustration of Samantabhadra* as Mount Emei based on artistic continuity to Song landscape paintings [10]. This paper will argue that this argument is not valid for two reasons after explaining the existence of travelers in the mural from Cave 29 in the part of mediums.

In short, within the pictorial realm of this mural, the travel theme in Song landscape paintings undergoes a nuanced transformation, transmuting into the paradigm of a Buddhist pilgrimage. The morality and spirituality within the natural landscapes in Song paintings transform into the concept of Buddhist sacred mountains. The unwavering devotion of Buddhists within *Travelers* is concretized in specific figures and Buddhist pilgrimage within the Cave 3 mural.

4. Mediums

Travelers is a vertical scroll, usually suspended on walls, inviting viewers to take in the entire painting from a distance at once before examining its details up close [18]. This first step indicates a panoramic engagement while appreciating landscape paintings advocated by *Linquan gaozhi*. Then, each nuanced detail is examined, such as an exploration of the employed artistic techniques and an inquiry into the identities of depicted characters. Thus, perceiving Chinese silk landscape paintings within a vertical scroll is characterized by a telescopic transition from a broad overview to scrutiny.

As advocated by the 8th-century painter Zhang Zao, Chinese landscape painting employs imagination to recreate the mental landscape from the artist after fully understanding the physical reality [1]. Consequently, the interaction of viewers with the painting necessitates a personal emotive engagement. It is a spiritual traversal where the audience visually apprehends the artwork, subsequently conjures an internal mental landscape, and ultimately embarks on a spiritually resonant journey within it. Thus, appreciating landscapes on a vertical scroll indicates an introspective spiritual pilgrimage to nature.

The spiritual travel of audiences occurs in the mural as well. Since the mural is only one part of the entire cave, inherent to this analysis is the contextualization of these murals within their tangible architectural milieu. Given that caves are usually considered temples hewn into the mountainside, it is conceivable that these caves served akin religious functions to conventional Buddhist temples [19]. Both murals depict landscapes set against the backdrop of Mount Emei, which is physically and geographically distant from the locations of the two murals. Therefore, caves offer a devotional site where cave donors engage with the murals, evoking a spiritual journey akin to a pilgrimage within their psyches to Mount Emei. Through this engagement, the landscapes portrayed transcend terrestrial confines and establish a spiritual communion with Samantabhadra. This spiritual travel offers an insightful perspective regarding the absence of the traveler within the Cave 29 mural. In essence, the traveler can be any audience outside the mural. They become an extension of the painted landscape. This extension through the contextualization of murals also refutes the view of previous scholars that the mountains in murals are not Mount Emei.

First, all mural elements conspicuously serve Buddhism, supported by the historical context of Yulin Caves where cave donors contributed to its construction, accumulated merit, and prepared for Buddhist rituals. This diverges from the previous discourse that Song dynasty landscape art emphasizes spiritual nourishment through natural landscapes since this nourishment usually lacks support from a specific religion but reflects a societal yearning to approach real nature.

Second, the claim that the mural mountains do not signify Mount Emei relies solely on the style continuity in visual art. This inference overlooks the original setting of these murals, a point emphasized in this paper. In other words, the engagement of audiences, especially Buddhists, has been disregarded. As earlier mentioned, murals function as a medium transcending geographical barriers, aiding Buddhists in establishing a spiritual connection to sacred sites. Once Buddhists identify the central figure as Samantabhadra, they may naturally associate the mural mountains with the corresponding Buddhist sacred mountain. Thus, audiences, based on their Buddhist beliefs, assume in their minds that these mountains are Mount Emei. In this case, the visual continuity of Song landscape paintings and the degree of similarity to the appearance of Mount Emei become secondary. This process mirrors a spiritual pilgrimage, albeit undertaken within the mind. Scholars who concur that mountains in murals are not Mount Emei also acknowledge this intimate conversation between individuals and divinity facilitated by murals [10].

Therefore, this paper posits that analyzing artistic style continuity is not crucial for identifying mountains in murals. Audiences, particularly Buddhists, perceive the cave as a sacred space for religious rituals. In this environment, they view the murals as a spiritual conduit for attaining a Buddhist pilgrimage. The consideration of audiences and the original setting of murals are the key to deciphering whether the mural mountains represent a specific Buddhist sacred mountain.

The spiritual travel in murals is further amplified when considering light as an external factor influencing the viewing experience in caves. Murals in the cave are illuminated by natural lights outside during the daytime. The interplay between natural light and sacred imagery enables viewers to recognize the spiritual resonance embedded within the mural landscapes. This infusion of natural lights facilitates a lucid comprehension of the mural's sacredness, signifying the active participation of nature in the pictorial narrative and reminding audiences that landscapes depicted on murals are spiritual.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper compares *The Illustration of Samantabhadra* from Caves 29 and 3 to *Travelers* painted by Fan Kuan from the panoramic view, the travel theme, and the mediums. The first two parts exhibit artistic and thematic continuities of Song silk landscape paintings on later landscape murals, identify the mountains in two murals as Mount Emei, and connect mountains in murals to the concept of Buddhist sacred mountains. The third part analyzes audiences' experiences of viewing landscapes in vertical scrolls and murals separately and contextualizes these murals in the environment of caves. In summary, this paper expands the conventional interpretation of travelers in Song landscape paintings and includes the audiences themselves who actively engage in a spiritual journey enfolded within the narrative of the mural. The murals bridge the audience and Mount Emei. The architectural configuration of the cave permits the ingress of natural light, converging the natural and artistic masterpieces. The discernment of latent religious beliefs within these murals alludes to the hybridity of artistic and cultural elements emanating from disparate geographical spheres. The contextualization of murals enables the later research on related topics to extend beyond artworks.

However, due to spatial constraints, this study lacks an in-depth examination of online viewing experiences. For example, the emergence of Digital Dunhuang has dramatically transformed art appreciation, facilitating novel interpretations and engagements with cave art. Future research could focus on the interaction between the audience and online artworks, expanding the visiting places from conventional museums and galleries to the digital realm. Thus, the prodigious potential of these ancient artworks, revitalized through contemporary technologies, will be more comprehensively understood and elucidated.

References

[1] R. M. Barnhart, X. Yang, C. Nie, J. Cahill, S. Lang, H. Wu. Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.

[2] T. Li, J. Xie. VD. 04, 5-6, (2021).

[3] Wikipedia, The Illustration of Samantabhadra (2016), Available online at: https://zh.wikipedia.org/zh/File:%E6%99%AE%E8%B3%A2%E8%AE%8A%E5%9C%96.png.

[4] National Palace Museum, Travelers Among Mountains and Streams (nd), Available online at: https://digitalarchive.npm.gov.tw/Painting/Content?pid=1195&Dept=P#collapseExample.

[5] F. Li, K. Li. JNAI (Fine Arts & Design). 02, 127-132, (2022).

[6] J. Fan, S. Zhao. The Art in Yulin Caves, Nanjing: Jiangsu Phoenix Fine Arts Publishing, 88-112.

[7] W. Sha. JSRS. 00, 287–314 + 418-482, (2020).

[8] F. Yang, J. Liu. DR. 06, 1-12, (2022).

[9] X. Huang. AO. 03, 26-30, (2022).

[10] L. Yi, R. Yang. XS. 02, 308–318, (2022).

[11] X. Guo (Northern Song). B. Lu (Ed.). Linquan gaozhi, Nanjing: Jiangsu Phoenix Literature and Art Publishing.

[12] Y. Wang. SSN. 01, 105-107, (2008).

[13] J. Xie. Xixia Tibetan Paintings: A Study of Xixia Thangkas Unearthed in Heishui City, Shijiazhuang: Hebei Education Press, 200-231.

[14] X. Yang. Study of “The Illustration of Mañjuśrī" and “The Illustration of Samantabhadra" during the Western Xia Period at Dunhuang, MA Thesis, Nanjing, (2021).

[15] A. D. Silva. The Art of Chinese Landscape Painting: in the Caves of Tun-Huang, New York: Crown Publishers, INC., 33-52.

[16] Q. De (Ming). Y.Chen (Ed.). Outline and Essentials of the Avatamsaka Sutra, Chung Hwa Book Co., 412-416.

[17] W. Sha. JEA. 01, 5–26, (2019).

[18] J. Silbergeld. Chinse Painting Style: Media, Methods, and Principles of Form, Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 5-15.

[19] V. Dehejia. Indian Art, London: Phaidon, 102-134.