

A Study on the Spiritual Interaction of Traditional Landscape Art Images from the Perspective of Neo Confucianism in the Song and Ming Dynasties

Liqin Hu

Zhang Daqian Academy of Fine Arts, Neijiang Normal University, Neijiang 641100, Sichuan, China

Corresponding author: Liqin Hu (e-mail: huliqin19922024@163.com)

ABSTRACT Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, as a systematic philosophical peak of Confucian thought from medieval to early modern China, deeply shaped traditional literati cosmology, mind-nature theory, moral cultivation, and aesthetic ideals through core categories such as heavenly principle, mind and nature, investigation of things, sincerity, tranquility, and selfcultivation. The maturation and transformation of traditional landscape art images from the Song to Qing dynasties can be understood as a process in which literati visualized, patterned, and conceptualized the spirit of Neo-Confucianism. Existing research on landscape art has tended to emphasize form, style, and technique, while lacking a systematic explanation of the deeper spiritual interaction mechanism between landscape imagery and Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism. From the perspectives of iconography, semiotics, and psychological interpretation, this study examines the trinity logic of “philosophical concept-visual schema-spiritual realm” and constructs an analytical framework for understanding how landscape images translate Neo-Confucian concepts into visual order, spatial structure, brushwork grammar, and artistic conception.

INDEX TERMS Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, traditional landscape art, visual semiotics, image schema, spiritual interaction

I. INTRODUCTION

A. RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

SINCE the Song Dynasty, the Chinese intellectual world has completed the philosophical reconstruction of Confucianism, forming a Song Ming Neo Confucianism system represented by Zhou Dunyi, Zhang Zai, Er Cheng, Zhu Xi, Lu Jiuyuan, and Wang Yangming, elevating traditional Confucian ethics to a holistic philosophy that connects the universe, nature, morality, and aesthetics. At the same time, traditional landscape art has shifted from “depicting mountains and rivers” to “conveying ideas through mountains and rivers”, from realistic representation to “freehand visualization”, ultimately establishing the mainstream position of literati landscape. The landscape image is no longer just a depiction of natural landscapes, but has become a spiritual carrier for literati to understand reason, nature, the heavens, and self-cultivation[1,2].

This paper defines “Spiritual Mutual Construction” as a recursive semiotic process: Neo-Confucianism provides the conceptual “DNA” for artistic motifs, while these motifs, once visualized, serve as the cognitive infrastructure that stabilizes and propagates philosophical ideas. Consequently, the dual context of intellectual history and art history indicates that landscape images became the visual syllo-

gisms of the Song-Ming period, where “without painting, there is no reason”. The ideas of Neo Confucianism, such as the theory of logic and qi, the theory of mind and nature, the pursuit of knowledge through observing things, the cultivation of tranquility and the balance of the mean and harmony, and the unity of heaven and man, are fully integrated into composition, texturing, virtuality and virtuality, aura, and artistic conception. Neo Confucianism establishes a “spiritual height” for mountains and waters, while mountains and waters provide a “visual body” for Neo Confucianism. The two form a deep and mutually integrated relationship of spiritual construction[3]. However, there are often three paths of separation in existing research: firstly, philosophical research focuses more on semantics and less on images; Secondly, the study of art history focuses more on style and techniques, with less emphasis on philosophical foundations; Thirdly, cultural studies tend to focus on macro level correlations and lack precise decoding at the level of iconography. Therefore, systematically interpreting the spiritual generation, symbol encoding, and value implementation of traditional landscape images from the perspective of Neo Confucianism, and reverse revealing the dissemination and internalization mechanism of landscape images on the spirit of Neo Confucianism, has become an important topic to fill

the gaps in interdisciplinary research[4].

Theoretical significance:

1) Constructing a theoretical model of spiritual mutual construction between Song and Ming Neo Confucianism and traditional landscape images, filling the gap in the systematic explanatory framework of the intersection of philosophy and art;

2) Using image-based methods to complete the translation research from the field of science to visual grammar, expanding the depth of interpretation of traditional landscape images;

3) Reveal the generation mechanism of “philosophical concepts → artistic patterns → spiritual realm” and deepen the ontological research on the spirit of traditional Chinese art.

Practical significance:

1) To provide ideological and historical basis for contemporary landscape creation to return to the spirit of context, moderate atmosphere, and spiritual character;

2) Provide academic support for cultural interpretation, exhibition interpretation, and aesthetic education dissemination of traditional landscape images;

3) Promote the integration and understanding of excellent traditional Chinese culture at the philosophical and artistic levels, and assist in cultural confidence and the inheritance of civilization[5].

B. CURRENT RESEARCH STATUS AT HOME AND ABROAD

1) Research on the Relationship between Song and Ming Neo Confucianism and Art Aesthetics

The academic community generally recognizes the overall shaping of Song Dynasty art by Neo Confucianism, which involves categories such as “stillness, harmony, reason, qi, heart, and nature”. Xu Fuguan’s “The Spirit of Chinese Art” reveals that Confucianism and Taoism jointly constitute the foundation of artistic spirit; Li Zehou’s “The Journey of Beauty” points out the “philosophization and psychologization” shift of Song Dynasty culture. Previous studies have affirmed the connection between science and art, but they mostly remain at the macro aesthetic level and have not delved into the specific structure and symbolic system of landscape images[6].

2) Traditional Landscape Imagery and Formal Research

Panofsky’s iconography and Chinese indigenous iconography methods have been applied to the study of landscape themes, spaces, and symbols. The Palace Museum and major art schools have made a lot of achievements in the composition, proportion, and pattern evolution of landscape images, but most of them regard images as visual forms or style history, and rarely place them in the framework of Neo Confucianism’s theory of mind and nature for spiritual decoding.

3) Research on the Relationship between Science and Landscape Architecture

Previous achievements have noted the correlation between “investigating things to gain knowledge” and the realistic landscape of the Song Dynasty, “mind and nature” and the freehand brushwork of the Yuan and Ming Dynasties, and “theory of reason and qi” and the charm of brush and ink. However, most of them are single point discussions and case interpretations, lacking a coherent system of “cosmology mind and nature theory morality aesthetics image theory”, especially a comprehensive demonstration of the bidirectional mechanism of “spiritual construction”[7].

4) Insufficient Existing Research

1) Philosophy and art research are separated from each other, lacking interdisciplinary integration;

2) Insufficient disclosure of the bidirectional nature of spiritual construction, with more emphasis on the influence of philosophy on art and less discussion of art nurturing philosophy;

3) Lack of research on the symbolization of theoretical concepts from the perspective of image grammar;

4) Lack of a comprehensive comparison that runs through the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties and covers mainstream patterns[8,9].

C. RESEARCH CONTENT AND TECHNICAL ROUTE

1) Research Content

This study specifically defines “Spiritual Interconnection” as the alignment of philosophical categories with visual schemas, while “Spiritual Mutual Construction” refers to the recursive process where art and philosophy co-evolve. The research includes: 1) Sorting categories of Neo-Confucianism; 2) Analyzing landscape symbol systems; 3) Investigating the bidirectional internalization of these realms through the Song-Qing dynasties.

2) Technical Roadmap

Using the logical mainline of “logical reasoning → spiritual core → visual grammar → visual schema → spiritual realm → mutual construction mechanism”, this study employs methods such as literature review, visual analysis, style comparison, textual verification, and historical context reconstruction to complete the complete argument from theoretical construction to case analysis and systematic conclusion[10].

D. PAPER STRUCTURE

The full text consists of 7 chapters:

Chapter 1 Introduction; Chapter 2: The Spiritual Basis of Song Ming Neo Confucianism and Traditional Landscape Architecture; Chapter 3: The Symbol and Schema System of Traditional Landscape Art Images; Chapter 4: The Visual Translation of the Spirit of Neo Confucianism into Landscape Images; Chapter 5: The Carrying and Internalization

of the Spirit of Neo Confucianism through Landscape Images (Bidirectional Interaction);

Chapter 6: The Historical Evolution of Spiritual Interconstruction; Chapter 7 Conclusion and Prospect.

II. THE SPIRITUAL FOUNDATION OF SONG MING NEO CONFUCIANISM AND TRADITIONAL LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

A. THE CORE SPIRIT OF SONG MING NEO CONFUCIANISM

The Neo Confucianism of Song and Ming dynasties is a new Confucian system that integrates Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Its spiritual core can be summarized into five dimensions, forming the philosophical foundation for the mutual construction of traditional mountain and water spirits[11].

1) Heavenly Principle Essence: The Ultimate Certainty of the Universal Order

Taking “heavenly principles” as the essence of the universe, it emphasizes that the world has orderliness, regularity, fairness, and eternity. The principle of heaven is embodied in nature, which is the “principle of heaven and earth”, in the human heart, which is the “principle of life”, and in art, which is the aesthetic tone of “righteousness, elegance, solemnity, and orderliness”, as shown in Table 1[12].

TABLE 1. Core Spiritual Categories of Neo-Confucianism

Category	Core Idea	Spiritual Orientation
Heavenly Principle	Universal order and norm	Order, solemnity, eternity
Mind-Nature	Moral consciousness within heart	Self-reflection, sincerity, autonomy
Investigation of Things	Pursuit of truth through observation	Rigor, rationality, structure
Quiescence & Cultivation	Moral discipline through calmness	Tranquility, peace, detachment
Golden Mean	Harmony and balance	Moderation, unity of heaven and human

2) Heart based: The Inner Consciousness of Moral Subjects Heart, nature, emotion, intention, sincerity, and positive heart constitute the core of Neo Confucianism’s theory of heart and nature. Advocating for “nature is reason” and “heart is reason”, emphasizing inward seeking, introspection, self-discipline, and self satisfaction. As a result, landscape art has shifted from “writing about objects” to “writing about the heart”, from reproduction to introspection, nurturing the heart, and clarifying the mind.

3) Exploring Things to Gain Knowledge: A Cognitive Approach of Exhaustive Reasoning

The principle of ‘grasping the essence of things’ emphasizes observation, understanding, exploration, and integration. The rigor, realism, regularity, and structure of the landscape in the Song Dynasty are the direct presentation of the spirit of exploring objects in images[13].

4) Master static cultivation: Kung Fu theory of self-cultivation practice

The principles of tranquility, respect, cultivation, and introspection constitute the theory of Confucian kung fu. Require

the subject to be calm, focused, peaceful, and centered. Landscape art thus advocates the realm of simplicity, stillness, clarity, distance, and simplicity, using stillness to brake and simplicity to reveal truth.

5) The Doctrine of the Mean and Harmony: The Ideal Value of Harmony between Heaven and Man

Impartiality, moderation, harmony between heaven and man, and unity of all things. The landscape image pursues an orderly opening and closing, the coexistence of reality and virtuality, a clear distinction between primary and secondary, and a balance of rigidity and flexibility. The spatial structure presents a stable, harmonious, and harmonious overall atmosphere[14].

B. THE SPIRITUAL SHIFT OF TRADITIONAL LANDSCAPE ART

After the Song and Ming dynasties, traditional mountains and waters underwent a triple spiritual transformation, providing an artistic premise for the mutual construction of spirits

- 1) Transitioning from narrative representation to philosophical expression;
- 2) From craftsmanship to literati self-cultivation;
- 3) Transitioning from visual pleasure to emotional comfort and spiritual refuge.

C. INNER CONVERGENCE POINTS OF SPIRITUAL INTERCONSTRUCTION

The reason why Neo Confucianism and landscape can form a deep mutual structure is due to the four internal connections:

- 1) The isomorphism between heaven and man: the order of heavenly principles and the isomorphism of landscape space;
- 2) Same frequency of heart and nature: seeking the same frequency of inner self and freehand landscape;
- 3) Kung Fu Tongdao: Cultivate Master Jing and Clear Huai to observe the same path;
- 4) Value in the same direction: Adult morality and artistic maturity are in the same direction[15]. This chapter establishes from a philosophical foundation that traditional landscape images are not simply visual art, but rather a visual, schematic, and lifelike form of the spirit of Neo Confucianism[16].

III. THE SYMBOL AND SCHEMATIC SYSTEM OF TRADITIONAL LANDSCAPE ART IMAGES

A. RESEARCH METHOD: THREE LAYER ANALYSIS OF IMAGERY

This article uses the three-level method of image science to interpret landscape images:

- 1) Previous Image Chronicles: Natural Objects (Mountains, Waters, Trees, Stones, Clouds, Bridges, Houses, People);
- 2) Image Chronicles: Themes, Patterns, Styles, Themes;

3) Imagery: spiritual significance, philosophical connotation, and value orientation.

B. BASIC VISUAL SYMBOLS OF LANDSCAPE IMAGES

The main peak, secondary peaks, slope foot, veins, and texture together form a stable, solemn, and distinct structure, corresponding to the order and hierarchy of the natural order. Following the iconographic method of Panofsky as adapted for Chinese art by Wen Fong, this study validates the “ruler-minister” metaphor through contemporary Northern Song texts like Guo Xi’s *The Lofty Message of Forests and Streams*, which explicitly links the mountain hierarchy to social order. While Taoist concepts of “emptiness” and Buddhist “voids” certainly influenced brushwork, this paper focuses on how Neo-Confucianism re-appropriated these forms into a structured ethical framework. While traditional iconography often equates the main peak with a sovereign ruler and the foot with the people to reflect the Confucian ethical order, this symbolism is not monolithic; for many reclusive literati, the “centrality” of the peak represented the “internal ruler” of the moral mind or a spiritual bastion of personal integrity against a corrupt political center[17].

Water represents softness, non contention, benefit, and restlessness, corresponding to the spiritual nature of the heart and the goodness of morality. The flow of clouds and water is also known as the “trend of gasification”, which is consistent with the theory of “qi” in Neo Confucianism.

Pine, cypress, bamboo, and cold forest symbolize steadfastness, integrity, aloofness, and noble character. The density, withering, and turning of trees are all manifestations of the character of the heart[18].

Hermits, travelers, waterfall enthusiasts, leaning on pine trees, playing chess, and reading are all self metaphors for those who cultivate themselves through Neo Confucianism. The characters are small and simple, highlighting the reverence and humility of people in the world[19,20].

Pavilions, platforms, buildings, pavilions, and thatched cottages are places where the mind and nature can be settled, corresponding to the concept of “nurturing the environment in the garden”. They provide moral and spiritual spaces beyond the mundane world, as shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2. Visual Symbols in Traditional Landscape Painting

Visual Symbol	Meaning	Corresponding Neo-Confucian Spirit
Main Mountain	Sovereign, order, heaven principle	Hierarchy, solemnity, norm
Water	Fluidity, kindness, vitality	Moral kindness, qi circulation
Pine/Bamboo	Integrity, perseverance, gentleman	Moral character, integrity
Hermit Figure	Self-cultivation, seclusion	Mind nature, inner freedom
Empty Space	Void, calm, transcendence	Quiescence, clarity, detachment

C. CLASSIC SCHEMA SYSTEM FOR LANDSCAPE IMAGES

High distance, far-reaching, and flat distance correspond to the order of the upper and lower, transparency of the inner and outer, and harmony of distance and distance, which is the spatial translation of the Neo Confucian cosmology.

Opening and closing, emptiness and solidity, gathering and dispersing, complexity and simplicity, embody the principles of moderation, yin and yang, balance, and harmony.

The main peak is centered, towering, and stable, accompanied by the arch of the peak, echoing the ethical order of kings and ministers, fathers and sons, and hierarchy.

Blank space represents emptiness, stillness, emptiness, and spirit, corresponding to the “main stillness”, “empty mind”, and “clear heart” of Neo Confucianism. It is a visual expression of the realm of mind nature.

D. BRUSH AND INK GRAMMAR OF LANDSCAPE IMAGES

The spirit of Neo Confucianism is implemented through the use of brush and ink techniques

1) Pen is principle: the brushwork is affirmative, clear, and regulated, like the strictness of heavenly principles;

2) Ink is Qi: Ink is misty, changing, and vivid, like the trend of gasification;

3) Vivid Qi: The unity of reason and qi, connecting the metaphysical and the tangible.

System establishment in this chapter: The symbols, patterns, and strokes of landscape images are not purely formal, but a visual language system that carries the spirit of Neo Confucianism.

IV. THE VISUAL TRANSLATION OF THE SPIRIT OF NEO CONFUCIANISM INTO LANDSCAPE IMAGES

A. HEAVENLY PRINCIPLE BODY → SPATIAL ORDER: ORDERED, SOLEMN, AND UPRIGHT

Neo Confucianism regards heavenly principles as the absolute order and transforms them into landscape images:

1) The main peak is symmetrical in the center, presenting stability, solemnity, and nobility;

2) The mountain range has clear veins, distinct layers, and is neither chaotic nor fragmented;

3) The overall structure is balanced, reflecting the fairness and constancy of natural principles.

The panoramic landscapes of the Northern Song Dynasty, such as Fan Kuan’s *Traveling through Mountains and Streams*, provide a concrete visual manifestation of “Heavenly Principle.” In this work, the massive central peak occupies two-thirds of the vertical composition, creating a monumental “sovereign” presence that dictates the spatial logic of the surrounding mist and waterfalls. This structural hierarchy serves as a visual analogue to the Neo-Confucian concept of an immutable universal order. Similarly, Guo Xi’s *Early Spring* uses “S-shaped” rhythmic pulses in the mountain forms to visualize the “Qi” (vital force) flowing within the “Li” (principle), representing the most typical visual representations of the natural order, as shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3. Visual Translation of Neo-Confucian Spirit

Philosophical Spirit	Visual Form in Landscape
Heavenly Principle	Central peak, clear hierarchy, stable composition
Mind-Nature	Freehand brushwork, simplicity, distant realm
Investigation of Things	Realistic structure, precise texture, rational order
Quiescence & Cultivation	Pale ink, quiet atmosphere, empty space
Golden Mean	Balanced composition, moderate density, harmony

B. ESSENCE OF HEART NATURE → FREEHAND REALM: INNER VIEW, CLEAR HEART, TRANQUILITY

The combination of the study of Lu Wang's mind and the landscape of Yuan and Ming literati promotes the transformation of images

1) From realism to freehand brushwork, simplicity, and lightness;

2) From grandeur to solitude, tranquility, and antiquity;

3) Shift from external observation to internal observation, such as taking photos, writing about the mind, and seeing the nature.

Ni Zan's famous declaration of "writing the untrammelled spirit in a few sketchy strokes" (Yi Bi Cao Cao), when viewed alongside the Lu-Wang school's emphasis on the "autonomy of the mind," suggests that the reduction of visual detail was a deliberate philosophical move to prioritize internal moral intuition over external mimesis. This makes his work the ultimate image expression of the essence of the mind.

C. EXPLORING THINGS TO GAIN KNOWLEDGE → REALISTIC METHOD: FINE, RIGOROUS, AND RATIONAL

The spirit of Cheng Zhu's Neo Confucianism directly shaped the landscape of the Song Dynasty:

1) Fine observation of mountain and stone structures, tree growth, and changes in clouds and water;

2) The texturing method is rigorous and in line with natural physics, that is, the "principle of writing things";

3) The visual structure is rational and the logic is clear, reflecting the pursuit of knowledge through reasoning.

D. CULTIVATION OF TRANQUILITY → TRANQUILITY AND DISTANCE: TRANQUILITY, CLARITY, SIMPLICITY, AND DISTANCE

Transforming stillness and respect into visual aesthetics:

1) The color tone is light, elegant, quiet, and solemn;

2) Converge the momentum, use static braking, and reduce the restlessness of the pen;

3) The artistic conception is clear, distant, empty, and serene, achieving the effect of nourishing the heart, calming the mind, and correcting the mind.

E. MODERATION AND HARMONY → OPENING AND CLOSING MASTER AND SLAVE: BALANCE, MODERATION, AND HARMONY

The Doctrine of the Mean is implemented as a principle of composition:

1) Not too intense or too harsh, neither too much nor too little;

2) The combination of reality and illusion, the balance of hardness and softness, and the appropriate density;

3) The overall weather is positive, calm, elegant, and atmospheric.

F. SAGE ATMOSPHERE → PERSONALITY ELEVATION: HIGH PURITY, STEADFASTNESS, AND MAGNANIMITY

The landscape image ultimately points to personality shaping:

1) Compared to mountains and rivers, the hardness of stones, the integrity of water, and the purity of pine trees;

2) Cultivate virtue with one's realm, remain distant and detached, and stand out from the dust;

3) By using images to cultivate virtue, we can achieve the goals of "educating people, helping them with relationships, and nurturing their character".

The core conclusion of this chapter is that the five spiritual cores of Neo Confucianism can fully correspond to the spatial, brushwork, schematic, artistic conception, and character of landscape images, forming stable visual translation rules.

V. THE CARRYING AND INTERNALIZATION OF THE SPIRIT OF NEO CONFUCIANISM THROUGH LANDSCAPE IMAGES

A. THE BIDIRECTIONAL MECHANISM OF MENTAL CONSTRUCTION

This article proposes a bidirectional mutual construction model:

1) Philosophy → Image: The spirit of Neo Confucianism provides the value core, aesthetic standards, and artistic conception height for mountains and waters;

2) Image → Philosophy: Landscape images do not merely reflect philosophy but actively refine and feedback into Neo-Confucian discourse by providing concrete visual paradoxes and spatial models—such as the tension between "reason" (li) and "vital force" (qi)—that forced later scholars to provide more nuanced textual explanations of the unity of heaven and man. They serve as a carrier for the dissemination of Neo-Confucianism, a tool for self-cultivation, and a practical form for daily use.

B. LANDSCAPE IMAGES: A VISUAL TEXTBOOK OF THE SPIRIT OF NEO CONFUCIANISM

Landscape images serve the function of disseminating science:

1) Intuitive and easy to understand, surpassing textual barriers, popularizing natural principles, nature, order, and harmony;

2) Daily use is the way, hanging in the hall and study, achieving subtle and imperceptible education;

3) Cross class dissemination, from literati to the common people, jointly shaping the aesthetic and moral character of Zhongzheng.

C. LANDSCAPE IMAGES: A PRACTICAL TOOL FOR CULTIVATING THE MENTALITY AND CHARACTER OF LITERATI

Historical accounts from the Song Shi and literati colophons (ti-ba) demonstrate that scholars like Zhu Xi utilized “looking at mountains” (guan-shan) as a visual extension of gewu (investigating things). These paintings acted as portable shrines for moral reflection; by interacting with the “rectitude” of a painted pine or the “order” of a peak, the viewer cognitively rehearsed the internalizing of Neo-Confucian virtues when physical nature was inaccessible.

Neo Confucianism emphasizes self-cultivation skills, and landscape images have become a medium for martial arts:

- 1) Observing mountains and waters → Clarifying the heart and purifying the mind → Sincerity and righteousness;
- 2) Painting mountains and waters → Concentrating and introspecting → Emphasizing stillness and nurturing;
- 3) Hidden mountains and waters → Nourishing the mind with the environment → Completing personality.

D. LANDSCAPE IMAGES: A LIFE EXPERIENCE OF HARMONY BETWEEN HEAVEN AND MAN

Neo Confucianism pursues the concept of “unity of all things”, and landscape images provide embodied experiences:

- 1) Feasible, promising, playable, and livable, enabling people to integrate into the order of heaven and earth;
- 2) Seeing the big picture from the small, writing the charm of thousands of miles with a picture within reach, achieving a universal understanding;
- 3) The image of the integration of natural principles and qi allows people to intuitively experience the unity of natural principles and qi.

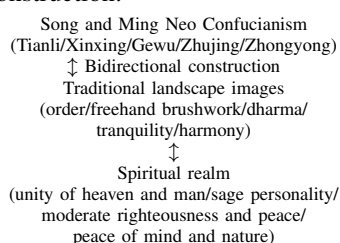
E. LANDSCAPE IMAGES: CULTURAL IDENTITY AND VALUE IDENTIFICATION

Landscape images have become a cultural identity symbol for literati:

- 1) A common aesthetic language that strengthens the recognition of the Neo Confucian community;
- 2) Distinguish between elegance and vulgarity, good and evil, and purity and turbidity based on the character of mountains and waters;
- 3) In political turmoil, uphold moral and spiritual bottom lines with mountains and waters.

F. OVERALL MODEL OF BIDIRECTIONAL INTERACTION

This chapter ultimately extracts the overall model of spiritual mutual construction:



VI. THE EVOLUTION OF HISTORICAL FORMS OF SPIRITUAL INTERCONSTRUCTION

A. NORTHERN SONG DYNASTY: THE FOUNDATION OF CHENG ZHU NEO CONFUCIANISM → PANORAMIC LANDSCAPE AND HEAVENLY ORDER

Spiritual characteristics: the essence of heavenly principles, the spirit of investigating things, and the lofty order;

Image features: panoramic view, main peak, rigorous, realistic, grand;

Representatives: Fan Kuan, Guo Xi, Li Cheng, see Table 4 below.

TABLE 4. Visual Translation of Neo-Confucian Spirit

Period	Dominant Thought	Landscape Style	Spiritual Feature
Northern Song	Cheng-Zhu School	Grand panoramic landscape	Heavenly order, grandeur
Southern Song	Mature Neo-Confucianism	Corner composition, elegance	Calmness, restraint, peace
Yuan Dynasty	Syncretism of Confucianism & Zen	Freehand, simple, elegant	Mind nature, hermitage
Ming Dynasty	Cheng-Zhu & Lu-Wang Schools	Evolution from Orthodox to Expressive	Orthodoxy, conscientious imitation, & individuality

B. SOUTHERN SONG DYNASTY: MATURE NEO CONFUCIANISM → EDGE LANDSCAPE · INTROVERTED AND TRANQUIL

Spiritual characteristics: self-cultivation, moderate simplicity, and convergence of mind and nature;

Image features: corners, white space, ethereal, elegant, small but big;

Representatives: Ma Yuan, Xia Gui.

C. YUAN DYNASTY: INTEGRATION OF CONFUCIANISM, TAOISM, AND ZEN → YI GE SHAN SHUI · XIN XING FREEHAND BRUSHWORK

Spiritual characteristics: Heart oriented, reclusive, and self-centered;

Image features: minimalism, sparsity, elegance, and antiquity;

Representatives: Huang Gongwang, Ni Zan, Wu Zhen.

D. MING DYNASTY: THE PREVALENCE OF NEO CONFUCIANISM → FREEHAND LANDSCAPE PAINTING AND SPIRITUAL EXPRESSION

Spiritual characteristics: mind as reason, conscience, and spiritual freedom;

Image features: freehand brushwork, freedom, individuality, and charm are prioritized;

Representatives: Shen Zhou, Wen Zhengming, Dong Qichang.

E. QING DYNASTY: SUMMARY AND INTEGRATION OF NEO CONFUCIANISM → PARALLEL ORTHODOXY AND PERSONALITY

Spiritual characteristics: integration of orthodoxy, pragmatic research, and individual expression coexisting;

Image features: Parallel imitation and innovation, coexistence of meteorological rectification and spiritual expression;

Representative: Four Kings and Four Monks of the Early Qing Dynasty.

F. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION LAW

- 1) The shift in the focus of science determines the style shift of landscape images;
- 2) The tension between order and nature drives mountains and waters to oscillate between realism and freehand brushwork;
- 3) The spiritual core remains unchanged, always revolving around the principles of heaven, nature, selfcultivation, and harmony.

VII. CONCLUSION AND PROSPECT

A. RESEARCH CONCLUSION

- 1) There is a systematic, profound, and bidirectional spiritual mutual construction relationship between Song and Ming Neo Confucianism and traditional landscape art images, which is not a superficial influence, but a symbiotic coexistence of philosophy and art.
- 2) Neo Confucianism provides the spiritual essence, value norms, and aesthetic tone for traditional mountains and waters based on the five core principles of natural principles, mind nature, object investigation, tranquility, and the doctrine of the mean; Traditional landscape achieves a complete visual translation of the spirit of Neo Confucianism through spatial order, schematic grammar, brush and ink symbols, and artistic conception.
- 3) The mutual construction of the two follows a stable mechanism: philosophical concepts → spiritual core → image grammar → visual schema → spiritual realm, forming an interpretable, verifiable, and generalizable theoretical model.
- 4) The traditional landscape image is essentially a visual, aesthetic, and life oriented form of Neo Confucianism in the Song and Ming dynasties. It is a spiritual carrier for literati to cultivate themselves, preach, feel at ease, and establish their own destiny.
- 5) The spiritual interconnection runs through the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, forming a clear historical evolution, but the core spirits of righteousness, harmony, tranquility, nature, and heavenly principles remain consistent throughout.

B. MAIN INNOVATION POINTS

- 1) The first systematic construction of a complete theoretical framework for the spiritual interconnection between Song and Ming Neo Confucianism and traditional landscape images;
- 2) Using image-based methods to achieve precise translation and decoding from the realm of physics to visual symbols;
- 3) Clearly reveal the bidirectional mutual construction mechanism and break through the one-way influence theory;
- 4) Extracting a spiritual mutual construction model that connects history, with strong theoretical generalization and explanatory power.

C. RESEARCH SHORTCOMINGS AND PROSPECTS

Further expansion is possible in the future:

- 1) Quantitative research on composition, proportion, and symbols based on digital image analysis;
- 2) Expand the acceptance and reconstruction of the spirit of Neo Confucianism in the landscapes of North Korea and Japan, and conduct comparisons in East Asia;
- 3) Thoroughly studying the perspective of women and the presentation of the spirit of Neo Confucianism in folk landscapes;
- 4) Promote the application of the theory of spiritual mutual construction in contemporary landscape creation and aesthetic education curriculum system.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Hu Liqin designed, collected and analyzed the data, and drafted the manuscript. Hu Liqin conducted the study, critically revised the manuscript for important intellectual content, and gave final approval of the version to be published. Hu Liqin participated fully in the work, take public responsibility for appropriate portions of the content, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

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