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Strange and Illusory: The Aesthetics of Distortion in *Scenery of Shanbei* by
Shi Lu

by

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Abstract

The objective of this thesis is to consider modern Chinese painting of the Chang'an School, studying in particular an undated painting titled *Scenery of Shanbei* by Shi Lu. It investigates the fact that Shi Lu's painting distorts the appearance of the depicted terrain of Shanbei, expressing what I term aesthetics of distortion. I address the question of the personal and political significance of distortion. Is Shi Lu's use of distortion aimed at self-expression by means of landscape representation? Does it breach cultural conventions and political values preeminent in Shi Lu's art-historical context? The primary aim of this thesis is to analyse Shi Lu's aesthetics of distortion and deploy this analysis for arguing that distortion serves representational, expressive, and political uses. The secondary aim is to reconsider the contentious classification of Shi Lu as a propaganda artist and to investigate his association with the regional artistic practices of the Chang'an School.

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Introduction

Shanbei fenghuang 陝北風光 (Scenery of Shanbei) [Figure 1] is an undated landscape painting by Shi Lu 石魯 (1919-1982). If one examines this work from the standpoint of shape, colour, and the painting's title, it is likely that it was intended to represent a loess plateau. Shi Lu depicted a few traces of human activities in the painting. He outlined a trail at the foot of the loess plateau. He also included a series of *yaodong* 窯洞 (cave-dwelling), a type of local architecture used in the area for living nearby trails. The segregation between earth and sky is not clear in the painting. Furthermore, very little contextual information is provided. For instance, it is hard to tell the season or the time of the depicted landscape.

I must confess that, for me, *Scenery of Shanbei* was not a case of love at first sight. I could hardly interpret the brushwork, composition and colour scheme. Why did Shi Lu paint in such a strange and hazy manner? Shi Lu has been considered as a propagandist artist. He is known for painting in a Socialist Realist style, in which clarity and distinctness of motifs and themes are compulsory. Was this painting a work with a propagandist function, or was it something else? I was puzzled and confused. This painting presents a challenge for interpretation due to the presence of strange visual effects. Most prominently, it appears to employ distortion. What do I mean by 'distortion'? Among other senses, the notions of "distortion" in English and *bianxing* 變形 (change of shape) in Chinese often refer to the process of twisting away from facts or original sources. This concept seems relevant to interpret Shi Lu's painting for a number of reasons, the first of which being that Shi Lu depicted a distinctive geologic formation of Shanbei in a twisted or ambiguous manner. Let me explain this point, which requires us to understand the nature of the Chinese loess terrain.

In *An Outline of Chinese Geography*, the loess terrain of central China is described as follows:

The plateau is largely covered by a layer of loess which generally varies in depth from 50 to 80 metres but which exceeds 100 metres in some places. This yellowish soil is a loose, loamy deposit blown in over the centuries all the way from the highland deserts of Inner Mongolia. Sparse vegetation and concentrated rainfall in summer have caused serious loss of water and soil, and over the ages

this has brought about the formation of numerous gullies. The complex terrain of the plateau is typical of loess land formation.¹

This paragraph above illustrates a physical and natural property of the loess. The loess terrain of China is not a tall and rigid geological formation. Gullies run through or amongst the plateaus. If one considers the painting from this standpoint, it is clear that Shi Lu's work goes beyond an accurate depiction of the natural structural properties of a loess land formation, namely because the representation is twisted by an uncanny ascending effect. This effect is most likely elicited by subtle manipulations of the spatial relationships between the basic pictorial elements of the composition. For instance, Shi Lu omitted transitional regions and clear boundaries in the depicted landscape. In addition, he painted the loess land from a high-vantage perspective. This perspective might prompt beholders' imaginings about height, volume, and monumentality of the depicted loess land. Shi Lu, it seems, uses distortion as an aesthetic means for expressing his artistic vision in *Scenery of Shanbei*, inducing a colossal ascent that might serve expressive functions beyond realistic representation.

The research presented in this thesis hypothesizes that the aesthetics of distortion in *Scenery of Shanbei* stem from Shi Lu's attempt at addressing two types of interwoven artistic goals. The first aims at creating monumentality in represented landscape in order to present the magnificence of local landscape and, more importantly, the Chang'an School. The second seeks to make a statement of Shi Lu's artistic practice, his brushwork and his viewpoint of *guohua* 國畫 (Chinese ink painting) in his time. I argue that Shi Lu develops aesthetics of distortion to address these two aims. I use the term "aesthetics of distortion" to refer to doctrines and practices that influenced Shi Lu's art and relate to distortion understood in several senses. First, Shi Lu provides a discussion of one of these senses in his notes in his *Shi Lu xuehualu* 石魯學畫錄 (Record of Shi Lu's Study of Painting). In the chapter entitled *Bimo* 筆墨 (brush and ink), he discusses the doctrine of *qihuan*. This doctrine, which I view as a central concept of the aesthetics of distortion, is introduced by Zheng Ji (1813- ?) in a painting manual titled *Menghuanju huaxue jianmian* 夢幻居畫學簡明 (Strange and Illusory Dwelling: The Concise Study of Paintings). A second concept of distortion is related to a contradiction in which Shi Lu was caught. He had to compromise his individualistic artistic practice to the Communist

¹ Chung Chih. *An Outline of Chinese Geography* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1978), p. 50.

cultural guidelines. This can be better understood if one has an understanding of the basics trends in scholarship about Shi Lu's art and biography.

Current Scholarship and Debates about Shi Lu's Oeuvre

Scholarship on Shi Lu's oeuvre has focused on at least four key topics: Shi Lu's biography and his involvement in the Chang'an School; the relationship between Shi Lu's art and modernity in Chinese paintings; the consequences of Communist cultural policies on Shi Lu's artistic practices; and, finally, the diversified artistic styles in Shi Lu's oeuvre. Scholars have investigated Shi Lu's styles from the standpoint of modernity in Chinese art (John Clark), the impact of Shi Lu's mental illness and psychiatric experience on his artistic practices (Richard Vinograd), and Communist cultural guidelines and Shi Lu's art (Julia Andrews, David Clarke, Shelley Hawks).

Modernity in Chinese art. John Clark holds that the interpretation of modernity in Shi Lu's works of art is unlikely to be the most significant in Shi Lu's artistic practices. He argues that "... [the] towering peak in an ink landscape with whatever disingenuously 'modern' symbol – the epic leader or the modern lumber-camp characterizes much less clearly the situation of modernity."²

Impact of Shi Lu's mental illness and psychiatric diagnosis on his artistic practice. In a survey text on Chinese art and culture, Richard Vinograd and Robert Thorp claim that Shi Lu "had a remarkably diverse career as a political print maker and painter of epic propaganda pictures, as well as a calligrapher and landscape and flower painter in *guohua* modes."³ Vinograd's inquiry focuses on the representation of turbulence, physical intensity and psychological turmoil in a painting titled *The Banks of the Yellow River*, created in 1961. Vinograd interprets Shi Lu's intention of positioning the calligraphic inscription at the top edge of the composition as a means to induce an interpretation of the represented river bank as "a great vertical cliff viewed straight on and radically disjunct from the adjacent river scene."⁴ Although he does not use the concept of aesthetics of distortion, Vinograd's analysis prefigures my interpretation of

² John Clark. "Modernity in Chinese Painting," in *Modernities of Chinese Art* (Boston: Brill, 2010), p. 32.

³ Robert L. Thorp and Richard Vinograd, *Chinese Art & Culture* (New York: Abrams, 2001), p. 382.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 384.

Scenery of Shanbei in terms of aesthetics of distortion. Both interpretations originate from the analysis of conflicted or “disjunctive” spatial relationship in Shi Lu’s depictions.

Communist cultural guidelines and Shi Lu’s art. Julia Andrews, David Clarke and Shelley Hawks discuss the impact of Communist cultural guidelines on Shi Lu’s artistic practice. In the context of discussion of propaganda in *guohua* 國畫 (Chinese ink painting) in the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), David Clarke suggests that *Fighting in Northern Shaanxi* by Shi Lu has revolutionary significance due to the way it eulogizes a landscape attached to important political events. Clarke states that “pure landscapes are far removed from the servitude to propaganda found in most oil paintings, but such apparent freedom was frequently gained by making topographical reference to locations of revolutionary or national significance.”⁵ Shelley Hawks discusses Shi Lu’s paintings from 1970s, the period in which Shi Lu was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Hawks thinks that Shi Lu’s works of art from this period is an upshot of a protest against the Cultural Revolution driven by an assertion of Confucian values. Hawks notes that Shi Lu’s art from the 1970s “provides a window on the erosion and final collapse of his Mao-centred faith,”⁶ a point reminiscent of Andrews’ analysis of Shi Lu’s last period. Hawks adds that Shi Lu appealed to Confucian values in his art as a form of “protest and psychological compensation.”⁷ I will discuss Hawks’ view in more details in Chapter 3, in the context of my analysis of the dual allegiance in Shi Lu’s artistic practice.

In her writing about art and communist politics, Julia Andrews analyses the role and influence of Shi Lu in the Chang’an School. She outlines the trajectory of Shi Lu’s artistic career and its association with his administrative roles in the artistic field of Xi’an. Andrews compares Shi Lu’s paintings with art works by Zhao Wangyun 趙望云 (1906-1977) and He Haixia 何海霞 (1908-1998). She identifies similarities in terms of composition and subject matter between paintings such as *On the Road to Nanniwan* by Shi Lu and *Returning Herder in an Autumnal Forest* by Zhao Wangyun, or *Going Upstream at Yumen* by Shi Lu and *Yumen Gorge on the Yellow River* by He Haixia.

⁵ David Clarke, “Revolutions in Vision: Chinese Art and the Experience of Modernity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Chinese Culture*, ed. by Kam Louie (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 285.

⁶ Shelly Hawks, “Summoning Confucius: Inside Shi Lu’s Imagination,” in *Art in Turmoil: The Chinese Cultural Revolution 1966-76*, edited by Richard King with Ralph Croizier, Shengtian Zheng and Scott Watson (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), p.60.

⁷ Hawks, “Summoning Confucius”, p. 60.

Andrews wrote that “Shi Lu and Zhao Wangyun share a somewhat unsystematic, individualistic use of the brush. [...] Only He Haixia completely eschewed this textural chaos.”⁸ In addition, in her examination of Shi Lu’s woodcut prints of the late 1940s, Andrews argues that “the Socialist Realism was not a style with which Shi Lu ever became entirely comfortable.”⁹ However, Shi Lu and the Chang’an School contributed “national forms and local colour” to raise awareness of uniqueness of this regional art school. Despite his efforts, the school was criticised for developing aesthetics viewed as lacking in terms of originality. In addition, Andrews provides evidence that Shi Lu produced paintings “freed from the constraints of party policy” after he lost his “favour” from the Communist Party. I will concur with several points made by Andrews in my interpretation of *Scenery of Shanbei* and my analysis of the contradiction encountered by Shi Lu in his artistic career.

A few Chinese art historians have examined Shi Lu’s art from the standpoint of a discussion of his contributions to innovation in *guohua*. Ling Hubiao explores two aspects of Shi Lu’s artistic practices. The first aspect is that, according to Ling Hubiao, Shi Lu “borrowed” techniques from Western paintings, such as composition, perspective and chiaroscuro, and meshed them with Chinese painting techniques to depict loess land.¹⁰ The second is Shi Lu’s innovative practices of copying painters, such as, Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521-1593), Shitao 石濤 (1630-1724), the artists of the Yangzhou School, Xugu 虛谷 (1823-1896), Qi Baishi 齊白石 (1864-1957) and others. Shi Lu was studying what he considers as “tradition” for his use to innovate *guohua*.

Wang Chuan provides a periodization of the development of Shi Lu’s art divided into four historical phases. According to this analysis, in 1949 and earlier, Shi Lu focused on woodcut prints in the Socialist Realism style. In his paintings with human figures as subject matter, narration was involved in most cases. From 1949 until 1959, Shi Lu’s art focused on new-year pictures and paintings with coloured ink. Wang Chuan argues that it is during this period that Shi Lu has developed more interests in landscape than human

⁸ Julia Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People’s Republic of China, 1949 – 1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 292.

⁹ Andrews, 106.

¹⁰ Ling Hubiao, “Yidao fangchang xinyi weiqu: shilun Shilu de guohua tansuo daolu 藝道方長新意為趣: 識論石魯的國畫探索道路” in *Shi Lu xuehualu*, (Xi’an: Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 1985), p. 77.

figures, and became a landscape painter. The third period (1964-1971) is defined by Shi Lu's focus on the depiction of the unique geographic character of loess terrain. With the period of Shi Lu's last years (1971-1982), his paintings expressed emotions such as love and grief, which seem to reflect attitudes elicited by events of Shi Lu's personal life.¹¹ I will use this periodization of Shi Lu's artistic career in my discussion of the date of *Scenery of Shanbei* and the situation of this painting within Shi Lu's oeuvre.

Current scholarship reveals the puzzling diversity that characterises Shi Lu's artistic practices and styles. There are at least three basic ways to construe this diversity, which are not exclusive to one another. A first line of interpretation is that it originates from the ambiguous and unsteady influence of the Western art on Shi Lu's aesthetics. Shi Lu first encountered Western art in the Oriental Art School co-founded by his brother, Feng Jianwu 馮建吳. On a second construal, the Communist cultural policy was a "stressor" for Shi Lu's artistic practices, which impacted his art in ways that led to its complex diversity, due to frequent shifts in Shi Lu's allegiance and priorities. In this type of account, Shi Lu's works of art reflect his belief or attitudes towards the cultural policies of his time. In a third construal, schizophrenia made an impact on Shi Lu's mentality, which led to Shi Lu's unpredictable artistic practices in the 1970s.

In addition to garnering the attention of art historians, I should not neglect that works of art by Shi Lu have also interested art collectors. Robert H. Ellsworth is a prominent figure among these collectors. His collection of Chinese fine arts includes many works by Shi Lu. Ellsworth began collecting Shi Lu's paintings and calligraphic works when they were still contemporary. He acquired his first painting by Shi Lu in the late 1970s.¹² Since then, the artistic and market value of Shi Lu's art has been recognized. Ellsworth's collection of Shi Lu's paintings and calligraphies has been published in *Later Chinese Painting and Calligraphy, 1800-1950* and *The Beauty of Art: Paintings and Calligraphy by Shi Lu*. I consulted these two catalogues to cultivate myself about Shi Lu's calligraphic inscriptions in the published paintings.

¹¹ Wang Chuan, "Shi lu lun 石魯論" in *Shi Lu yu nage shidai: 2007 symposium on art by Shi Lu*, (Shijiazhuang: Heibei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2008), p.129.

¹² Robert D. Mowry, "The Beauty of Art: Paintings and Calligraphy by Shi Lu from the Private Collection of Robert Hatfield Ellsworth" in *The Beauty of Art: Paintings and Calligraphy by Shi Lu from the Private Collection of Robert Hatfield Ellsworth*, (New York: Christie's, 2011), p.3.

The unusual *Scenery of Shanbei* alerts us to tensions that we see in various degrees in other parts of Shi Lu's oeuvre. The interpretation of Shi Lu's artistic practices in terms of "distortion" has been considered in writings by Shelly Hawks and Richard Vinograd, which I introduced above. Expanding this tradition, I further investigate this notion of distortion by means of an examination of the web of historical and social connections that influenced Shi Lu's artistic practices.

Brief Biography of Shi Lu and Shi Lu's Placement in Xi'an

In this section, I will provide biographical and historical information in order to facilitate the understanding of Shi Lu's history in Xi'an and his artistic practice within his historical and political context. Shi Lu (1919-1982, né Feng Yaheng 馮亞珩) was born in a wealthy family in the province of Sichuan. Influenced by his brother Feng Jianwu, Shi Lu began painting in the Oriental Art School in Chengdu, where he was admitted into the Chinese painting department in 1934.

The school publication titled *The Sun in the East* indicates that Shi Lu was exposed to a diversified curriculum and introduced to writings related to both Chinese and Western aesthetics.¹³ Although Shi Lu was studying in the Chinese painting department, the "avant-garde" thinking he absorbed in his youth is likely to have played a role in his later artistic work.

Shi Lu left his hometown in Sichuan for Yan'an in the province of Shaanxi in his early twenties. He wanted to devote himself to the anti-Japanese movement in Yan'an, where there was a base for Communist revolutionaries.¹⁴ He came to Yan'an and later joined local propaganda teams. Shi Lu wanted to be part of political movements and take advantage of the historical momentum. He committed himself to patronizing and promoting communist politics through his artistic abilities. In 1940, he adopted the name Shi Lu, which is compound of the last names of Shitao and Lu Xun. Shi Lu joined in the Chinese Communist Party in 1946.

¹³ Quanguo tushuguan wenxian weisuo fuzhi zhongxin, *Minguo zhenxi duankanduankan Sichuan juan* 民國珍惜短刊斷刊四川卷 (Beijing: Quanguo tushuguan wenxian weisuo fuzhi zhongxin, 2006), p. 6769-6789.

¹⁴ Shi Dan, *Shi Lu* 石魯 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2003), p. 1-15.

In his paintings from the 1950s, he adopted the style of Socialist Realism and integrated it with the media of Chinese traditional painting. Shi Lu's importance in the art movements of Xi'an was quickly acknowledged after he moved there in 1949. Moreover, closely following contemporary cultural guidelines in his time, Shi Lu set out plans on initiating art movements in the Northwest region of China where he was residing. He sensed the prospect that he could contribute to the development of a vibrant artistic scene and establish his stature as an artist in this region. He presented his propositions at a meeting attended by representatives from the art and literary fields in the Northwest. He gave a speech in September 1950 titled "How to Develop People's Art Movements in the Northwest Region," which was compiled in *Shi Lu yishu wenji* 石魯藝術文集 (Shi Lu's Collected Writings on Art).¹⁵ In his speech, he defended three main points. First, movements have to be in line with the cultural guidelines advocated by Mao Zedong at the Yan'an conference on art and literature. This conference took place in 1942. It aimed at conveying Mao Zedong's conception of art and literature and its relationship with revolution and politics. Artists and writers need to follow these guiding principles to create works of art take the stand of the proletarian class and for the people from this class. Second, instead of focusing on art forms and artistic skills, artists have to fully understand the political rationale that motivates the creation of works of art at the service of the people. Third, the print media should be used to promote people's pictorial newspapers and reach a broader audience.

In 1951 Shi Lu was appointed the director of *Xibei huabao* 西北畫報 (*Northwest Pictorial Newspaper*).¹⁶ Through public appearances and his patronage to the Communist cultural guidelines, Shi Lu quickly secured a prominent administrative and artistic position in Xi'an. Furthermore, Shi Lu frequently expounded his artistic viewpoints in public, which encouraged artists and students to be his disciples and followers.

Shi Lu's involvement in artistic movements of Xi'an from the 1950s till the 1960s exemplified his ambition of establishing his position and influences locally. The *Shanganning bianqu wenxie meishu gongzuo weiyuanhui* 陝甘寧邊區文協美術工作委員會 (Association of Literature and Art at the Border of Provinces of Shan Gan Ning)

¹⁵ Shi Lu, *Shilu yishu wenji* 石魯藝術文集, ed. Ye Jian and Shi Dan (Xi'an: Shaanxi renmin meishu chubanshe, 2003), p. 15-20.

¹⁶ Shi Lu, *Shilu yishu wenji*, p. 337.

was founded in August 1950 mainly for preserving the Buddhist caves in this region. Zhao Wangyun was the associate director in this office. Shi Lu was closely associated with Zhao in 1950s. Zhao supported Shi Lu for the founding of a research group on *guohua*. Shi Lu was later appointed as the director of this research group. This group developed into *meixie shanxi fenghui chuanguo yanjiushi* 美協陝西分會創作研究 (Art Association Shaanxi Branch Creative Research Group), which provided an organizational foundation for the development of the Chang'an School.¹⁷

In the 1950s, Shi Lu and Zhao Wangyun were leading figures in this local art school. Later, other notable artists, such as He Haixia 何海霞 (1908-1998), Kang Shiyao 康師堯 (1921-1985) and Li Zisheng 李梓盛 (1919-1987), were considered as members of this art group. Around the same time period, cultural policies encouraged artists to *xuexi chuantong* 學習傳統 (learn from traditions) but *tuichen chuxin* 推陳出新 (overthrow the old to create the new) . In 1953, *zhongguo wenxue yishu gongzuozhe dierci daibiao dahui* 中國文學藝術工作者第二次代表大會 (Chinese workers of literature and art the second conference of representatives) took place in Beijing. The debates that took place at this event raised a number of questions. How should artists study traditions? How are they to manage the relationship between tradition and life? How should they create works of art from life? What are the means of artistic expression that can capture the national style? What is the correct attitude towards foreign art forms? How to properly adopt art from abroad?¹⁸ Responding to these questions and communist guidelines for art, Shi Lu proposed that artists should adopt this aesthetic attitude: “*Yishou shenxiang chuantong, yishou shenxiang shenghuo* 一手伸向傳統，一手伸向生活 (one hand extends to tradition; one hand extends to life).”¹⁹ Shi Lu further specified that doing research on traditions and being inspired by life is equally important in order to create new forms of works of art. In 1953, Communist art guidelines raised a series of questions regarding the motto: “learn from traditions but overthrow the olds to create the news.” Shi Lu responded with his definition of “tradition.” He argued that:

¹⁷ Liang Xinjie, *Chang'an huapai yanjiu* 長安畫派研究, (Xi'an: Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 2002), p.10-12.

¹⁸ Liang Xinjie, *Chang'an huapai yanjiu* (Xi'an: Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 2002), p.14. The original text reads : 如何學習傳統 ?如何正確處理傳統與生活的關係 ?如何從生活到藝術 ?用什麼樣的方法表現才有民族風格 ?如何正確對待外來藝術 ,吸收外來藝術的精華 ?

¹⁹Ibid. p.16.

“[t]radition does not represent certain dynasties, certain painters or certain formulaic forms. Instead, it is necessary to investigate the fundamental rules of Chinese painting. These fundamental principles flow from life to art. In other words, certain matters and objects move you. This creates ideas with authentic emotions and genuine feelings. Furthermore, [painters] and authors process the combined [ideas] and property of objects to create the course of new formula.”²⁰

In this paragraph, in the context of discussing Communist artistic guidelines, Shi Lu proposed his viewpoints about “new” form or methods of artistic practices of Chinese painting. This consolidated Shi Lu’s position as the leading painter and spokesman for the local artworld. The importance of Shi Lu’s administrative role in Xi’an was known and respected. Shi Lu and Zhao Wangyun travelled to India and Egypt on a government-sponsored trip from 1955 to 1956. Paintings created on the basis of this trip were exhibited in Xi’an and Beijing in 1956.

The anti-rightist campaign (*fanyou yundong* 反右運動) in 1957 dismissed Zhao Wangyun from his political and administrative positions. In the same year, Shi Lu questioned the dominant guideline of artistic practices. In a letter Shi Lu wrote to his friend Li Qi 李琦, he expressed his concerns as follows:

Some people proposed that landscape paintings cannot reflect real life. Improvisational artistic practices, so-called sketching, is normally considered to lack ideology. We are unable to discuss style. They seem to search for the new. However, nothing proposed is new.²¹

Shi Lu defended the genre of landscape painting and expressed disappointment with respect to practices or “experiments” in new forms of art. He also proposed at a nationwide conference for discussing an aesthetic of expression of human by means of landscape painting:

Landscape painting can present magnificence of humans through indirect representations. The presence of humans could be mirrored through depicting the greatness of mountains. Landscape painting embodies the emotions of this era.

²⁰Ibid. The original text reads: [...] “傳統”，不是某代某家某個程式，而是要研究中國畫的根本規律。這個規律就是從生活到藝術，就是客觀某一事物打動了你，而產生的真情實感的意，再結合客觀對象的理，經過作者頭腦的加工所創造出新程式的過程。

²¹ Liang Xinzhe, *Chang’an huapai yanjiu* 長安畫派研究 (Xi’an: Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 2002), p.246-247. The original text reads: 又有人說，風景畫不能反映現實生活呀，即興的創作，所謂速寫總是缺乏思想性呀，不能談風格呀，他們像是追求新，然而並沒有提出任何新東西。

Landscape painting is more distinctive than paintings with subject matter of figures.²²

Shi Lu argued that the ideology of a landscape painting is beyond the depicted landscape itself. The subject matter of landscape in a painting could be interpreted in a metaphorical manner. The magnificence of landscape demonstrates and echoes the significance of humans. The painting titled *Fighting in Northern Shaanxi* [Figure 2] Shi Lu created in 1959 embodies this aesthetic viewpoint. This painting led to controversies about his work, mainly because Shi Lu depicted a scene wherein Mao Zedong contemplates military strategy at the edge of a cliff.

After Shi Lu secured his influence and consolidated his political and social positions in Xi'an, he had the ambition of promoting the Chang'an School on a nationwide scale. This ambition led to a touring exhibition titled *Xi'an meixie zhongguohua yanjiushi xizuo zhan* 西安美協中國畫研究室習作展 (*Xi'an Art Association Chinese Painting Research Group Preparatory Works Exhibition*) in 1961. As an initiator and leader of this school, Shi Lu benefited from regional art movements and this touring exhibition to further extend his influence. While the Chang'an School gained acknowledgements and reputation, arguments and criticism also lingered. In 1962, criticism on Shi Lu's artistic practices was made public in a journal titled *Mei Shu*. This journal is line with the Communist cultural guidelines, which has been distributed nationwide. I will discuss this exhibition further in Chapter 3.

Shi Lu's *Ferry to the East* was criticized on the basis that it did not eulogize the leader. This happened in 1964. Shi Lu was hospitalized due to schizophrenia in 1965. A year later, the Chinese Cultural Revolution began. Shi Lu's artistic practices in painting and calligraphy during this period of time paid no heed to rules and disciplines. As Shelley Hawks has stated, "he spent the remainder of his life pursuing a 'self-revolution' in visual arts."²³

Although *Scenery of Shanbei* is an undated painting, I will make a few conjectures about the date of this painting and attempt to situate in its social and political

²² Ibid. p.249. The original text reads: 風景畫可以通過曲折的關係表現人的偉大, 描寫山的雄偉, 就有人的存在, 有時代感情. 有時它比直接描繪人物的畫還有獨到處.

²³ Hawks, "Summoning Confucius," p.92.

context. I will discuss that Shi Lu was caught in a contradiction in his artistic practices for public and in private. On the one hand, Shi Lu created paintings strictly abide by the Communist cultural guidelines. These paintings convey political messages. On the other, he created painting, such as *Scenery of Shanbei* with ambiguous interpretation as a “silent” statement, because it is unknown if this painting has ever been exhibited publicly.

Shi Lu’s book *Shi Lu xuehua lu* is a key tool for the investigation and discussion of Shi Lu’s artistic practice. This book recorded Shi Lu’s reflections on his artistic practices. It was published in 1985. In the postscript of *Shi Lu xuehua lu*, Shi Lu wrote:

Xuehua lu was first written in 1963. I planned to write a systematic document on the foundation of theories aiming to explore artistic rules of Chinese painting from the standpoint of life, shape making, brush and ink, establishing objective, composition, colour, inscriptions and seals as well as other perspectives. However, due to limitations of energy and time, this wish has not been fulfilled. I have only written simple outlines of chapters of life, shape making and brush and ink.²⁴

At first reading, Shi Lu’s writings seem to reflect his views on Zheng Ji’s propositions of *qihuan*, which would have guided his own artistic practices. These components would partially or fully contribute to the aesthetics of distortion in Shi Lu’s individual art practices, particularly in *Scenery of Shanbei*. Alternatively, our interpretation should not be limited to the notion of *qihuan*. Shi Lu was a proponent of Communist cultural policies. His works of art in the early 1950s expressed his positive attitude and genuine endorsement of such policies. In 1961, Shi Lu organized and participated in the “preparatory work” exhibition. In this public exhibition, Shi Lu exhibited paintings in line with Communist cultural policies. Considering Shi Lu’s private and public artistic practices, one can notice that Shi Lu was apparently caught in a contradiction, which partially or fully contributed to the inconsistency of his artistic practices. Later, in the 1970s, Shi Lu altered his emotional responses and personal beliefs with respect to these cultural policies. In the course of changing from supporting to being discouraged by contemporary cultural policies, Shi Lu was trapped in a maze of contradictory allegiances and circumstances. In 1982, Shi Lu died at the age of sixty-three.

²⁴ Shi Lu, *Shi Lu xuehua lu*, p.71. The original text reads: 曾有心寫一個比較系統的筆記, 從理論上探索一下中國畫在對待生活, 造型, 筆墨, 立意, 構圖, 設色, 題款等方面的藝術規律. 但因精力和時間的限制, 未能如願, 只寫了生活, 造型, 筆墨三章的簡單提綱.

Outline of the Thesis and Method of Inquiry

In Chapter 1, I position my thesis within the context of current scholarship on Shi Lu to explain my approach and contribute to knowledge of Shi Lu and modern Chinese art. Furthermore, I analyse and provide evidence to support my claim of distortion in *Scenery of Shanbei*. I propose that the depicted landscape is distorted in order to express monumentality of the loess land in Shanbei.

In Chapter 2, I provide an analysis of the painting that lends support to the claim that the concept of *qihuan* influenced Shi Lu's artistic practices and his manipulation of distortion-related effects in *Scenery of Shanbei*. I suggest that distortion in *Scenery of Shanbei* has an expressive function related to social and political critique. This artistic approach and the proposals of expressive aims by Zheng Ji provides a historical foundation for interpreting the methods of distortion that Shi Lu adopted to express monumentality in this landscape painting. Furthermore, I suggest that the abstract style of calligraphic inscription is in consistent with Shi Lu's aesthetics of distortion.

In Chapter 3, I analyse Shi Lu's art in a broader existential and historical context and attempt to decipher the relationships of this aesthetics to other aesthetics and styles that might have influenced Shi Lu. I situate Shi Lu in the Chang'an School, further investigating connections between the aesthetics of distortion and his artistic practices in the context of Communist cultural policies. Particularly, I discuss the nationwide touring exhibition titled "preparatory works exhibition of the Xi'an Art Association and Chinese Painting Research Group." The exhibited paintings by Shi Lu embody propagandist functions. *Scenery of Shanbei* is at the polar opposite end of these paintings. I argue that, tragically, Shi Lu's aesthetics of distortion conflicts with his practice of propaganda art. Shi Lu had to cope with the risk of contradicting himself when he attempted to abide by both aesthetics of distortion and aesthetics of propaganda.

The method of my inquiry is to focus on one particular undated painting *Scenery of Shanbei*. Given this focus, this research can neither survey Shi Lu's complete oeuvre nor discuss a complete period of Shi Lu's artistic career. However, on the basis of a careful analysis of *Scenery of Shanbei* in the style of micro-history and the scholarship I discuss, it is possible to find a variety of sources of evidence to support the existence and significance of Shi Lu's aesthetics of distortion. My analysis provides clues and items of

evidence of the fact that issues related to distortion are likely responsive to cultural policy of the time when this painting was created. On the basis of this analysis and contextualization, I will conclude this research with an interpretation of one aspect of Shi Lu's art practices on the basis of *Scenery of Shanbei*.

My thesis is built upon current scholarship, which analyses Shi Lu's unconventional use or design of pictorial space and the impact of the Communist cultural guidelines on his artistic practices. I ground my thesis in Shi Lu's own writings to unravel relevant evidence, such as Shi Lu's reference to the concept of *qihuan*, to support my claim that *Scenery of Shanbei* is based on aesthetics of distortion. Throughout my discussion of the "Preparatory Art Exhibition" that Shi Lu organized, I provide more detailed analysis of Shi Lu and the Chang'an School in 1960s. Shi Lu and the Chang'an school have not been discussed comprehensively in the 20th century Chinese art. My thesis will provide one piece of information to supply this gap.

Chapter I. Shi Lu and the Painting in Context

1.1 Basic Characteristics of the Painting

When I first encountered *Scenery of Shanbei*, I met a strange painting. If it was a genuine attempt to represent a landscape in Shanbei, it failed to meet my spontaneous expectations regarding how a depiction of such geological formation would look like. How could one explain the tall and ascending characteristic depicted in the painting? The colour scheme of the depiction, however, could remind the viewer of loess terrain in Shanbei. When looking closely at this painting, all I can see is layers and layers of ink wash. When looking from a distance, however, it seems to present a landscape similar to loess land judging on the basis of shape, volume, and context.

The size of this painting is impressive. Its measurement with mounting is 264.4 × 112.2 cm. The depicted landscape appears barren. No attempt has been made at depicting vegetation. A herder with a group of animals was outlined at the top of the landscape. A path is depicted at the foot of the loess formation. Several items of *yaodong* were painted along that trail.²⁵ These might prompt us to imagine that the herder and the animals would live in *yaodong*. Overall, however, the depiction provides only very little contextual information. For example, it is impossible for beholders to identify any season or time that could be associated with the represented landscape. In comparison to the size of the depicted geological formation, the *yaodong* and herder with animals are barely noticeable.

The position of the inscription is unconventional. It surrounds the depicted landscape. It is positioned at the lowermost part of the painting, below the pictorial space. The shape of the inscription is reminiscent of the shape of the landscape above it, echoing its rough outline. Shi Lu's inscription is a commentary about brush and ink. I will discuss its content in Section 2.3.4. Shi Lu wrote in the inscription that this painting was completed in Chang'an. However, we are lacking information about the date of this painting. The fact that the date of creation is unknown adds complexity to the already difficult task of deciphering *Scenery of Shanbei*. I will propose a few conjectures regarding the date of this painting in Chapter 3. In addition, the seal was probably drawn

²⁵ Gideon S. Golany, *Chinese Earth-Sheltered Dwellings*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), p.1. "[...] cave dwellings constitute a unique form of shelter among Chinese vernacular habits. Although they are commonly called cave dwellings, they are actually entirely man-made earth-sheltered environments, [...]."

instead of being imprinted in the painting. Shi Lu outlined the characters of his name in epigraphic style.

In order to combine together relevant pieces of information and attempt to decipher the meaning of this artistic conundrum, I need first to discuss the formal aspects of the painting.

1.2 Formal Analysis and the Distortion in Scenery of Shanbei

At first sight of *Scenery of Shanbei*, the high-vantage perspective and lumps of ink-wash impressed me because of their peculiar formal characteristics. The scene includes a cluster of loess²⁶ terrain. On the diagonal plane, the formal construction of the composition confers an ascending drive on the depicted landscape. The ascending propensity is chiefly achieved through compression of the pictorial space: the intermediate spatial regions between the different layouts of depicted landscapes are not clearly distinguishable and look like distorted projections. This compression induces a visual experience in which the strata of depicted loess are “piled” one on top of each other vertically instead of being stretched in depth. This composition provides an aura of monumentality to the geological formation.

On the horizontal plane, especially in its middle section, the depicted landscape presents a quasi-three-dimensional trapezoid form. The side plane of the trapezoid form presents the steepness of the depicted loess. The top plane exhibits the width of the landscape. The manipulation of ink in various degrees, tonalities as well as spaces intentionally left blank in the foreground does not seem to depict the structure of the landscape. It seems to serve as the base for the ascending structure.

Architectural elements can be seen at the base of the main represented landscape. These elements are painted in a sketchy manner. Only the recognizable vaulting arch indicates that these symbols are earth-sheltered dwellings. These architectural elements are painted repetitively with slight size differences. Certain shapes of objects painted

²⁶ Oxford English dictionary, 2nd ed., 1989; online version December 2011. <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/109719>>; accessed 17 January 2012. “loess: A deposit of fine yellowish-grey loam which occurs extensively from north-central Europe to eastern China, in the American mid-west, and elsewhere, esp. in the basins of large rivers, and which is usually considered to be composed of material transported by the wind during and after the Glacial Period.”

almost at the top edge of the landscape seem to depict a herder with animals. The herder is characterized with a stick. This figure is painted in motion, as one leg is ahead of the other. The type of animals is not distinguishable. Most of the animals are painted with a mere block of ink. A few of them are outlined with linear brushwork.

Shi Lu painted this landscape in a way that provides very little contextual information. I use the term ‘contextual information’ to refer to any marks in the painting that provide reliable clues for identifying temporal, spatial, causal, climatic, or cultural aspects of the objects depicted in the pictorial space. For example, beholders would be at pain to tell which season (if any) is depicted by this painting. The depicted landscape does not suggest any particular time of the year or of the day.

In sum, *Scenery of Shanbei* imbues the painting with a static and timeless status. It conveys a tone of solemnity and remoteness. However, far from promoting realistic aesthetics, the spatial and formal ambiguity in the painting suggests that Shi Lu deploys aesthetics of distortion in this painting. I use the term “aesthetics of distortion” to denote an artistic practice and axiology characterised by a variety of spatial distortion and a breach of Shi Lu’s own early aesthetic of propaganda.

1.2.1 Distortion in Scenery of Shanbei

Shi Lu organized the pictorial space of the painting through effects of distortion. I use ‘pictorial space’ to refer to the illusory depth that beholders experience when they engage in ‘seeing-in’ the image in order to visually explore the ostensibly tridimensional content of the depiction (the landscape depicted by the image).²⁷ I will now provide evidence to support my claim that Shi Lu distorts by analyzing the painting.

Ambiguity of perspective and depth in the pictorial space. First, the depicted landscape appears with ambiguities of perspective in the composition. The cluster of plateaus is represented as one massive block without clear separation among levels of depth (despite a few occlusive boundaries or clues that can still be interpreted in terms of depth relationship). For example, the division between foreground, middle-ground and background is blurred in the pictorial space. This blurring of frontiers between spatial

²⁷ Richard Wollheim, “In Defense of Seeing-In,” in *Looking into Pictures: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Pictorial Space*, ed. By Heiko Hecht, Robert Schwartz and Margaret Atherton, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), p. 3-5.

components of the pictorial space is induced by continuous and fluid transitions in ink wash, which provide neither discreet indicators of boundaries nor hierarchical relationships between spatially distinct layouts. The absence of obvious vantage point produces an effect of compression in spatial depth.

Shi Lu used traces of watery brown and black ink to depict the rear end of the landscape. Cursive strokes of relatively dry and dark ink were applied to the back portion of the landscape to outline the finer structures of the plateaus. The dark ink used in the rear of the landscape seems to emphasize the equal importance of the parts of the landscape, which are the front and the back of the pictorial space. Shi Lu re-emphasized the landscape in the penultimate block in the background. In addition, the watery ink used to depict the landscape in the background almost saturates the upper part of the pictorial space. This echoes the depiction of the foreground part of the landscape.

The edges of the different spatial compartments are not sharply defined. This undermines the representation of spatial depth in the pictorial space. Shi Lu carefully distributed the saturation of the ink. The dark ink is sparsely applied in the rear portion. On the one hand, the gradual transition of the ink tone facilitates to design the represented landscape as a unitary piece. On the other, Shi Lu manipulated the density and sparsity of dark ink in the painting to represent the components and spatial construction of the loess.

The ascending structure. Second, Shi Lu organised the pictorial space of *Scenery of Shanbei* according to a diagonally ascending structure. This effect is generated by the design of the composition. It de-emphasizes the depicted depth in the picture by drawing attention to the medium (I have discussed the issue of spatial depth above; here I will focus on the composition). The transitions from dark ink to relative diluted tones (along with the alignment of top plane of depicted landscape along a diagonal line) construct a diagonal ascending visual effect. This effect is also elicited by means of the unpainted areas presented between the main depicted landscape and a side portion, which seems to depict a trail (or a road) parallel to the imaginary diagonal formed landscape. If one immerses oneself in the depiction and “sees-in” it, the landscape is depicted in a high-vantage perspective, which facilitates the beholder’s awareness ascending visual effect (this high-vantage perspective facilitates the detection of the diagonal alignment).

Conflicted perspective. Third, on the horizontal plane, the contrast between the black and brown ink tones outlines the top and side planes of the landscape. Shi Lu outlined a quasi-rectangular shape with dry and dark brushstrokes beside the middle section of the main landscape. This portion extends the width of the loess. However, this portion also indicates a vertical ascending tendency, which conflicts with the horizontal plane on its right side. The dark brushstrokes and tonality of the quasi-rectangular shape that Shi Lu designed in the middle ground suggests a visual connection with the landscape in the foreground. This quasi-rectangular shape attached to the represented landscape in the middle ground expands the composition to the left edge of the pictorial space. This painted structure seems to stand as an odd position. Shi Lu clearly and solidly defined the volume of the landscape in the middle section of the painting, suggesting its importance.

1.2.2 Scenery of Shanbei as a Chinese landscape painting

In the preceding section, I analysed a number of distorted components in *Scenery of Shanbei*. In this section, I situate this painting within the historical context of Chinese landscape paintings and examine how it relates and differs from landscape paintings pre- and post-1949.

Shi Lu's method of composition by compressing depth differs from methods used in many historical monumental landscape paintings. In many such works transitions between landscape elements different depths are usually distinct. Take Guo Xi 郭熙 (1023-1085) *Early Spring* [Figure 3] from the Northern Song period as an example, the S-shape composition guides beholders to appreciate or "wander" through the spatial strata. The depicted mist and spaces left unpainted in the middle ground suggests a transition from the foreground to mid-ground. Landscape in the background is painted with less saturated ink, which suggests a spatial recession. Shi Lu's painting process does not create the same kind of clearly delineated pictorial space. Moreover, in contrast to creators of landscape paintings such as Ma Yuan 馬遠 (1160-1225) [Figure 4] and Xia Gui 夏圭 (active early 13th century) [Figure 5], Shi Lu does not use much fading of the background to create the illusion of spatial depth. Fading of the background is a common depth cue in landscape depictions by court and professional painters of pre-modern China. In landscape paintings by Ma Yuan and Xia Gui, who helped spell out conventions used

by court and professional painters, mountains in the distance are painted in diluted ink to suggest a recession in space.

Loess as the subject matter of a landscape painting is relatively rare. Artists represent the loess in different manners. *Prima facie*, my expectation of how a depiction of loess should look like is low and lumpy with an appearance of dryness. This expectation comes from the physical property of loess. However, *Scenery of Shanbei* shatters this expectation. Compare, for instance, *Scenery of Shanbei* with well-known, monumental landscape hanging scroll, *Travelers amid Streams and Mountains* [Figure 6] by Fan Kuan 范寬 (ca. 990-1030). I choose this painting to make the comparison with respect to the typology of the landscape. Wen C. Fong wrote in *Song Mimesis and Beyond* that:

[...] for example, the pointillistic technique, described as the “raindrop” (*yudian*) texture pattern, vividly captures the rocky landscape of the artist’s native Shaanxi region in northwestern China, where trees and brush grow in rich alluvium soil wind-deposited on steep mountaintops.²⁸

In this quote, Wen Fong indicates that the subject matter depicted by Fan Kuan’s well-known monumental landscape painting is a landscape in Shaanxi. Shanbei is a northern territory of Shaanxi. Therefore, *Scenery of Shanbei* and that in *Travelers amid Streams and Mountains* in principle depict landscape located in the same region. The style of representation and expression of monumentality in the two paintings is, however, quite distinct. First, Fan Kuan used *cun* 皴 (texture strokes) for depicting the mountainous and rocky formations. In *Scenery of Shanbei*, Shi Lu also depicted the texture of the landscape. However, it is hard to find any type of *cun* in Shi Lu’s painting. Second, Fan Kuan painted travelling figures to provide an entry point for viewers to wander, travel, dwell, and develop their ‘seeing-in’ within the depicted landscape. The figure and animals in *Scenery of Shanbei* were painted at the top edge of the landscape. The ends of the depicted path were painted at near locations. There is no entry point for viewers in *Scenery of Shanbei*. This absence induces a distance between the beholder and the painting. It is possible that Shi Lu was looking at a photograph taken from the landscape when he was painting *Scenery of Shanbei*. One can make this conjecture on the basis of

²⁸ Wen C. Fong, “Song Mimesis and Beyond,” in *Tradition and Transformation: Studies in Chinese Art in Honor of Chu-Tsing Li*, edited by Judith G. Smith, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), p. 89.

the aerial perspective in the painting. In this context, aerial perspective refers to the painted landscape appears to be seen from a distance. This differs from the floating perspective in monumental landscape painting such as *Travelers amid Streams and Mountains*.

Through the comparison, one may see that Shi Lu's artistic representation of landscape painting departs from conventional composition and aesthetics of monumental landscape painting. He made a statement of his own type of monumental landscape painting in *Scenery of Shanbei*.

Julia Andrews has proposed that “[n]ational forms and local colour are particularly important developmentally both to Shi Lu's own painting and to the work of artists under his direction in Xi'an.”²⁹ However, if one judges from his published paintings, Shi Lu also represented the loess with tall and rigid cliff. Shi Lu painted the volume of loess in a painting titled *Scenery of Going to Work* [Figure 7] in 1961. What did cause Shi Lu to develop such methods for representing the loess? Did Shi Lu create the “national forms and local colour” originally?

My proposal is the innovation of representing the volume or depth of the loess might have been a result of mutual influence from a painting titled *Scenery of Shanbei* by Fu Baoshi 傅抱石 (1904-1965). Fu's *Scenery of Shanbei* [Figure 8] is dated of November 7, 1960. It was consecutively published in the second issue of *Meishu* in 1961. Fu Baoshi led a group of artists from *Jiangsu guohua gongzuotuan* 江蘇國畫工作團 (the Jiangsu Province *guohua* Working Group) to sketch and visit local artists. This group traveled in six provinces, and they visited Shaanxi and Shi Lu. Fu Baoshi's *Scenery of Shanbei* was painted during his visit in Shaanxi.³⁰

If one compares these two paintings both titled *Scenery of Shanbei*, some similarities can be identified. Both paintings represent the voluminous character of the loess. Clues indicating a path can be seen in both paintings. The compositions of these two paintings are like mirror images. However, given his usage of colour tones in the scenery, it seems that Shi Lu might have disagreed with the colour scheme chosen by Fu

²⁹ Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, p. 288.

³⁰ Huang Mingqian. *Bimo jiangshan: Fu Baoshi shuaituan erwansanqianli xiasheng shilu* 筆墨江山: 傅抱石率團二萬三千里寫生實錄. (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 2005). p. 163-165.

Baoshi. Furthermore, I have been unable to find decisive evidence that Shi Lu was attending to Fu Baoshi's painting of his *Scenery of Shanbei* or attended to one of its exhibitions. That being said, the connection is likely. Had Shi Lu been exposed to Fu Baoshi's *Scenery of Shanbei*, it would be plausible to think that Shi Lu was influenced by Fu's methods for representing silt and loess sediments. Shi Lu's artistic "innovation" might not be wholly original and might have had influence from his peers.

Shi Lu's artistic practice was also caught in the debate regarding *guohua*. The new *guohua* in the post-1949 era was aimed at serving the apparatus of the Communist Party. But the politicization of *guohua* confused painters and was taken advantage of by some artists and officials. As Julia Andrews has noted:

The *guohua* issue was paramount in the struggle, but it was used for different purposes by each layer of the art world's social strata. At the top, CCP officials sought to encourage intellectuals to help the state. At the bottom, *guohua* artists wanted more money and higher position. In between were the art bureaucrats, including Jiang Feng and Cai Ruohong, who evaluated the issue in terms of their professional goals.³¹

In such case, Shi Lu probably wanted to take advantage of this opportunity to establish his artistic practice and consolidate his administrative position in the Communist Party. His public speeches, writings about his reflections on paintings and his promotion of the Chang'an School increased his social exposure and fulfilled his personal ambitions. *Scenery of Shanbei* could be a product of Shi Lu's statement of his artistic practice and viewpoint regarding the new *guohua*. However, it does not seem to fit in the Communist cultural guidelines that *guohua* needs to serve for the Party and the politics (for a more developed analysis of this point, see Chapter 3).

1.2.3 Monumentality in *Scenery of Shanbei*

One of the functions of the aesthetics of distortion is to express and magnify the monumentality of the represented landscape. Let us first clarify the concept of monumentality and consider the nature of monuments. According to Cecil D. Elliott, "Before a monument [is] to be built there obviously must be general belief in the lasting

³¹ Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, p. 184.

significance of the person or event to which it is to be dedicated.”³² Under this construal, the main characteristic of a monument is to preserve or remind an audience of the significance of what it is dedicated to. Arguably, Shi Lu’s painting depicts the landscape as monumental in this sense. In *Scenery of Shanbei*, the aesthetics of distortion may be a means to express the significance of the loess in Shanbei, because this aesthetics confers on the landscape remarkable expressive qualities, usually found in figures. Through this expressive aesthetics, Shi Lu would emphasise the significance of the Chang’an school and even perhaps Shi Lu’s own influence in Shanbei. Shi Lu conceived of expression through landscape art as follows:

Landscape painting can express the magnificence of humans by means of indirect representations. The presence of humans can be mirrored by a depiction of the majestic stature of mountains. Mountains embody the emotions of this era. Landscape painting is more distinctive than paintings that have figures as subject matter.³³

In other terms, the depicted elements of a landscape painting such as mountains or hills serve expressive functions like expressing an emotion or mood, or capturing an important aspect of an historical and geographical context. Although it is likely that *Scenery of Shanbei* is an expressive work in this sense, Shi Lu’s words provide supporting evidence to the view that his own subjectivity was not the main subject matter of the depiction. Instead of being expression of idiosyncratic aspects of the artist’s subjective life, the chief objective of the painting seems rather to indicate the significance of Shanbei and art in Shanbei through the depiction of a metaphorical landscape. Martin Powers has introduced a useful framework to address this question. He has written that:

When the artist’s subjectivity becomes the primary subject of the landscape, naturalism tends to take a back seat. There is, one could argue, a tension between naturalism and subjectivity [...].³⁴

How did Shi Lu deal with this tension? Did he choose naturalism or subjectivity? Although he did not chose the path of an idiosyncratic subjectivity, a purely naturalistic

³² Cecil D. Elliott, “Monuments and Monumentality,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 18, no. 4 (March 1964), p. 51-52.

³³ Liang Xinzhe, *Chang’an huapai yanjiu* 長安畫派研究, (Xi’an: Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 2002), p.249. The original text reads: 風景畫可以通過曲折的關係表現人的偉大, 描寫山的雄偉, 就有人的存在, 有時代感情. 有時它比直接描繪人物的畫還有獨到處.

³⁴ Martin Powers, “Landscape Assessment,” p. 273.

or realistic depiction of the loess could not fulfill Shi Lu's agenda either. For his aim, I argue, was likely to monumentalise and glorify the landscape in Shanbei. It is my proposal that the aesthetic of distortion was used to fulfill this aim. A similar point was made in *Topography and the Anhui School*, in a passage stating that:

[...] These paintings were not visual reports – the artists never stressed the verisimilitude – but instead focused on personal association with, or private reference to, the place.³⁵

It is the case of *Scenery of Shanbei*. Shi Lu used the aesthetics of distortion to make a statement or artistic expression through this painting. In order to differentiate his practices from others, Shi Lu had to abandon the classic composition of the monumental landscape to create the monumentality in at least six aspects. First, Shi Lu compressed spatial depth and designed fluidity and continuity between transitions of the represented landscape. Second, he created the visual effect of diagonal ascending composition. Third, he depicted the volume of the represented landscape. Fourth, the calligraphic inscription was positioned at the bottom of the pictorial space. Fifth, the painting presents a contrast between the size of the landscape and the depicted herder and animals. Sixth, Shi Lu depicted little contextual information of the represented landscape to create an atmosphere of solemnity and eternity. Through these artistic methods, Shi Lu distorted the geographic characters of the loess in Shanbei to create the monumentality in *Scenery of Shanbei*. As Martin Powers has suggested:

The artist manipulates placement, light, and the shapes of trees and rocks so as to achieve a certain poetic effect, but in the end we are to feel as if we have arrived at the “real” scene.³⁶

Shi Lu was making such an illusory scenery in the painting to present his viewpoint of representations of landscape with loess. First, the painting represents the monumentality of the loess through distortion. It is a statement that the low and lumpy loess can be the subject matter of a monumental landscape painting. This presents the

³⁵ Jane DeBevoise and Scarlett Jang, “Topography and the Anhui School,” in *Shadows of Mt. Huang: Chinese Painting and Printing of the Anhui School*, (Berkeley: University Art Museum, 1981), p. 46.

³⁶ Martin Powers, “Landscape Assessment,” in *Landscape Theory*, edited by Rachael Ziady Delue and James Elkins, (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 274.

importance of the Chang'an School. Second, it is a statement of Shi Lu's artistic practice and his new form of *guohua*.

Chapter II. Distortion in Light of *Qihuan* and Abstraction in the Calligraphy

In this chapter, I investigate Shi Lu's understanding of the notion of *qihuan*. My aim is to determine the extent to which Shi Lu endorsed Zheng Ji's notion of *qihuan* both in his writings in aesthetics and his execution of distortion effects in *Scenery of Shanbei*.

2.1 Distortion in Light of *Qihuan*

2.1.1 The Concept of *Qihuan* in Zheng Ji's Painting Manual

In the *Bimo* (brush and ink) chapter in *Shi Lu Xuehua lu* (Record of Shi Lu's Study of Painting), Shi Lu refers to the notion of *qihuan* from page forty-six to forty-seven. The notion of *qihuan* is originally written by Zheng Ji in a painting manual entitled *Menghuanju huaxue jianmin* (Strange and Illusory Dwelling: The Concise Study of Paintings).

Zheng Ji, also known under the sobriquets Jichang 紀常 (disciplinary ordinary) and Hanshi 愍士 (poised gentry), was a painter based in Guangzhou during the late Qing dynasty.³⁷ He had a close friendship with Su Liupeng 蘇六朋 (1791-1862) and Su Renshan 蘇仁山 (1814-1850), who were painters active around the same period.³⁸ On the basis of art works that have reached us, scholarship has concluded that Zheng Ji was a landscape and figure painter who used art as an instrument for social critique, as in *Painting of Gold Money* where he criticised the social phenomenon of money worship.³⁹

Zheng Ji introduced the notion of *qihuan* as one of seven expressive aims that a painting must or should fulfill. In this account, the concept of *qihuan* is dual in that it refers to both formal and social aspects. In respect of the formal aspect, Zheng Ji described artistry needed to depict scenery endowed with the quality of *qihuan*. In regard

³⁷ Yu Jianhua, *Zhongguo meishujia renming cidian* 中國美術家人名辭典 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 2009), p.1394-1395.

³⁸ Zhu Wanzhang, *Liupeng huashi* 六朋畫事, (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2003), p. 23.

³⁹ Zhu Wanzhang, "Jinqian tu 金錢圖," in *Guangzhou huajuan* 廣州畫卷 2009, <http://www.gzlib.gov.cn/> (accessed June 8, 2011.)

of the social aspect, he encouraged painters to use strategies of expression that break social rules and established artistic doctrines.

In the chapter titled *Lunyi* 論意 (*discussion of aims*), Zheng Ji suggests that “before placing the brush on paper, it is [necessary] to establish the aim of the painting. Tonality of ink can be manipulated at will. Paintings created in such a manner are beyond artisanship.”⁴⁰ Zheng Ji identifies seven aims or functions of artistic expression in the art of painting: the aims of expressing *jiangu* 簡古 (simple and archaic), *qihuan* 奇幻 (strange and illusory), *yunxiu* 韻秀 (charming and serene), *canglao* 蒼老 (old and worn out), *linli* 淋漓 (dripping and wet), *xionghou* 雄厚 (powerful and rich), or *qingyi* 清逸 (pure and reclusive). Zheng Ji argues that the formal expression of *qihuan* is achieved by means of the application of four rules, which specify frequency of brushwork,⁴¹ composition,⁴² vertical and horizontal planes⁴³ and inaccessibility of the depicted landscape.⁴⁴ A central claim is that:

If one desires to be strange and illusory, the frequency of brushwork needs to be shaky and bumpy to avoid being even. The composition needs to break the limit in order to appear unexpected. There should not be any rules and standards for the density, sparsity and the verticality and horizontality of planes. If human beings cannot access it, then [the painted landscape] can be called scenery of strangeness and illusion.⁴⁵

In this quotation, Zheng Ji aims to instruct the reader about artistic means that can engender the style of *qihuan*. Interestingly, these rules not only prescribe formal methods of artistic craft but also allude to a social stance that the artist might take. The social dimension is evidenced by his recommendation to painters to be beyond limitations of established rules and depart from particular art schools to create believability in paintings. Along this line, he further advocated that:

⁴⁰ Zheng Ji, *Menghuanju huaxue jianmin* 夢幻居畫學簡明, (Beijing: Beijing zhongguo shudian, 1984), p.23. The original text reads: 皆所謂先立其意而後落筆而墨之濃淡焦潤則隨意相配故圖成而法高自超乎匠習之外矣。

⁴¹ Shi Lu, *Shi Lu xuehua lu*, (Xi'an: Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 1985), p.47. The original text reads: 筆率

⁴² Ibid. The original text reads: 布置

⁴³ Shi Lu, *Shi Lu xuehua lu*, p.47. The original text reads: 疏密縱橫

⁴⁴ Ibid. The original text reads: 非人間尋常可到之處

⁴⁵ Zheng Ji, *Menghuanju huaxue jianmin*, p.23. The original text reads: 意欲奇幻則筆率形顛最忌平勻佈景則從意外立局疏密縱橫不以規矩準繩較尺若非人間尋常可到之處庶可疑作奇幻。

The brushwork does not need to follow any particular laws but be with its own rules. It seems that there is a shape, yet without a particular shape. [...] depart from art schools and without restraints. It only can be subtly understood, but cannot be taught by words.⁴⁶

As is the case in this text, Zheng Ji encouraged artists to breach established doctrines of brushwork. This approach challenged a certain lineage in artistic practices in Chinese painting, and this point might have echoed a feature of Shi Lu's own experience of wrestling with established doctrines of artistic policies. In the inscription written in *Scenery of Shanbei*, he also sorrowfully expressed that "I recorded some words for appreciation by people with similar thoughts." Shi Lu used this particular proposal by Zheng Ji to support his style of brushwork. In Section 2.1.2, I will argue that the notion of *qihuan* has influenced Shi Lu's aesthetic doctrine in two domains. On the one hand, it is arguable that the formal rules of Zhen Ji's aesthetics of *qihuan*—such as frequency of brushwork, composition, vertical and horizontal planes and inaccessibility of the depicted landscape—are compatible with the techniques used in *Scenery of Shanbei*. On the other, Zheng Ji's proposals of "breaking limits and go beyond expectations" meet Shi Lu's desire of creating paintings that represent his own aesthetics and the Chang'an school.

2.1.2 Shi Lu's Analysis of the Concept of *Qihuan*

In the section titled *Brushwork and Ink* in *Shi Lu xuehua lu*, Shi Lu argued that:

If paintings embody my own thoughts, then I have control of my own brushwork and ink. If paintings do not express my own thoughts, [I am] the slave of nature as well as of the brushwork and ink of ancient people. Thus, following and copying certain school of brushwork and ink is without efficiency. However, I have my own thoughts, emotions and aims. I have my own brushwork and ink.⁴⁷

Shi Lu quoted Zheng Ji's *Menghuanju huaxuejianmin* and commented on his discussion of the expressive aims of a depiction. Within the context of discussion of styles of brushwork, Shi Lu commented not only on the notion of *qihuan*, but also on Zheng Ji's other aesthetic concepts such as "simple and archaic" or "charming and

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.24. The original text reads : 筆若無法而有法形似有形而無形[...]脫習派且無矜持只當意會難以言傳正謂此也.

⁴⁷ Shi Lu, *Shi Lu xuehua lu*, p.46. The original text reads : 畫有我之思想, 則有我之筆墨 ; 畫無我之思想, 則徒作古人和自然之筆墨奴隸矣. 故, 但仿某家筆墨乃無筆墨之驗也, 若既有我之思想情意則有筆墨也.

serene.” Shi Lu used Zheng Ji’s aesthetics to argue that differences in the geography and character of the depicted regions should be reflected in differences in the styles of brushwork, which would in turn reflect the artist’s character and aesthetics. For instance, Shi Lu stated in *Shi Lu xuehua lu* that “brush and ink are a language that expresses the painter’s character and styles.”⁴⁸ On this view, if Shi Lu were to seek a manner of depiction that adequately represent loess land, he would have to “invent” a proper style of brushwork and ink tone that would agree with the proper character of both his intention and the represented landscape. For instance, he stated that:

Since there are geological differences, consequently, there is a difference between the representation of the landscapes in the Northern and Southern regions. Paintings the subject matter of which is the Northern landscape have a rigid style. In contrast, paintings the subject matter of which is the Southern landscape present a style of softness. Therefore, due to their (typological) difference, (the style of) brushwork should not be a unitary one.⁴⁹

One way of understanding Shi Lu’s interpretation of *qihuan* is through his comments on Zheng Ji’s writings about brushwork in *Menghuanju huaxue jianmin*. Shi Lu’s quotation of Zhen Ji’s manual goes as follows:

意欲奇幼 (按: “幼” 应為 “幻”) 則筆率形顛, 最忌平均 (按: 查 <夢幻居畫學簡明>, 為 “平均”), 布置則從意外立局, 疏密縱橫, 不以規矩準繩較尺寸. 若非人間尋常可到之處, 庶可疑作奇幼. (按: “幼” 应為 “幻” 之誤).

One desires to be strange and illusory. The application of brushwork needs to be shaky and bumpy. [It is important] to avoid being even. The composition needs to be established beyond expectations. There should not be any rules and standards for the density, sparsity and the verticality and horizontality. If human beings are prevented from accessing [the depicted landscape], then [the painted landscape] can be called scenery of strangeness and illusion.

Shi Lu’s punctuation makes clear that his understanding of *qihuan* relies on five criteria: (1) shaky and bumpy brushwork; (2) avoidance of being even; (3) unexpected composition; (4) absence of rules and standards; and (5) inaccessibility of depicted landscape.

⁴⁸ Shi Lu, *Shi Lu xuehua lu*, p.46. The original text reads : 筆墨乃畫者性情風格之語言.

⁴⁹ Ibid. The original text reads: 即地域之別, 亦有北畫主剛, 南畫主柔之分, 豈能歸筆墨于一統哉.

After quoting Zhen Ji, Shi Lu concludes that “thus, with regard to brush and ink, the intention needs to follow the properties of objects.”⁵⁰ Zheng Ji’s expressive aims are used by Shi Lu to justify his ambition to design distinct styles of brushwork that capture the specificity of loess terrain and landscape in Shanbei. Shi Lu also used this historical manual to rebut the criticism against his “wild” brushwork. This is indicated by this question: “if viewing loess land, how could the *pima cun* 披麻皴 (hemp-fiber texture strokes) be used to paint loess land?”⁵¹ The *pima* texture stroke was known for being used by Dong Yuan 董源 (ca. 934 – ca. 962) and Juran 巨然 (active ca. 960-985) to depict the geologic formations in the Southern region. The statement and question reveal that Shi Lu desired to design personal and unique artistic methods to depict the landscape in Shanbei. For instance, he wrote that:

I have my own methods, which are genuine and new methods. Ancient people were able to establish new methods. Why should contemporary people be prevented from doing it? [...] [We] need to learn the methods of brushwork inherited from ancient people. We should not, however, strictly abide by their methods. The [fundamental] rules do not change, yet [specific] methods can be changed.⁵²

Similarly to the dual character of Zheng Ji’s concept of *qihuan* described above, Shi Lu’s aesthetic doctrine is dual, involving both formal and social aspects. On the one hand, he needed to use unconventional styles of brushwork and forms to depict the landscape in Shanbei. On the other, it is likely that Shi Lu was devising novel methods which were really a way of adhering to the Communist cultural guidelines. Since *Xuehua lu* was written in 1963 after the nation-wide touring exhibition of the Chang’an School in 1961, Shi Lu was likely undertaking the task of defending himself against the criticism on lacking of “tradition”. This dual procedure is similar to the one recommended by Zheng Ji’s in his principles of *qihuan*.

In summary, my analysis demonstrated that there is evidence to think that Zheng Ji’s manuscript provides a historical and theoretical foundation for Shi Lu’s aesthetics, that is to say Shi Lu’ artistic innovations and infringements in *Scenery of Shanbei*. Given

⁵⁰ Shi Lu, *Shi Lu xuehua lu*, p.48. The original text reads : 故言筆墨, 意當隨物理.

⁵¹ Ibid., p.48. The original text reads: 若觀黃土高原, 豈可以披麻之筆寫之耶?

⁵² Ibid., p.49. The original text reads : 夫我有我法, 方為真法, 新法也. 古人既可立法, 生法, 難道不許令人(按: “令人”應為 “今人”) [...] 故求筆法當師古人之常規, 不應守古人之常法. 常規不可變, 常法猶可變.

this doctrinal connection between the thinking and aesthetics of the two artists, it is plausible that Shi Lu's representation of the distinctive geological nature of the landscape operates by means of styles and conceptions of brushwork proposed by Zheng Ji. This inheritance enabled Shi Lu to establish a historical connection with the depiction of the locality of the landscape.

2.1.3 *The Rules of Qihuan Observed in Shi Lu's Scenery of Shanbei*

As I noted above, Shi Lu's understanding of *qihuan* covers five guiding rules for the guidance of pictorial aesthetics. Is it reasonable to think that this kind of rules concord with the rules followed by Shi Lu in the execution of *Scenery of Shanbei*? A number of reasons support an affirmative answer.

First, *Scenery of Shanbei* was painted in a brown-black ink tone with layers of ink wash. The structure and transitions of the landscape are defined with dark and rigid brushstrokes. The blended wash diminishes the traces of brush. This imitates the earthy property of the loess. Certain surfaces on the paper remained unpainted. Shi Lu placed dark and bold brushstrokes near the unpainted surfaces to form a vivid contrast. This contrast emphasizes the structure and transition in the represented landscape. This suggests that Shi Lu intended to use shaky, bumpy and uneven brushwork to depict the loess.

Second, Shi Lu composed the represented loess with a diagonal ascending tendency and with the middle, voluminous section on the horizontal plane. Furthermore, the unpainted areas presented between the main depicted landscape and a side portion seems to depict a trail (or road). In historical monumental landscape paintings, there is an entry point for viewers to visually travel within the depicted landscape. For instance, Guo Xi wrote that

[...] there are landscapes in which one can travel, landscapes which can be gazed upon, landscapes in which one may ramble, and landscapes in which one may dwell.⁵³

However, in *Scenery of Shanbei*, the ends of the depicted trail are blocked. The size of the cave-dwellings and the trace of human activities are insignificant. These two

⁵³ Shio Sakanishi, trans. *An Essay on Landscape Painting* (London : John Murray, 1949), p. 32.

pieces of evidence suggest that Shi Lu intended to design an inaccessibility of the represented landscape. Moreover, this is in line with the discussion about the unexpected composition by Zheng Ji.

Third, the depicted volume of the landscape and the diagonal ascending structure create an overwhelming atmosphere. It produces a distance between the viewers and the represented landscape. The naturally flat and low loess is depicted beyond expectations, which enforces the aura of monumentality. This challenges rules and standards of artistic representation of landscape in Shanbei and even social norm.

2.1.4 Pictorial Elements in Scenery of Shanbei within the Framework of Zheng Ji's Principles

In addition to *qihuan*, Shi Lu also discussed other principles proposed by Zheng Ji. First, he discussed the claims about simple and archaic appearances:

[...] one desires to be simple and archaic. The brushstrokes need to be few, nearly dry, bold as well as clumsy. The brush needs to be vigorous and exquisite with very few *cunca* 皴擦 (textured rubbings). Ink needs to be dark and densely saturated. With the application of ink-wash, the dark ink would be diluted and consequently become watery ink. Colour should not be flamboyant. Dark green and ochre present an archaic quality.⁵⁴

These statements are effective descriptors of the way his painting represents the stratigraphic property of the loess in Shanbei. The colour tone of the represented loess in *Scenery of Shanbei* is dark ochre. This corresponds to the archaic quality in the conceptual framework of Zheng Ji's analysis and rules.

Second, the represented landscape consists of a cluster of plateaus, which are depicted by layers of ink-wash. The degree of ink saturation is used to depict the form and depth of the landscape, especially in the middle section. The watery brushwork seems to suggest a soil after rain. Yet, the watery brushwork to an arid scene itself is a property of *qihuan*. This violates expectations of how one might represent loess. In Shi Lu's writing, he quoted from Zheng Ji:

⁵⁴ Shi Lu, *Shilu xuehualu*, p.47. The original text reads: 意欲簡古, 筆須少而禿拙. 筆筆矯健, 筆筆玲瓏, 不用多皴擦. 用墨多農, 复染以水墨. 設色不宜艷, 墨綠墨赭, 乃得古意.”

[...] one desires to have the effect of dripping and wet, [...] Ink needs to be watery dark or weak. The appropriate scenery needs to be a clear day as just after the rain.⁵⁵

The climate in Shanbei is known for its aridity. However, in *Scenery of Shanbei*, the landscape is painted with layers of ink-wash. This facilitates the expression of an atmosphere of wetness and saturation. This corresponds to the “appropriate scenery” discussed by Zheng Ji in his manual.

Third, in *Scenery of Shanbei*, the left and middle sections of the landscape are depicted by relatively dark ink. Shi Lu used the contrast between the black and brown ink tones to outline the top and side planes of the landscape. Consequently, the volume of the represented landscape is exhibited to viewers. Zheng Ji wrote that “[...] mountains and rocks must have both shades and areas exposed to sunlight. [...] The use of dark and weak ink is with respect to this phenomenon.”⁵⁶ By drawing the parallel between Shi Lu’s design of the colour scheme and Zheng Ji’s proposition of using dark and weak ink tones, it is likely that Shi Lu had thought that the rules of ink tone described by Zheng Ji were the most effective method for representing the subject matter of the loess.

Moreover, Zheng Ji’s doctrine of light effects on mountains and rocks contain the principle of sketching from life. Shi Lu also discussed sketching from life in a variety of occasions. He asserted that the subject matter is the main focus of sketching from life. However, since Shi Lu viewed art as a combination of ideal and reality, sketching from life should not be equivalent to using a camera. Improvisation, for instance, is an essential part of sketching from life.⁵⁷

In sum, in addition to the notion of *qihuan*, Shi Lu used other notions of expressive aims by Zheng Ji to depict the property of landscape in Shanbei. Through the notion of *qihuan*, Shi Lu established the foundation of the pictorial and social aspects of his aesthetic of distortion in *Scenery of Shanbei* and, even broadly, in his artistic practices.

⁵⁵ Shi Lu, *Shi Lu xuehualu*, p.47. The original text reads: 意欲淋漓, [...], 墨當濃淡濕化, 景宜新雨初晴.

⁵⁶ Zheng Ji, *Menghuanju huaxue jianmin*, p.11. The original text reads: [...] 蓋山石必有陰陽, [...] 有明晦則有濃淡矣.

⁵⁷ Li Shinan, *Kuangge dangku: ji Shi Lu 狂歌當哭: 記石魯*, (Zhengzhou: Henan meishu chubanshe, 1997), p.147-148. The original text reads: 寫生是客觀為主, 生活為主. 藝術[...], 是理想和現實的結合. 寫生[...] 又不是照相機, 寫生是即興的創作.

2.2 Ambiguity in Scenery of Shanbei and the “Duck and Rabbit” Phenomenon

Shi Lu uses *qihuan* to create distortion in the depicted landscape, which creates ambiguous phenomena in *Scenery of Shanbei*. I would like to suggest that this is a case of “duck or rabbit.” E. H. Gombrich discussed the example of “duck and rabbit” in *Art and Illusion*:

[w]e can see the picture as either a rabbit or a duck. It is easy to discover both readings. It is less easy to describe what happens when we switch from one interpretation to the other. Clearly we do not have the illusion that we are confronted with a ‘real’ duck or rabbit. The shape on the paper resembles neither animal closely.⁵⁸

I suggest that the perceptual ambiguity or duality akin to the “duck and rabbit” example in *Scenery of Shanbei* stems from two considerations. On the one hand, the title, the colour tone, the depicted *yaodong* and the represented landscape suggest that this painting is about the landscape in Shanbei. However, on the other, Shi Lu used artistic methods to distort in order to create an illusion of monumentality. The monumentality persuades beholders that the landscape in Shanbei is as significant as landscapes in other regions. The low and barren loess can be the subject matter of a monumental landscape painting. Furthermore, Shi Lu’s artistic practice of distortion was influenced by the notion of *qihuan*. It creates the illusory monumentality in *Scenery of Shanbei*.

In conclusion, the notion of *qihuan* is a historical and theoretical foundation for Shi Lu’s aesthetic doctrine of distortion. Shi Lu used unconventional brushwork and composition inspired by the principles of *qihuan* to depict the subject matter of *Scenery of Shanbei*. His artistic practices challenge established forms of monumental landscape painting. As Shi Lu discussed Zheng Ji’s writings:

[If the paintings] are easy to look and [understand] then the atmosphere [depicted by the painting] vanishes. If the depicted object is uncanny, and the brushwork is well ordered, the composition is mediocre, the illustration and copying follows historical painters in the qualified category. (Then the paintings) are without

⁵⁸ E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, (London: Phaidon, 2002), p. 4.

spirit. These are the problems of being “shapeless”. It is difficult to describe but only makes sense to one who understands.⁵⁹

Through Zheng Ji’s writing, Shi Lu questioned painters who closely followed the established rules of landscape paintings without individual interpretations and contributions. Shi Lu expressed his ambition of challenging established rules of monumental landscape paintings and even the authority.

Qihuan and distortion cover artistic and social aspects. First, they are artistic means for creating certain styles of painting. Second, they encourage the artist or the appreciator to undermine established artistic doctrines and even social and political rules. Shi Lu determined to establish a type of monumental landscape painting with unconventional subject matter of loess. *Qihuan* is an artistic channel for Shi Lu to create distortion in *Scenery of Shanbei*.

2.3 Abstraction in Shi Lu’s Calligraphy

In the section above, I suggested the possibility that the abstract style of Shi Lu’s calligraphy was influenced by Huaisu’s 懷素 calligraphy style and execution of calligraphy. In this section, I will further analyse the abstract style in Shi Lu’s calligraphy, its political significance and its association with aesthetics of distortion.

2.3.1 Shi Lu’s Discussion of Huaisu’s Calligraphy

In his discussion of calligraphy and painting, Shi Lu quoted Huaisu’s *Zixu tie* 自敘帖 (*Autographical Essay*). Huaisu was a monk who lived in the Tang dynasty. His sobriquet was Cang Zhen 藏真. Shi Lu argued that if one assumes that the rules of calligraphy and of painting are the same, then one will fail to understand their essential differences.⁶⁰ Shi Lu further suggested that “the structure of a character written in calligraphic style is a graphic form extracted from the substance or abstract essence of a character.”⁶¹ Shi Lu’s interpretation of extracting form means to form an abstract shape of the structure of a character. On the basis of Shi Lu’s proposition and my visual

⁵⁹ Zheng Ji, *Menghuanju huaxue jianmin*, p.4. The original text reads: 淺白易見可指而言也氣象俱泯物象乖離筆墨雖工佈置鄙俗描摹雖似品類無神此無形之病可以意會難以言喻也。

⁶⁰ Shi Lu, *ShiLu xuehualu*, p.52. The original text reads: 然以書法即為畫法

⁶¹ Ibid. The original text reads: 余謂書之結體，乃受具體而抽象化，

analysis, it seems reasonable to suggest that Shi Lu designed the distortion in the pictorial space and the abstract style in the calligraphic inscription to combine and form a consistent style. Similarly to the concept of distortion, the concept of abstraction can be interpreted with respect to both formal and social aspects. In respect of the formal dimension, the shape of the calligraphic inscription completes the composition to create the monumentality of the represented landscape. As regards the social aspect, the characters in the inscription written in the manner of Huaisu's cursive style still maintain the function of linguistic communication. However, the linguistic function might not be as prominent as the abstractive form of the written characters and the shape of the inscription.

2.3.2 Abstraction in the Calligraphic Inscription

The abstraction of the inscription could be understood in two ways. First, the characters were written with relatively less controlled brushstrokes and uneven degrees of saturation of ink. This creates individuality for each character. Second, the organization of characters shifts from an orderly and straight position to a more freely and tilted status. Despite the preserved linguistic function, the written characters and the shape of the inscription exhibit a form which echoes the style of the depiction in the landscape and so supports the function of the depiction, which is to express the monumentality for the landscape.

My proposal is based on consideration of formal aspects of the composition between the represented landscape and the calligraphic inscription. First, Shi Lu designed the irregular shape of this group of characters (the inscription) through uneven numbers of characters in each line to create a particular shape. The shape of the inscription seems to “support” the represented landscape. It also echoes the shape of the landscape at the back in the composition. These two aspects of the formal composition seem to facilitate the rendering of the monumentality and unity of the represented loess in the composition. Second, the stylistic expression is also exhibited through the uneven ink tones of brushstrokes. The characters at the beginning of the inscription are set along a straight line by means of orderly strokes. In contrast, the characters by the end follow a line inscribed by unevenly controlled strokes. It indicates Shi Lu's writing rhythm and the manipulation of lifting and pressing brush tips. Shi Lu quoted from *Huaisu zixu tie* 懷素自敘帖 (*Huaisu's Biography*) by Lu Yu 陸羽 that “the shape of the character written in

stylistic calligraphic manner ... [needs to be] similar to the form of the original character but plausibly derived from its original shape.”⁶² This is in consistent with the style of distortion he used to design in the pictorial content of the painting.

In the social aspect, given that in Shi Lu’s historical context artists were discouraged to follow this expressive style, these characteristics might have been an indication that Shi Lu’s act of artistic expression is associated with the violation of certain dominant aesthetic norms and the surfacing of his originality and individuality.

To conclude, the landscape depicted in *Scenery of Shanbei* is represented with spatial and pictorial distortions. The distortion is consistent with the representation of Shi Lu’s calligraphic writings in the inscription. The characters still hold their fundamental function, which is to communicate linguistic information from the inscription. Yet, the communicative function of the inscription seems second to the visuality of the inscription.

2.3.3 *The Abstract Style in Shi Lu’s Calligraphic Inscription and the Notion of Distortion*

Shi Lu considered characters written in cursive calligraphic style to be the result of transforming the structure of a character into an abstract form. Judging from a quote Shi Lu discussed in *ShiLu xuehualu*, he considered the process of transforming calligraphic characters into animated ones was to enrich characterization of the characters. He quoted from *Discussions of Brushstrokes* (笔论) by Cai Yong 蔡邕 (133-192 B.C.): “in order to write the structure of a character, it is required to enter the shape. As if (the characters) are sitting, walking, flying, moving, coming, going, lying, waking, being sad and happy.”⁶³ In this quote, I suggest that the concept of “enter the shape” probably means to analyse the combinatorial structure of a character. He further stated that “the shape (of the character) is ambiguous.”⁶⁴ It seems that Shi Lu’s understanding of the notion of “extracting the shape of a character” is “ambiguity.” The quality of ambiguity is the illusion Shi Lu created in *Scenery of Shanbei*. Shi Lu presented the ambiguity in the inscription through two aspects: the stylistic transition in the calligraphic inscription and

⁶² Shi Lu, *Shilu xuehualu*, p.52. The original text reads: 狀之似是而非也。

⁶³ Ibid. The original text reads: 為書之體，須人（按：人為人之誤）其形，以（按：查蔡邕筆論，以為石魯衍字。）若坐，若行，若飛，若動，若往，若來，若卧，若起，若愁，若喜。

⁶⁴ Ibid. The original text reads: 狀之似是而非也。

the shape of the inscription in *Scenery of Shanbei*. In addition to the linguistic function, the inscription has become a pictorial element to facilitate to complete the monumentality in the represented landscape. This is associated with the distortion in the represented landscape.

2.3.4 *The Political Significance of Shi Lu's Calligraphic Inscription*

Some scholars have argued that Chinese calligraphy is a system of power. Richard C. Kraus has proposed three political functions of calligraphy: first, the power of magic over the illiterate; second, the power of ideological control over the Chinese state; third, the power of cultural tradition over the individual.⁶⁵ The form of writing is associated with the power of reign. However, Kraus also suggests that cursive writing was calligrapher's self-indulgence and an avenue for escape from power.⁶⁶ This style allows calligraphers to "celebrate individuality and obscurity and is self-consciously contrary to the demands of maintaining orderly bureaucratic communication and records in a far-flung agrarian empire."⁶⁷ Calligraphers execute their calligraphic writings with personal preferences and interpretations. I will argue that a similar point can be made with respect to Shi Lu.

Judging from the more organized and controlled style of writing at the beginning of the inscription, it seems that Shi Lu intended to communicate or defend his message. These characters are carefully positioned and arranged in a nice straight line. However, the characters in the last lines have been written in a less controlled manner. There are at least two possible interpretations of this stylistic shift. One is that Shi Lu shifted the speed of writing and re-arranged number of characters in each line to design the effect that the inscription surrounds the represented landscape. The second possibility is that the stylistic shift represents Shi Lu's "escapist tendencies" of the type that Kraus describes.⁶⁸

He was in need to express his viewpoints through the inscription. Shi Lu discussed brushstrokes and its relationship with ink in the inscription. The translation of the text is:

⁶⁵ Richard Curt Kraus, *Brushes with Power : Modern Politics and the Chinese Art of Calligraphy*, (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1991), p. 3-14.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.43.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.41.

筆無氣不活, 墨無氣則死. 吾國之畫, 言氣而不言墨者, 並()氣有()些之氣, 有精神之風. 對而物之氣, 為源我氣. 為富有源, 無富(), 寄之有宿. 無源無以托之. 而我之所托, 又生於筆墨之氣也. 氣之出生於精神, 無為力勢神. 其主客結合, 乃在於動, 故言氣. 石魯寫陝北. 風情漫筆於長安. 造興而作, 並記數語為識者賞.

Brush without vitality is not alive. Ink without vitality is lifeless. Paintings of my country, [some paintings] speak vitality but not ink, and (...) vitality has some sorts of vitality; has the demeanor of spirit. With regard to the vitality of an object, it is the source of my vitality. Being richness stems from the source. Without the richness (...), reliance has its own placement. There would not be reliance if without the source. However, my reliance stems from the vitality of brush and ink. The vitality is born of spirit, without being power and divinity. The marriage of subject and object yet in movement, therefore, [I am] speaking about vitality. Shi Lu wrote Shanbei [and] casually record in Chang'an in manner of elegance. The [painting or inscription] was created with interests. I recorded some words in appreciation of people with same thoughts.

Shi Lu articulated that “my reliance stems from the vitality of brush and ink. The vitality is born of spirit, without being power and divinity.”⁶⁹ Shi Lu had an ambition to “invent” a type of brushwork to serve his own artistic practices. This type of brushwork would divorce itself from the established historical ones to depict and distinguish the property of the loess. This would facilitate the uniqueness of the landscape paintings with the subject matter of the loess plateau and the Chang'an School. Yet, he was disappointed that his viewpoints were not agreed by others. As he indicated in the inscription, “I recorded some words for the appreciation of people with same thoughts.”

Shi Lu was disappointed that his ambition was not supported by his contemporary critics. As I have mentioned above, Shi Lu's paintings and his style of brushwork was dismissed by Meng Lanting 孟蘭亭 in *Meishu* magazine.⁷⁰ He criticized Shi Lu's brushwork and described it as “wild, weird, chaotic, and black” without archaic quality. Meng wrote that:

⁶⁹而我之所托, 又生於筆墨之氣也. 氣之出生於精神, 無為力勢神.

⁷⁰ Meng Lanting, “Laihan zhaodeng 來函照登,” *Meishu* no.4 (1962): p. 32.

[...] with ink but without brushwork [Shi Lu] did not adopt the brushwork from Ma-Xia and four Wangs. It seems the paintings are fair at first glance. However, it is not corroborated if the paintings are looked at carefully.⁷¹

Shi Lu responded to the criticism with a poem composed by him. The poem⁷² reads as follows:

People scold me for being wild. I can be wilder. From ordinary things I make marvellous pictures. People call me strange I can be stranger! I refuse to be a slave. I think for myself. People say I'm chaotic I'm not chaotic. The method of no method is the most disciplined of all. People mock my blackness I'm not too black. Black startles the mind. I move the soul. "Wild, strange, chaotic, black" not worth discussing. You have a tongue. I have a heart and mind. Life gives me ideas. I paint its spirit.⁷³

In this poem, Shi Lu expressed his sadness and anger at not being recognized and acknowledged. Shi Lu's ambition of establishing a new type of monumental landscape painting was not supported by his peers. In combination with these numerous independent but converging pieces of evidence, it seems likely that the shift of style in the calligraphic writing in the inscription along with the style of the depiction reflect Shi Lu's advocacy for his artistic viewpoints through *Scenery of Shanbei* in the face of criticism. Shi Lu was determined to establish the Chang'an School through his style of monumental landscape painting. Shi Lu's efforts to establish monumental landscape painting with the subject matter of loess was intended to establish a new identity for his landscape paintings and the Chang'an School.

2.4 Other Distorted Elements in Scenery of Shanbei

In addition to the pictorial and calligraphic distortion of *Scenery of Shanbei*, we can hardly neglect the position of the inscription and the unorthodox seal. In this section, I will outline these characteristics.

⁷¹ The original text reads: [...]有墨爾無筆, 遠不見馬夏, 進不見四王, 乍看似不差, 細看則無甚意味了。

⁷² Shi Lu, *Shi Lu shuhua ji* 石魯書畫集, (Beijing: Beijing renmin meishu chubanshe, 1990), p.9. The original text reads: 人罵我野我更野, 搜盡平凡創奇蹟。人責我怪我更怪, 不屑為奴偏自裁。人謂我亂不為亂, 無法之法法更嚴。人笑我黑不太黑, 黑到驚心動魂魄。野怪亂黑何足論, 你有嘴舌我有心。生活為我出新意, 我為生活傳精神。

⁷³ Shelley Hawks, "Painting by Candlelight during the Cultural Revolution: Defending Autonomy and Expertise under Maoist Rule (1949-76)" (Ph.D. Dissertation: Brown University, 2003), p. 67.

Shape and position of the inscription. Shi Lu's aesthetic of distortion is also manifested in the position of the calligraphic inscription. The inscription surrounds the depicted landscape. It is positioned at the bottom, below the pictorial content. In the classical monumental landscape painting, the inscription is positioned in the upper part of the pictorial space. The lower positioning of the inscription seems less significant in comparison to the pictorial content. This position creates a visual contrast with the represented landscape. The shape of the inscription echoes the shape of the landscape at the top.

Painted seal. The seal was probably drawn instead of being imprinted in the painting. The colour contrast between the outline of the seal and the paper, even the slightly exaggerated size of the seal makes it one of the pictorial elements. Shi Lu outlined the characters of his name in epigraphic style. The historical background of the epigraphic movement was closely tied to search for identity. It took place during the time that the Han Chinese was ruled by the Manchus. The declining Qing dynasty was under pressure from "foreign" countries. Under such political circumstances, the "Chinese" were searching for their identities. This movement stressed that the only truly authentic sources for ancient Chinese calligraphy were genuine works on such ancient materials as bronze vessels and stone stelae.⁷⁴ The painted seal in *Scenery of Shanbei* suggests a type of distortion and infringement against the conventionality. One construal is that the painted seal with the epigraphic style embodies that Shi Lu intended to establish his identity, infringe the rules of monumental landscape painting in order to establish the political importance of the Chang'an School through a painting such as *Scenery of Shanbei*.

⁷⁴ Stephen Little, *New Songs on Ancient Tunes: 19th -20th Century Chinese Painting and Calligraphy from the Richard Fabian Collection* (Honolulu: Honolulu Academy of Arts, 2007), p. 109.

Chapter III. Artistic and Socio-Political Implications: The Existential Inconsistency of Shi Lu's Dual Allegiance to the Aesthetics of Distortion and Those of Propaganda Art

In Chapters 1 and 2, I analysed Shi Lu's aesthetics of distortion from the standpoint of the concept of *qihuan* and the abstract style of calligraphic inscription in *Scenery of Shanbei*. In Chapter 3, I will discuss how distortion is at the epicenter of an existential conflict in Shi Lu's artistic practices of the early 1960s, a time when he was faced by a dilemma between two incompatible allegiances. On the one hand, in an attempt at self-expression, Shi Lu used a personal style to deploy his aesthetic of distortion or *qihuan* and express the monumentality of the subject matter of his paintings. On the other, Shi Lu kept putting his art in the service of propaganda practices that were inconsistent with any attempt at self-expression. These are two incompatible horns of a dilemma of self-expression. Shi Lu was caught in an artistic and existential contradiction as a result of this dilemma. Shi Lu's individual interests and the aesthetics of distortion in *Scenery of Shanbei* had to compromise with the cultural guidelines of his time, and this has proven to be a challenging task.

3.1 Possible Date of Scenery of Shanbei

Scenery of Shanbei is an undated painting. This fact complicates the task of locating this work in its original artistic and political context. To apprehend its genuine historical significance, it is essential to investigate the possible date of its making. A first fact that complicates the task of dating is that Shi Lu might have re-worked on this painting at different stages of his career. Furthermore, judging from his available paintings, even works created in the same time period can have highly distinct styles. This variety of styles entails that we need to proceed with great caution when attempting to date the work based on its stylistic traits. Yet, it might be possible to infer the period in which Shi Lu painted this work by means of a comparison of the pictorial information from *Scenery of Shanbei* (e.g., subject matter, style, format, brushstrokes, colour scheme, signature and seals) with other paintings by Shi Lu.

In what follows, I propose three conjectures. First, the main pictorial elements of *Scenery of Shanbei* were most likely painted during early 1960s. Second, Shi Lu probably modified the pictorial content again in *Scenery of Shanbei* at a later stage in his career,

possibly during the 1970s. Third, it is difficult to determine whether the calligraphic inscription and the seal were inscribed when Shi Lu first painted this painting or were added later.

Scenery of Shanbei could have been painted in the early 1960s. First, it is unlikely that the whole pictorial content in *Scenery of Shanbei* was painted in 1970s. Judging from the paintings available to us through publications and catalogues, the subject matter of loess or landscape of Shanbei was not among Shi Lu's artistic interests in the 1970s. Furthermore, Shi Lu's daughter, Shi Dan 石丹, has revealed in her writings that Shi Lu was hospitalized and diagnosed with schizophrenia from 1965 until 1970. Shi Lu was unable to engage in artistic practices until the early 1970s.⁷⁵ In the 1970s, Shi Lu spent most of his time re-working the paintings created during or after his government sponsored trip to Egypt and India. The subject matter of these paintings consists of exotic figures and architecture. In terms of landscape paintings, provided by the information from titles, it seems that Shi Lu chiefly painted *Huashan* 華山 (Mount Hua). Considering a painting titled *Huashan*, Arnold Chang argued:

It is also a graphic composition in black and white, combining abstract and naturalistic concerns, while conveying a mood of isolation and tension. [...] The brushwork is spikey and nervous, crude by orthodox standards [...]⁷⁶

According to Chang's interpretation of *Huashan*, Shi Lu's artistic representations of abstract forms in this particular painting are consistent in *Scenery of Landscape*. However, the spikey and nervous brushstrokes hardly can be identified in *Scenery of Shanbei*. Moreover, Shi Lu created more works with motif of animals and flowers in this period. On the basis of these pieces of evidence, I suggest that the whole pictorial content of *Scenery of Shanbei* is unlikely to be painted in 1970s.

My second conjecture is that it is unlikely that *Scenery of Shanbei* was painted during the 1950s. In the 1950s, Shi Lu supported the Communist cultural guidelines and propaganda aesthetics. Instead of using the medium of woodcut (as he did in 1940s) for communicating political messages, he painted in a Socialist Realist style such as in *Beyond the Great Wall* [Figure 9]. This painting depicts a moment in which a train

⁷⁵ Shi Dan, *Shi Lu*, p.148-149.

⁷⁶ Arnold Chang, *The Mountain Retreat: Landscape in Modern Chinese Painting* (Colorado: Aspen Art Museum, 1986), p.86.

crosses a valley. The painted Chinese minorities and animals on the slope are astonished by the whistle of the train. Julia Andrews has commented on the content of this painting as follows:

As might be expected, the subject matter of *Beyond the Great Wall* is politically appropriate. Minority tribesmen react with joy at the sound of a train roaring toward them on tracks but cut through the crumbling Great Wall. The picture thus propagandizes for success in bridging the physical and psychological boundaries dividing the Han people from the national minorities.⁷⁷

Comparing artistic methods of representing landscape and mountains in *Beyond the Great Wall* with that in *Scenery of Shanbei*, we may notice the main difference is that Shi Lu used chiaroscuro to depict the three dimensionality of the mountain in the former. Moreover, in the former Shi Lu created two types of depth to expand the pictorial scale. On the one hand, the perception of the mountain expands the horizontal plane of the picture. On the other, the depicted perception of the Great Wall extends the depth on the diagonal plane. *Beyond the Great Wall* fully embodies revolutionary romanticism and revolutionary realism upheld by Mao Zedong. It was completed in 1954. Given the analysis of differences in representations of mountains in *Beyond the Great Wall* and *Scenery of Shanbei*, I propose that it is unlikely that *Scenery of Shanbei* was painted around the mid-1950s.

Let us take *Fighting in Northern Shaanxi* as another picture for comparison. This painting was commissioned by the Museum of Revolutionary History and completed in 1959. Shi Lu intended to represent the moment when Mao Zedong contemplated military strategies while facing a valley. Shi Lu used great artistry to depict the magnificence of the landscape, which metaphorically acts as a eulogy to the significance of the leader. Given the information from the title, we can assume that the depicted geologic formation is loess. When it is compared to the depicted loess in *Scenery of Shanbei*, it appears that the loess in *Fighting in Northern Shaanxi* was rendered in a quite different manner. In the latter, the loess is designed in S-shape composition. It is painted in a tall and rigid shape without representing the volume of the landscape fully. The S-shape composition connects landscape in the foreground and background, which induces a spatial depth. The S-shape composition and the manner of depicting landscape remind me again the

⁷⁷ Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, p. 286.

monumental landscape painting titled *Early Spring* I mentioned above. This suggests that Shi Lu somewhat followed doctrines of established monumental landscape paintings for his representations of monumentality in *Fighting in Northern Shaanxi*. Based on the comparison of artistic methods used to depict loess and arrangement of space, it is unlikely that Shi Lu painted *Scenery of Shanbei* in late 1950s.

Shi Lu's artistic practice underwent significant transformations in late 1950s. While his artistic practices were questioned, his belief in his contemporary cultural guidelines shifted and this fact was also reflected in his paintings. Consider a painting titled *The Banks of the Yellow River* as an example. This painting was painted in 1959, the same year as *Fighting in Northern Shaanxi*. Despite the chronological proximity, the artistic representations are distinct in the two paintings. In *The Banks of the Yellow River*, Shi Lu designed the composition to present an absolute contrast. The edge of the loess sharply divides the pictorial plane diagonally. Richard Vinograd discussed this painting as follows:

[...] An adjacent turbulent mass of undulating dark ink lines, dots, and washes is much harder to comprehend. The title of the painting written just above suggests that this should be the river bank, but the very placement of the calligraphy encourages a reading as a great vertical cliff viewed straight on and radically disjunct from the adjacent river scene. [...] and it is hard to avoid reading this inchoate but enlivened form in terms of embodiment, or perhaps even of psychic turmoil.⁷⁸

Based on the analysis above, the incomprehensible brushwork and the unconventional placement of calligraphic inscriptions that Vinograd commented on could also be identified in *Scenery of Shanbei*. *Scenery of Shanbei* could have been painted after 1959. On the basis of this reasoning, it is possible that Shi Lu was undergoing a personal and artistic transition in late 1950s.

Third, I propose that this painting could be painted around 1961. This reasoning stems from a comparison between *Scenery of Shanbei* and a published painting in *Shi Lu* titled *Scenery of Going to Work*, which was completed in 1961. The two paintings are close in composition and style.

⁷⁸ Thorp and Vinograd, *Chinese Art & Culture*, p.384.

First, the most salient similarity between *Scenery of Shanbei* and *Scenery of Going to Work* is the volume of loess Shi Lu depicted in both paintings. In the latter, the blue-green ink and horizontal brushstrokes are used to define the horizontal plane of the loess. This artistic method can also be identified in *Scenery of Shanbei*.

Second, the loess in *Scenery of Going to Work* and *Scenery of Shanbei* is represented in a high-vantage perspective. The edges of the loess in both paintings are carefully painted with ink washes to present the smoothness. Third, Shi Lu used brush saturated with water and ink to paint the loess. Yet, we can also identify relatively dried brushstrokes painted to represent the texture of the landscape. The visual effect of the dried brushstrokes is like structure of the loess. Third, both paintings present a pictorial path beside the main landscape. Even the artistic methods used to paint the path are similar in both paintings. Based on these similarities, I propose that *Scenery of Shanbei* could have been painted during 1960s.

Even if all my analysis so far is correct, there is yet another puzzling fact. The calligraphic style of inscription and the painted seal exhibit inconsistent style compared to the pictorial content. These two components might or might not be completed in the 1960s. First, instead of imprinting the seal, Shi Lu outlined his name and painted this seal. Some scholars have suggested that the painted seal originated from the circumstances that Shi Lu had to move frequently to avoid being captured and frequently criticised in political movements in later 1970s. Therefore, carrying seals had become impossible. He started painting seals around late 1970s. Shi Lu designed his painted seals accordingly in terms of composition, content, tonality of paintings.⁷⁹ On the basis of this evidence, it is plausible that Shi Lu could have inscribed on *Scenery of Shanbei* and painted the seal around the 1970s.

Moreover, Shi Lu's calligraphic style shifted in his late artistic practices. Robert Ellsworth commented that:

In his last few years, [Shi Lu] produced calligraphies that cannot be judged by traditional standards. Their value is expressively calligraphic and painterly. [...]

⁷⁹ Liang Xinzhe, *Chang'an huapai yanjiu*, p.63.

his method of pushing his brush like a woodcutter's tool, and his innate capacity for innovation.⁸⁰

Some features Ellsworth outlined can be identified in the inscription in *Scenery of Shanbei*. For example, some angular strokes with sharp turnings are similar to textures of woodcuts. Moreover, the shape of this inscription as part of the pictorial components completes the monumentality of the landscape. On the basis of analysis, I propose that the inscription might not be written in 1960s.

In conclusion, although I cannot confidently pinpoint the exact date of *Scenery of Shanbei*, the possibility that Shi Lu completed the *Scenery of Shanbei* in the Mactaggart Chinese Art Collection at different stages of his artistic career is reasonable. It is my suggestion that the landscape represented in *Scenery of Shanbei* was likely painted in the early 1960s. The painted seal and calligraphic inscription was completed either when the painting was first made or added later. I am more inclined to think that the painted seal and inscription were included in later time periods, possibly around the 1970s.

I conjectured that *Scenery of Shanbei* was likely to be painted at different stages of Shi Lu's artistic career. But the represented landscape was possibly painted in the early 1960s. Compared to Shi Lu's propagandist paintings, the purpose or message Shi Lu wanted to convey in *Scenery of Shanbei* lacks of clarity. Moreover, Shi Lu chose to exhibit his paintings which were in line with the Communist cultural guidelines in the exhibition titled *preparatory works exhibition of the Xi'an art association and Chinese painting research group* (西安美協中國畫研究室習作展) in 1961. A confusing phenomenon is that Shi Lu used to create paintings with distinct functions. He painted propagandist paintings for public exhibition. Meanwhile, he created painting such as *Scenery of Shanbei* as an idiosyncratic and individualistic statement. Shi Lu defended his artistic practice in a symposium concerning this exhibition. Although he defended his artistic practice and the political stance of the Chang'an School, the defense did not breach the Communist cultural guidelines. However, the aesthetics of distortion in *Scenery of Shanbei* as a transgressive act reveals Shi Lu's rejection of revolutionary realism. Shi Lu was caught in a contradiction in his artistic practices. In order to articulate further, it is indispensable to look into the exhibition and the symposium.

⁸⁰ Robert Hatfield Ellsworth, *Later Chinese Painting and Calligraphy, 1800-1950*, (New York: Random House, 1987), p. 357.

3.2 The Exhibition

It is written in *Chang'an huapai yanjiu* 長安畫派研究 (Studies of the Chang'an School) that directors of *Zhongguo meixie* 中國美協 (the Chinese Art Association) Cai Ruohong 蔡若虹 (1910-2002) and Wang Chaowen 王朝聞 (1909-2004) visited Xi'an 西安 frequently at the beginning of the 1960s.⁸¹ They were impressed by local art practices. Around the same time, Shi Lu was exploring opportunities for a national touring exhibition for the Chang'an School. Later, this exhibition opened in Beijing on October 1st, 1961. This exhibition toured nationwide, which promoted Shi Lu as the leader of the Chang'an School.

Shi Lu championed and organized an exhibition titled *Xi'an meixie zhongguohua yanjiushi xizuo zhan* 西安美協中國畫研究室習作展 “Preparatory Works Exhibition of the Xi'an Art Association and Chinese Painting Research Group.” The paintings exhibited by Shi Lu appear to illustrate a political aesthetic that is inconsistent with the aesthetic of distortion in *Scenery of Shanbei*. This discrepancy is reminiscent of dilemma that Jerome Silbergeld has described:

Since the same art was considered acceptable in one period and not acceptable in another, most artists changed their styles as rapidly as they were able to perceive the changes in the Party's official line. If they remained true to the Party line, then over time they contradicted themselves and their art; if true to themselves, they contradicted the Party.⁸²

As I previously suggested, Shi Lu was caught in a contradiction or tension of this type. On the one hand, he breached Communist artistic guidelines for *guohua* in his use of aesthetic of distortion that favours self-expression. Through his aesthetics, Shi Lu's ambition was to exhibit individuality of his artistic practices and the importance of the Chang'an School. On the other hand, Shi Lu had to put individual interest behind collective interests to be in line with the cultural guidelines of the Party. The paintings exhibited by Shi Lu in the “preparatory works” exhibition are significant illustrations of his conflicted position as artist.

⁸¹ Liang Xinzhe, *Chang'an huapai yanjiu*, p.21.

⁸² Silbergeld, *Contradictions*, p. 4.

3.2.1 Guiding Principles of the Exhibition

The guideline of this exhibition reveals that Shi Lu was caught in the contradiction of artistic expression. Instead of exhibiting paintings with the aesthetic of distortion on a large scale, Shi Lu exhibited works abiding by an aesthetic of propaganda. The guiding principles of this exhibition are in line with the cultural guidelines of the Party.

The introduction of the guiding principles reveals that the goal of this exhibition was to exhibit *xin guohua* 新國畫 (new national painting).⁸³ However, the new national painting must satisfy at least three conditions. First, artists need to equip themselves with Marxism and enact and illustrate the core values of the proletarian class. Second, artists need to follow the art policy proposed by Mao Zedong. Artists need to implement the principle of artistic practice, which is that such practices should be guided by revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism. Artworks need to reflect on our great epoch. Third, artworks need to overthrow the old to create the new on the basis of the traditions of our nation. Shi Lu carefully outlined and promoted the rules of the cultural policy. These principles contradicted Shi Lu's own aspirations and ambitions expressed through his writings. A passage that I discussed in the section 1.3 is key:

I have my own methods, which are true and new methods. Ancient people were able to establish new methods. Why should contemporary people be prevented from doing it? [...] ⁸⁴

In the guiding principles, Shi Lu has “forgotten” his own methods and the aesthetics of distortion as well as the monumentality of the loess he defended. Instead, while facing public and broader audience, he had to “hide” his individual interests. This mechanism is discussed by Jerome Silbergeld in *Art Censorship in Socialist China* in these terms:

While basic policy comes from the Party, the artists collectively are their own policemen. The implementation of Party directives is theirs to carry out,

⁸³ Liang Xinzhe, *Chang'an huapai yanjiu*, p.21.

⁸⁴ Shi Lu, *Shi Lu xuehua lu*, p.49. The original text reads: 夫我有我法, 方為真法, 新法也. 古人既可立法, 生法, 難道不許令人(按: “令人”應為 “今人”).

transforming artists into agents of the state, collaborators in a union of do-it-yourself censors.⁸⁵

This psycho-sociological mechanism of censorship is what seems at stake in Shi Lu's practice. Shi Lu silenced his own works and works by members of the Chang'an School in order to abide by the principles of Maoist aesthetics. Moreover, Shi Lu has publicly advocated his artistic viewpoint that "one hand extends to tradition, one hand extends to life 一手伸向傳統, 一手伸向生活."⁸⁶ This viewpoint closely follows the cultural policies which encouraged artists to learn from traditions but overthrow the old to create the new. Shi Lu carefully maneuvered the exhibition into the issue of politicisation of *guohua*. As Julia Andrews states:

[...] the *guohua* question was not merely a matter of artistic standards; it became, in the end, a test of loyalty to the party leadership. [...] many principled administrators found themselves boxed in by the potentially conflicting calls for art that could express the accomplishments of the new society and at the same time 'perpetuate the national tradition'.⁸⁷

Shi Lu carefully positioned himself and this exhibition within the proper context and interpretation of the communist artistic guidelines. This reflects on the guiding principles of the exhibition. The guiding principles of this exhibition tried to define a new type of *guohua* from the Chang'an School.

In order to select the best paintings, Shi Lu and Zhao Wangyun provided artists with detailed instructions for this exhibition.⁸⁸ The instructions covered three main areas: (1) requirements for artistic creations; (2) study and research; and (3) exhibition. Under the requirements for artistic creations, the guideline encouraged artists to broaden the subject matter of their artworks and make an effort to depict local people and their lives. It required that artworks reflect artists' real emotions, poetic conception, and vivid artistic images. Artists need to work with revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism. Artworks need to embody their own authentic sentiments, poetic concepts and vivid artistic images. Artworks should not be conceptualized and naturalistic.

⁸⁵ Jerome Silbergeld, "Art Censorship in Socialist China : A Do-It-Yourself System," in *Suspended License : Censorship and the Visual Arts*, ed. by Elizabeth C. Childs, (Seattle : University of Washington Press, 1997), p. 301.

⁸⁶ Liang Xinjie, *Chang'an huapai yanjiu*, p.16.

⁸⁷ Andrews, *Painters and Politics*, p. 179.

⁸⁸ Liang Xinjie, *Chang'an huapai yanjiu*, p.21-23.

Under the section of study and research, it was recommended to study the history of traditional art and related theory. In order to inherit and develop better, it was necessary to study traditions systematically and critically. Folk arts and other forms of art could be studied and adopted in painting. In addition to these conditions, the most important was that studying Marxism and writings about art by Mao Zedong to assure that research and artistic practices were in the right direction.

Two research topics are proposed in the exhibition: (1) Inheritance and development of the traditions of national painting; (2) Marriage between traditional art and reality. Under the section of exhibition, it was encouraged that artworks need not to be limited within certain forms and styles. Original and novel artworks which challenge “old” compositions and styles are recommended.⁸⁹

Needless to say, these guidelines were consistent with the communist cultural guidelines and Shi Lu’s artistic and political stance in public. However, they conflict with his aesthetics of distortion in *Scenery of Shanbei*. This confirms my proposal above that Shi Lu was caught in a contradiction in his artistic practice. On the one hand, he was doing one type of *guohua* for scrutiny from the public and politics. On the other, he painted strange and illusory work such as *Scenery of Shanbei* to make an almost “silent” statement about his personal viewpoints of *guohua*. Here I used the word “silent” because it is unclear if *Scenery of Shanbei* has ever been exhibited in public. This reveals a tension between Shi Lu’s art for propaganda and his individualistic creation.

3.2.2 The Symposium

The exhibition brought recognition to the Chang’an School but triggered more controversies over this regional art school and their artistic practices. A symposium about this exhibition took place in Beijing. I will discuss receptions of this exhibition, topics discussed and debated in the symposium and Shi Lu’s talk and his defense.

The compiled content of this symposium was published in *Meishu* in 1961. This symposium was mediated by Wang Zhaowen 王朝闢. Attendees included artists who participated in the exhibition, artists from other regions, writers and critics. Participants dwelled on certain paintings exhibited by Shi Lu. Among them, one could find *Dawn in*

⁸⁹ Liang Xinjie, *Chang’an huapai yanjiu*, p.21-22.

the East, The Yan'an Pagoda, Overlook, Autumn Harvest and *Scenery of Going to Work*, which were discussed by participants. Judging on the basis of information provided by titles, these paintings embody revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism and in line with the communist cultural guidelines. It seems likely that Shi Lu selected these works instead of *Scenery of Shanbei* to express his allegiance to aesthetics of propaganda.

Although this symposium aimed to discuss the touring exhibition, Shi Lu and his works were discussed more than paintings by other artists and other topics. The main points discussed could be summarized as such: (1) the need to overthrow the olds to create the news (2) a lack of personal styles in the Chang'an School (3) a lack of variety in subject matter (4) Shi Lu, his brushstrokes and paintings. This symposium created debates over the Chang'an School, which brought attention to local artistic practices.

I have not yet discussed particular comments on Shi Lu's paintings and the Chang'an School. Let us shift the focus on these comments now. Cai Ruohong spoke about *Dawn in the East*. He commented that:

The magnificence of the landscape should be the subject matter of a painting. People from the proletarian class reconstructing nature should be the subject matter of a painting. Yet, although certain painted subject matter is insignificant, it evokes collective emotions on the splendid landscape. *Dawn in the East* is an example of such painting.⁹⁰

Furthermore, he expounded that “if the purpose of the landscape is only for depicting the landscape, it restricts ideology and subject matter of landscape painting. [...] Xi'an artists are not doing this. In fact, they open up avenue of landscape paintings.”⁹¹ Cai Ruohong's comments were in favour of Shi Lu's viewpoint “landscape painting can present magnificence of humans through indirect representations.” Hua Junwu 華君武 (1915-2010) debated the issue of a lack of personal styles in the Chang'an School. He spoke that: “as an art school, it could have a relatively more coherent style. As individuals, artists

⁹⁰ Wang Zhaowen, *Xinyi xinqing*, p. 25. The original text reads: 錦繡山河應當入畫, 勞動人民改造自然應當入畫, 除此之外, 也還有些風物雖非錦繡, [...] 卻引導人產生錦繡般的思想感情 (<東方欲曉>即是一例).

⁹¹ *Ibid.* The original text reads: 如果把山水風景畫的目的局限于表現祖國的河山這一方面, 實際上就會束縛創作思想, 固定創作題材, [...] 西安的同志們沒有這樣做, 實際上是開拓了風景畫的道路, [...].

could develop their own artistic styles.”⁹² Some commented on colour use properly depicting the geographic property of the loess. Yu Feng 郁風 (1916-2007) commented on Shi Lu’s artistic practices that Shi Lu not only studied traditions but also studied artistic styles of his contemporary peers, such as Huang Binhong 黃賓宏 (1865-1955), Qi Baishi 齊白石 (1864-1957) and Li Keran 李可染 (1907-1989). He further defended that it was understandable that artists of the Chang’an School influenced on each other, leading to a relatively more collective artistic style.

Some interpreted that the exhibited paintings of the Chang’an School reflected the relationship between humans and nature, which is different from historical gentries and their artistic representations of relationships with nature. Yet, Yu Feng also criticized that the perception of the depicted pagoda is not accurate in *the Yan’an Pagoda* by Shi Lu. Ye Qianyu 叶淺予 pointed out that: “there are deficiencies in expressive skills and methods. To put it straightforwardly, it is ‘wild’ and lacks rules and discipline. It feels that lacking of depth in skills. Subtlety is not enough.”⁹³

Wang Zhaowen commented on *Fighting in Northern Shanxi*, writing that “the painter [Shi Lu] searched for his distinctive artistic representations and forms through his revolutionary passion and personal understandings. [This painting] eulogizes the Party and the wise leader who led the war of liberation and obtained victories.”⁹⁴ This comment defended criticism on *Fighting in Northern Shaanxi*. It was in favour of Shi Lu.

Shi Lu spoke at the end of the symposium. He defended his artistic practices and the Chang’an School. He stated that “the reason why we named our paintings preparatory works is because our works are in a process of transformation. We are exploring how we can “overthrow the olds and create the new” to produce new forms of art which could satisfy new contents.”⁹⁵ He further defended “wildness”: “wildness is lack of elegance. In other words, it has brought our attention that the wildness points out the immaturity of

⁹² Wang Zhaowen, *Xinyi xinqing*, p. 23.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 21. The original text reads: 當然在表現技法上還有不滿足的地方。直率點說的是：“野”，規矩不夠，感到技術缺乏深度，含蓄的東西不多。

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 27. The original text reads: <轉戰陝北> 為了歌頌黨和領袖在領導解放戰爭中不斷取得勝利的英明偉大，作者按照他的革命熱情和個人修養尋找到與眾不同的表現方法和形式。

⁹⁵ Wang Zhaowen, *Xinyi xinqing*. The original text reads: 我們的作品稱之為習作，確實因為我們的畫都還處在一閣變化的過程中；如何推陳出新，如何創造合乎新內容的新形式，還是我們正在探索的大問題。

brushstrokes, not well-planned compositions or the ideology of the painting is not deep enough. Yet, every matter has two sides. If it is only wildness, it is lacking interest. However, if only seeking elegant artistic skills, it impairs the sublime. Thus, if only compromising without speaking out, it is more likely that it will ‘kill’ the artistic life.”⁹⁶ Shi Lu clearly and strongly defended himself and criticism on his “wildness” and less controlled brushstrokes.

He further argued that new contents of art required new forms of representations. The new forms of representations stem from life and traditions but were not restrained from copying certain artists and art schools. Shi Lu expounded that “[...] If we need to explore new forms, we should start from new forms of representations. Certain content requires corresponding forms.”⁹⁷ Shi Lu’s statement exemplified that he was determined to establish his artistic practices and the Chang’an School as an unprecedented new form of art. However, it does not seem Shi Lu exhibited paintings with “new forms of representations.” The exhibited new form of art contradicts the aesthetics of distortion Shi Lu practiced in *Scenery of Shanbei*.

Shi Lu insisted that the traditional artistic modes and styles cannot represent the new content. In other words, the traditional artistic modes cannot represent the subject matter of the landscape in Shanbei. Shi Lu was using a kind of interpretation of the cultural guidelines to shield the artistic representations of the Chang’an School and the “wildness” in his painting particularly from criticism. However, this type of “new” is in line with cultural policy, which is distinct from the aesthetics of distortion in *Scenery of Shanbei*.

At the end of his speech, Shi Lu humbly concluded that the Chang’an School needed to further improve in art forms, styles and skills. However, he believed that there would be more good works in his time if two conditions would be satisfied. One is pursuing the new and complete art mode without repeating historical and traditional artistic practices. A second is connecting life, tradition and artistic creation together.

⁹⁶ Ibid. The original text reads: 粗野自然是缺乏文雅, 或指筆墨還不夠凝練老到, 或指布局欠周密, 或指韻味還不夠深長, 總之是提起了我們必要的注意. 什麼事物都得從反面看看, 一味狂怪, 就粗野而寡趣; 相反只求技法文雅, 也有傷氣質; 因求柔媚而不敢吐氣, 恐怕也會殺害藝術的生命.

⁹⁷ Ibid. The original text reads: [...] 要探索新形勢首先就要從表現方法開始, 特定的內容要求相應的形式.

Through the comments and Shi Lu's defenses I have discussed above, we may see that criticism was put forward particularly with regard to Shi Lu's "wild" style. Shi Lu defended and argued that new content of painting needed new modes of representations. His argument seems loud but without substance, because Shi Lu's aesthetics of distortion and formal aspect in *guohua* was the polar opposite of the Communist cultural guidelines. Shi Lu's defense had to abide by the policy. He was trapped in this contradiction but had to compromise, which made his defense and argument pale in the symposium.

After this exhibition, Shi Lu and the Chang'an School became a topic in art forum. Shi Lu defended "wildness" and his artistic practices on various occasions. In 1964, he created *Ferry to the East*, which was first acknowledged as a masterpiece representing Shi Lu's aesthetic viewpoints: landscape could portray the greatness of human in a metaphorical manner. Later, this painting and together with *Fighting in Northern Shaanxi* was considered as evidence that Shi Lu attacked Mao Zedong in his art. In July 1965, Shi Lu defended the topic of the political stance of the Chang'an School at a conference of national art association. Soon after this conference, he was diagnosed with schizophrenia.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Shi Dan, *Shi Lu*, p.264-244.

Conclusion

My thesis has attempted to decipher *Scenery of Shanbei* and understand a few keys to understanding Shi Lu's artistic practice. I have articulated an interpretation suggesting that this painting exemplifies aesthetics of distortion. Following historical clues, I have investigated the origin of Shi Lu's aesthetics of distortion and found that one likely source of this aesthetics is Zheng Ji's concept of *qihuan*. This connection is supported by Shi Lu's own writings. Furthermore, I have argued that Shi Lu and the guiding principles of his aesthetic practice were caught in a contradiction between art with a propagandist function and Shi Lu's drive for an individualistic expression.

From this inquiry, I conclude that Shi Lu's *Scenery of Shanbei* can be understood from two standpoints. First, Shi Lu used aesthetics of distortion to express the monumentality of the represented landscape in the painting. This expressionism aims to take the low and lumpy loess as chief subject matter of this monumental landscape painting. The expression of this monumentality through artistic means in turn was aimed to confer importance to the Chang'an School and Shi Lu's artistic contribution. Second, *Scenery of Shanbei* is an artistic statement that Shi Lu made for his viewpoint of brushwork, artistic representations and even new *guohua*.

Due to the unknown date of this painting, it is relatively difficult to precisely locate this painting in Shi Lu's oeuvre. It is unclear if *Scenery of Shanbei* has even been publicly exhibited or published in any catalogue. In my discussion of the date of this painting, I propose several possibilities of the date. I am inclined to believe that the painting was completed at different stages of Shi Lu's career, but the pictorial content is more likely to be painted in early 1960s. It is the time close to the "preparatory exhibition" of the Chang'an School in Beijing. Therefore, I wonder if *Scenery of Shanbei* was exhibited on that occasion. Selected paintings in that exhibition were published in a corresponding catalogue titled *Guohua xuan* 國畫選 (*Guohua Selections*) in 1963. However, I was unable to obtain a copy due to the rareness of this publication.

Shi Lu's oeuvre and artistic practices is complex. Because my thesis is grounded in one particular painting, *Scenery of Shanbei*, it reveals one aspect of Shi Lu's art. There are a number of questions that could be further studied. How do the aesthetics of distortion play a role in Shi Lu's paintings from 1970s? If we broaden the scope of the

discussion, are the aesthetics of distortion applicable to the interpretation of other artists from Shi Lu's generation?

One question that can be raised is whether Shi Lu's dilemma is unique to his personal and artistic history or whether it fits a pattern found in the work and life of other Chinese artists whose career took place from 1949 until today. It is my suspicion that, due to the specific political history of China, many other Chinese artists have faced an existential contradiction similar to Shi Lu's contradiction between propaganda work and self-expression.

From the standpoint of the approach developed in this thesis, further research carried out on this theme could shed some light on essential features of modern and contemporary Chinese art. In the future, I am specifically interested in pursuing this theme by investigating Chinese art and surveillance.

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Wenwu chubanshe, 2003.

Appendix I

Figures



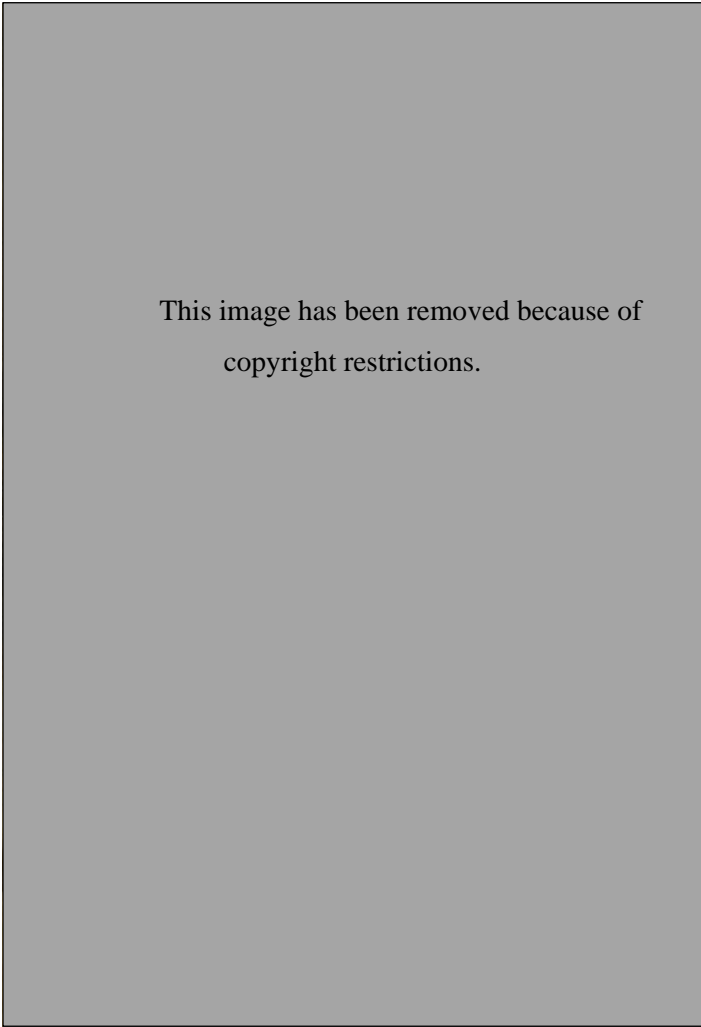
Figure 1 Shi Lu. *Scenery of Shanbei*. Hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper.
Unknown date. 264.4 × 112.2 cm. The Mactaggart Art Collection, University
of Alberta.



Figure 1.1 Shi Lu. *Scenery of Shanbei*. (detail) Hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper. Unknown date. 166.9 × 95.2 cm. The Mactaggart Art Collection, University of Alberta.

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Figure 2 Shi Lu. *Fighting in Northern Shaanxi*. Ink and color on paper.
1959. As reproduced in *Shi Lu*, Shi Dan, (Shijiazhuang: Hebei
jiaoyu chubanshe, 2003), 85



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Figure 3 Guo Xi. *Early Spring*. Hanging scroll, ink on silk. 1072. 158.3 ×
108.1 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

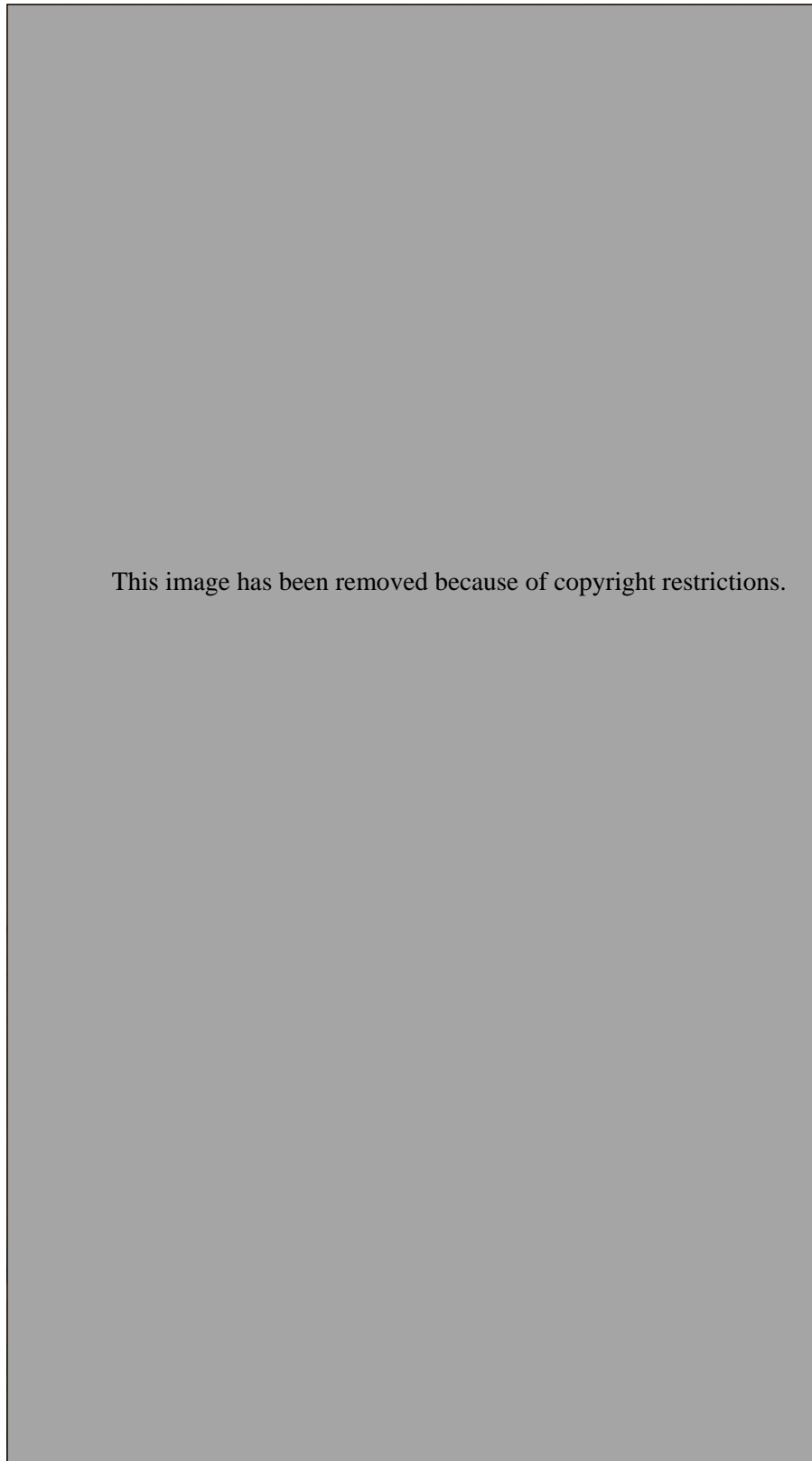


Figure 4 Ma Yuan. *Singing and Dancing in the Spring*. Hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk. 192.5 × 111 cm. The Palace Museum.

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Figure 5 Xia Gui. *Pure and Remote Views of Hills and Streams*. Hand scroll, ink on paper. ca. 1200. 46.5 × 889 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

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of copyright restrictions.

Figure 6 Fan Kuan. *Travelers amid Streams and Mountains*. Hanging scroll, ink on silk. ca. 1000. 206.3 × 103.3 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei

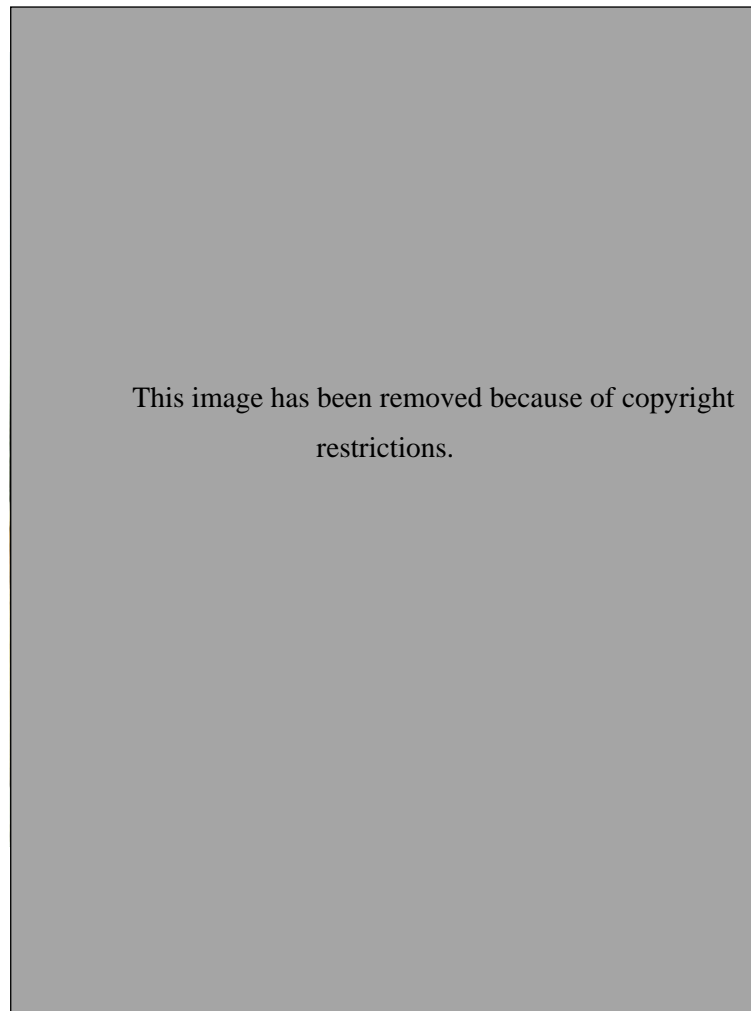


Figure 7 Shi Lu. *Scenery of Going to Work*. Ink and color on paper. 1961. As reproduced in *Shi Lu*, Shi Dan, (Shijiazhuang: Heibei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2003), 90

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Figure 8 Fu Baoshi. *Scenery of Shanbei*. Ink and color on paper. 1960.
As reproduced in *Mei shu* no.2 (1961)

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Figure 9 Shi Lu. *Beyond the Great Wall*. Ink and color on paper. 1954. As reproduced in *Shi Lu*, Shi Dan, (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2003), 70-71.