

The Reconstruction of Chinese Ink-Wash Animation Aesthetics in the Era of Generative Artificial Intelligence

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Generative artificial intelligence (AI) has reorganized contemporary visual production, and its capacity to synthesize images in the manner of almost any pictorial tradition raises pressing questions for classical art forms. This article examines how generative AI reconstructs the aesthetics of Chinese ink-wash animation (*shuimo donghua*), a tradition defined by expressive brushwork, a philosophy of empty space, and the pursuit of artistic conception (*yijing*) rather than optical realism. Adopting a conceptual-analytical method, the study integrates classical Chinese art theory, animation aesthetics, and theories of digital and computational creativity, testing the framework against a contrast between the hand-painted film *Feeling from Mountain and Water* (1988) and contemporary generative ink imagery. It argues that generative models do not merely imitate the surface of ink; they decompose, model, and recombine its elements, producing a distinct formation termed algorithmic ink aesthetics. Three transformations organize the analysis: from imitation to reconstruction, from embodied to algorithmic brushwork, and from singular authorship to distributed human–AI co-creation. The article also weighs the strongest counterargument—that meaning is made in reception—and considers the risks of cultural flattening, homogenization, and diminished human agency. It concludes that ink-wash animation survives through reinterpretation, and that algorithmic ink aesthetics suggests a possible new direction in the evolution of Chinese visual culture guided by cultural understanding.

Keywords: generative artificial intelligence, Chinese ink-wash animation, digital aesthetics, algorithmic ink aesthetics, human–AI co-creation, *yijing*

The rapid maturation of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has reorganized the conditions under which images are produced, circulated, and understood. Text-to-image systems built on generative adversarial networks and, more recently, latent diffusion models can now synthesize high-resolution pictures in the manner of almost any pictorial tradition on demand (Goodfellow et al., 2014; Rombach et al., 2022). This capacity is not confined to Western oil painting or photographic realism; it extends to the stylistic signatures of classical Asian art, including the tonal gradations and dissolving contours of Chinese ink painting (He et al., 2018). For the world's inherited art forms, the arrival of such systems is therefore both an opportunity and a provocation: an opportunity because traditional visual languages can be revived, extended, and recirculated at scale, and a provocation because the very meaning of those languages is unsettled when a machine can approximate their appearance without participating in the cultural practices that gave them life.

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Chinese ink-wash animation (*shuimo donghua*) offers a particularly instructive case for thinking through this tension. Emerging at the Shanghai Animation Film Studio at the beginning of the 1960s, the form fused the aesthetics of literati brush-and-ink painting with the temporal medium of the animated film. Its inaugural work, *Where Is Mama* (Te & Qian, 1960), rendered the tadpoles and aquatic creatures of Qi Baishi's paintings as moving, breathing figures, and later masterworks such as *The Cowherd's Flute* (1963) and *Feeling from Mountain and Water* (Te, 1988) extended the technique into an internationally celebrated "Chinese School" of animation (Du, 2019; Giesen, 2014; Macdonald, 2016). Unlike animation grounded in the mechanics of realistic representation, ink-wash animation privileges freehand expression (*xieyi*), poetic atmosphere, and the charged relationship between emptiness and presence. Its aim is not to reproduce the visible world but to evoke an inner, contemplative resonance.

With the emergence of generative AI, visual production increasingly incorporates algorithmic generation alongside existing manual and embodied practices. Neural style-transfer and generative models can convincingly simulate ink texture, the diffusion of pigment into paper, and the negative spaces characteristic of the tradition (Gatys et al., 2016; He et al., 2018). Yet the ease of this simulation raises questions that are aesthetic and philosophical rather than merely technical. Does an algorithmically generated image preserve the cultural spirit of ink aesthetics, or only its outward appearance? How does probabilistic, data-driven production transform artistic concepts—such as the resonance of the brush or the activity of empty space—that were historically inseparable from the human body and its disciplined gesture?

This article investigates the reconstruction of Chinese ink-wash animation aesthetics in the age of generative AI. Its central claim is that AI does not simply imitate the tradition. Rather, it decomposes the tradition into computable features and reorganizes those features through algorithmic processes, producing a new formation that the article names algorithmic ink aesthetics. The study does not offer new engineering results; instead, it provides a theoretical vocabulary for interpreting the aesthetic significance of a technical shift that is already well underway.

Methodologically, the article proceeds through conceptual analysis, an established mode of inquiry in aesthetics and media theory that clarifies and reconstructs the concepts through which a practice is understood rather than measuring its effects statistically. Three moves structure the argument. First, the study synthesizes three literatures—classical Chinese art theory, animation aesthetics, and theories of digital and computational creativity—into an integrated framework. Second, it uses that framework to specify what is inherited, transformed, and lost when ink aesthetics passes through a generative model. Third, rather than leaving these claims wholly abstract, it tests them against an illustrative contrast between a canonical hand-painted work, *Feeling from Mountain and Water* (Te, 1988), and the outputs of contemporary generative systems. The illustrative contrast is heuristic rather than evidentiary: it grounds the conceptual claims in a concrete case without purporting to establish them empirically. The contribution is correspondingly theoretical—a vocabulary that connects the study of Chinese aesthetics with the emerging field of generative-AI art studies (Cetinic & She, 2022)—and the intended audience spans animation studies, digital aesthetics, and Chinese art and media scholarship.

Three research questions organize the inquiry. First, how does generative AI reconstruct the aesthetic principles of Chinese ink-wash animation? Second, how does AI-mediated creation transform the relationship between artistic intention and visual production? Third, can algorithmic images inherit the cultural and philosophical meaning of traditional Chinese ink aesthetics, or do they merely replicate its surface? The remainder of the article proceeds by reviewing the relevant literatures, establishing a theoretical framework,

analyzing the aesthetic foundations of ink-wash animation, examining three axes of algorithmic reconstruction, reflecting on the attendant challenges, and drawing the threads together in a concluding discussion.

Literature Review

Two bodies of scholarship bear directly on this study—one concerned with Chinese ink-wash animation and its aesthetic heritage, the other with digital art, computational creativity, and generative AI. Each is substantial in its own right, but they have rarely been placed in sustained dialogue. Reviewing them together clarifies the gap the present article seeks to address

Chinese Ink-Wash Animation and the “Chinese School”

Historical and critical accounts of Chinese animation have established the “Chinese School” as a deliberate project of national aesthetic identity. Macdonald (2016) reads the mainstream animation produced at the Shanghai Animation Film Studio between the 1950s and the 1980s as a distinctive medium in dynamic tension with global and domestic visual cultures, situating ink-wash animation within a broader politics of style. Du (2019) recovers the transnational entanglements of early Chinese animation, arguing that its “Chineseness” was itself the product of cross-border exchange rather than an untouched essence. Giesen (2014) supplies a comprehensive filmography and chronology, and Wu (2017) extends the analysis into the era of creative industries and digital culture. Across this scholarship, ink-wash animation is understood as the migration of literati painting concepts—brush and ink, atmosphere, and the primacy of suggestion over description—into the moving image. What this literature largely predates, however, is the generative turn in AI; its concern is with historical style, cultural identity, and industrial context rather than with the algorithmic simulation of ink.

Digital Art, Computational Creativity, and Generative AI

A parallel literature theorizes the computational image. Manovich (2001) established the conceptual foundations of new media by arguing that digital images are, at base, numerical representations subject to algorithmic manipulation, and he later turned specifically to the aesthetics of machine learning (Manovich, 2018). Debates in computational creativity ask whether and in what sense machines can be creative: Boden (2004) distinguishes combinational, exploratory, and transformational creativity, while Hertzmann (2018) contends that the pertinent question is less whether computers create art than how art functions within the social systems that assign it value. Zylinska (2020) reframes the entire debate, arguing that AI art must be understood not only as an aesthetic phenomenon but in terms of labor, the position of the human, and the socio-political conditions of image making, and Crawford (2021) shows that the datasets on which such systems depend are themselves sites of classification and power rather than neutral repositories. On the technical side, generative adversarial networks introduced a framework in which a generator and discriminator are trained in opposition to model a data distribution (Goodfellow et al., 2014); neural style transfer demonstrated that the “content” and “style” of images could be separated and recombined (Gatys et al., 2016); creative adversarial networks were designed to deviate from learned style norms in pursuit of novelty (Elgammal et al., 2017); and latent diffusion models made high-resolution text-to-image synthesis broadly accessible (Rombach et al., 2022). Cetinic and She (2022) survey this fast-moving field and map its two principal facets—AI for the analysis of art and AI for the generation of art. Rich as it is in technical and philosophical insight, however, this literature rarely engages the specific aesthetic logic of any single non-Western tradition.

The Research Gap

Where the two literatures do meet, the encounter is typically narrow. Technical work on Chinese ink style transfer is illuminating precisely because of its limits: He et al. (2018), for instance, model ink painting through three explicit constraints—voids, brush strokes, and ink-wash tone and diffusion—treating the tradition as a set of reproducible visual features. Such work advances the engineering of appearance but does not theorize what happens, aesthetically and culturally, when the philosophy behind those features is reduced to parameters. General reviews of AI and art, in turn, catalogue creative and analytic applications without dwelling on the aesthetic philosophy of any particular tradition (Cetinic & She, 2022), while critical accounts of AI art tend to address the field at the level of labor, power, and the human condition rather than at the level of a specific pictorial grammar (Crawford, 2021; Zylinska, 2020). Conversely, humanities scholarship on ink-wash animation seldom confronts generative systems directly. The result is a persistent gap: there is little sustained theoretical analysis of how generative AI reconstructs the aesthetic logic—as opposed to the surface—of Chinese ink-wash animation. This article addresses that gap by developing the concept of algorithmic ink aesthetics and using it to interpret the transformation of the tradition. The following section develops the theoretical framework necessary to analyze this transformation.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis draws on three theoretical resources: classical Chinese aesthetics, animation aesthetics, and digital or algorithmic aesthetics. Read together, they yield the central construct of the paper, algorithmic ink aesthetics.

Classical Chinese Aesthetics: Qiyun, Xieyi, and Yijing

Chinese pictorial theory has long subordinated resemblance to resonance. In the canonical Six Laws attributed to Xie He, the first and governing principle is *qiyun shengdong*—commonly rendered as “spirit resonance” or “life-movement”—which places the animating vitality of a work above mere formal likeness (Bush & Shih, 1985). Related to this is the ideal of *xieyi*, the “writing of meaning” or freehand mode, in which the disciplined economy of the brush conveys the essence of a subject rather than its optical detail. Above the level of technique lies *yijing*, the artistic conception or realm of feeling that the work opens for a contemplative viewer; in the aesthetic tradition synthesized by Zong (1981), *yijing* names the fusion of scene and emotion into an evocative, resonant space. Jullien (2009) reframes this sensibility in comparative terms, arguing that Chinese painting pursues the “nonobject”—an image that dissolves fixed forms and treats presence and absence as a continuum rather than an opposition. These concepts jointly imply that the ink tradition is not oriented toward representation at all; its object is the cultivation of experience.

Animation as a Temporal Aesthetic Medium

Animation theory supplies the second resource. Wells (1998) characterizes animation as an art of metamorphosis in which movement, transformation, and the plasticity of the image generate meaning that live-action cinema cannot. Lamarre (2009) analyzes animation as a distinctive machine for organizing motion, layering, and the viewer’s relation to the moving image. Ink-wash animation occupies a singular position within these accounts, because it introduces time into a pictorial language that was historically static. When a painted brushstroke acquires duration—when ink appears to diffuse, a mist to drift, or a fish to turn—the temporal transformation itself becomes expressive, extending the classical pursuit of resonance into the dimension of

motion. Any theory of AI-reconstructed ink aesthetics must therefore account not only for the still image but for the animated, time-based unfolding of the image.

Digital and Algorithmic Aesthetics

The third resource concerns the ontology of the computational image. For Manovich (2001, 2018), digital images are numerical objects, and generative models add a further layer: images are sampled from a learned, high-dimensional “latent space” that encodes statistical regularities across a training corpus. Generation is thus neither copying nor free invention but probabilistic sampling within a modeled distribution. It should be stressed that this is not a simple averaging of examples; a well-trained generator learns a structured manifold from which it can produce coherent images unlike any single training instance, and different architectures—adversarial models such as GANs (Goodfellow et al., 2014) and iterative denoising models such as latent diffusion (Rombach et al., 2022)—arrive at this capacity by materially different means. What the architectures share, and what matters aesthetically, is that the generated image is not the trace of a particular hand at a particular moment but a reconstruction conditioned on the statistics of a corpus. Understanding ink aesthetics under AI requires taking this ontology seriously, because it changes the relationship between mark and meaning that classical theory presupposed.

Toward Algorithmic Ink Aesthetics

Synthesizing these resources, this article proposes algorithmic ink aesthetics as its central theoretical contribution: the reconstruction of traditional ink aesthetics through computational processes of feature extraction, statistical modeling, and probabilistic recombination. Three features define the concept and distinguish it from adjacent terms. First, it is generative rather than reproductive: unlike “digital ink painting,” which typically denotes the digitization or simulation of the brush as a tool under continuous human control, algorithmic ink aesthetics designates images that a model produces by sampling a learned distribution. Second, it is tradition-specific rather than general: unlike “computational aesthetics,” which seeks formal or quantitative accounts of aesthetic value across styles, algorithmic ink aesthetics is bound to the particular grammar of ink—brushwork, tonal diffusion, negative space, and atmospheric suggestion—and to the philosophy of *qiyun* and *yijing* that grammar historically served. Third, it is co-creative rather than autonomous: the aesthetic formation it names arises in the interaction of human framing and machine generation, not in either alone. Defined this way, algorithmic ink aesthetics is neither the digital preservation of ink painting nor a straightforward imitation of it, but a genuinely new formation; the concept allows the paper to ask, precisely, what survives the encoding of the tradition into computable parameters and what is transformed by it.

The Aesthetic Foundation of Chinese Ink-Wash Animation

Before examining how generative AI reconstructs ink-wash aesthetics, it is necessary to specify the aesthetic foundation on which the tradition rests. Three interlocking features are decisive: brushwork as embodied visual language, the philosophy of empty space, and the pursuit of artistic conception.

Brushwork as Embodied Visual Language

In the ink tradition, the brushstroke is never merely a means of depicting an object; it is an expressive event in its own right. Ink density, the speed and pressure of the hand, the absorbency of the paper, and the controlled accident of pigment bleeding together constitute a visual language whose vocabulary is the mark itself. The

classical emphasis on “bone method”—the structural integrity of the line—treats brushwork as the carrier of the artist’s vitality, so that a stroke registers not only what is shown but the disciplined energy of the one who made it (Bush & Shih, 1985). Brushwork, in this sense, is indexical: it is a physical trace of an embodied gesture, a record of a particular body’s participation at a particular moment. In ink-wash animation, this embodied quality was preserved through painstaking hand production, in which each frame was painted so that the living quality of the brush could survive translation into motion (Macdonald, 2016).

It is important not to romanticize this embodiment. Ink painting was never an unmediated emanation of the self; it was always realized through technologies—the brush, the grinding of ink, the sizing of paper or silk, and, in animation, the camera, the cel, and the multiplane apparatus that layered painted washes into motion. The pertinent contrast with generative AI is therefore not one of authentic human expression against artificial fabrication, as if the tradition were technology-free. It is a contrast in the kind of mediation and the locus of agency: in hand production, technology extends and disciplines a continuously governing human gesture, whereas in generative production the decisive shaping occurs within a learned model, and human agency is relocated to the framing, selection, and interpretation of what the model returns. Holding this distinction as a matter of degree and locus, rather than of essence, guards against the very essentialism this article elsewhere criticizes, while still allowing that the shift is aesthetically consequential.

Spatial Philosophy and the Poetics of Empty Space

Equally fundamental is the treatment of emptiness. In Chinese ink aesthetics, the unpainted area—*liubai*, or “left-white”—is not an absence to be filled but an active compositional and philosophical element. Empty space generates atmosphere, invites the viewer’s imaginative participation, and stages the continuity of presence and absence that Jullien (2009) identifies as central to the tradition. A mist-filled void can carry as much meaning as a delineated peak, because the two are understood as phases of a single continuum rather than as figure against neutral ground. In the animated form, this poetics of emptiness becomes temporal as well as spatial: the drift of unmarked space, the slow emergence and dissolution of forms, and the pacing of stillness all participate in the creation of meaning. Emptiness is thus a positive resource, and any reconstruction of ink aesthetics must reckon with its philosophical weight rather than treating it as mere background.

Artistic Conception and Cultural Meaning

The purpose that organizes brushwork and empty space is the creation of *yijing*, artistic conception. The ink tradition does not aspire to realistic reproduction; it aspires to a spiritual and poetic experience in which scene and feeling fuse (Zong, 1981). A landscape is valued less for its topographic accuracy than for the contemplative resonance it opens, and this resonance is inseparable from a specific cultural and philosophical inheritance—Daoist and Chan Buddhist sensibilities toward nature, transience, and the limits of representation. This foundation frames the paper’s guiding problem sharply. If the meaning of ink aesthetics resides not in visual features but in an experience grounded in cultural understanding, then the decisive question about generative AI is whether it can produce cultural meaning, or whether it can only produce visual similarity to the artifacts through which that meaning was historically expressed.

Generative AI and the Reconstruction of Ink-Wash Animation Aesthetics

Against this foundation, the article now analyzes three axes along which generative AI reconstructs ink-wash aesthetics: the shift from imitation to reconstruction, the shift from embodied to algorithmic brushwork,

and the transformation of authorship. To keep the analysis concrete, it first anchors these axes in an illustrative contrast.

An Illustrative Contrast: Feeling from Mountain and Water and Generative Ink

Consider *Feeling from Mountain and Water* (Te, 1988), the last ink-wash work produced by the Shanghai Animation Film Studio and a widely acknowledged summit of the form. The film has no dialogue; it renders the friendship between an aging musician and a young ferry girl entirely through landscape, gesture, and the sound of the guqin, transferring the viscosity of literati painting into motion (Du, 2019; Giesen, 2014). Its ink effects were achieved by an extraordinarily laborious hand process, in which tonal washes were painted and photographed in layers so that the bleeding and diffusion of ink would read as living movement rather than as flat drawing. Every gradation on the screen is, in this sense, the downstream trace of an actual painted wash: the empty space that surrounds the figures is a deliberate compositional and philosophical act, and the diffusion of ink is a physical, temporal event that the camera records.

Now consider how a contemporary generative system approaches the “same” aesthetic. A style-transfer network recombines the statistics of ink texture with the content of a target image (Gatys et al., 2016); a purpose-built model such as ChipGAN reconstructs the look of ink by enforcing three engineered constraints corresponding to voids, brush strokes, and ink-wash tone and diffusion (He et al., 2018); and a text-to-image diffusion model can synthesize an “ink-wash” scene from a prompt by sampling its learned distribution (Rombach et al., 2022). In each case the diffusion of ink is not a physical event but a modeled visual regularity, and the empty space is produced as a learned compositional tendency rather than as a considered act of restraint. The two routes can converge on strikingly similar surfaces, yet they differ at the level of what the image is: one is the indexical residue of a governed human gesture, the other a probabilistic reconstruction conditioned on a corpus. This contrast is the concrete referent for the three transformations analyzed below.

From Imitation to Reconstruction

It is tempting to describe AI-generated ink imagery as imitation, but the term is misleading. A generative model does not copy an existing painting; it learns a statistical distribution over a corpus and samples new images from it. In doing so, it must first decompose the tradition into features—ink texture, contour behavior, tonal gradients, compositional tendencies, and the distribution of empty space—and then reassemble those features probabilistically. The technical literature makes this decomposition explicit: the ChipGAN architecture models Chinese ink painting through three engineered constraints corresponding to voids, brush strokes, and ink-wash tone and diffusion (He et al., 2018). What such systems produce is therefore not a reproduction of any prior image but a reconstruction assembled from modeled parameters. The distinction matters aesthetically. Where imitation would preserve the tradition intact, reconstruction reorganizes it: the generated image is a new configuration of the tradition’s elements, expressing the statistics of the training data rather than the intention of a painter. Algorithmic ink aesthetics is, in this precise sense, reconstructive rather than reproductive.

From Embodied Brushwork to Algorithmic Brushwork

The second axis concerns the nature of the mark. In Peirce’s semiotic terms, a sign may function as an index, standing for its object through a real physical connection, or as an icon, standing for its object through resemblance. Traditional brushwork leans toward the indexical: the stroke is causally connected to the gesture that produced it, and its expressive authority derives partly from that connection. Algorithmic brushwork is weighted differently. It is generated through machine-learning models and probabilistic sampling, with no hand,

no ink, and no disciplined bodily energy behind the mark; what appears as a brushstroke is the model's reconstruction of the visual statistics of brushstrokes, and it therefore signifies primarily through resemblance rather than through physical connection. The distinction should not be overdrawn—the indexicality even of photographic and hand-made images has long been contested, and every reproduction of the film already attenuates the original trace—but the tendency is clear: generative production shifts the mark toward the iconic and relocates agency from the moment of making to the moments of prompting and selection. The consequence is double-edged. On one hand, algorithmic brushwork can generalize the visual signature of the brush across images and motions at a scale no hand could achieve, and it can generate variations a human might never attempt. On the other hand, it loosens the mark from the embodied vitality—the *qiyun* transmitted through the hand—that classical theory regarded as a source of a stroke's life (Bush & Shih, 1985). Whether the resulting images can nonetheless carry resonance is not a question the technology settles; it is displaced onto the human beings who select, arrange, and interpret the output.

The Transformation of Authorship

The third axis is authorship. When images are generated by a system trained on a vast corpus, the classical figure of the solitary author is destabilized in ways that critical theory anticipated. Barthes (1977) argued that the meaning of a text arises in its reading rather than in the sovereign intention of its author, and generative systems literalize this displacement, since no single intention governs an image sampled from a learned distribution. Benjamin (1969) observed that mechanical reproduction erodes the “aura” of the unique artwork—its embeddedness in a particular time, place, and tradition—and algorithmic generation intensifies this erosion, producing images that have no original and no site. In practice, the human role does not disappear but migrates. Artists increasingly function as concept designers, prompt authors, aesthetic directors, and curators of generated output, and authorship becomes a distributed relationship between human intention and algorithmic generation rather than a property of a single maker (Hayles, 1999). Zylinska (2020) cautions, however, that this distribution should not be mistaken for the human's disappearance: questions of labor, decision, and responsibility remain concentrated in the human agents who commission, configure, and frame the system. Algorithmic ink aesthetics is, in this respect, an aesthetics of co-creation, in which cultural meaning—if it is achieved at all—is achieved through the collaboration of human judgment with machine generation.

Challenges and Theoretical Reflections

The reconstruction described above brings significant challenges. Three are especially consequential: the risk of superficial cultural representation, the tendency toward aesthetic homogenization, and the question of creativity and human agency.

Cultural Representation and the Problem of Surface

Because generative models learn visual features rather than cultural understanding, they may reproduce the external symbols of Chinese culture without their philosophical and historical significance. A model can render the tonal diffusion and negative space of ink painting convincingly while remaining indifferent to the Daoist and Chan sensibilities that gave those devices meaning. The danger is compounded by the composition of training data: as Crawford (2021) argues, datasets are not neutral mirrors of the world but classificatory systems that encode particular assumptions, so a model's sense of “Chinese ink painting” is only ever as broad, as balanced, and as historically informed as the labeled images it was trained on. The likely result is that “Chineseness” is

reduced to a texture or a filter—an aesthetic surface detachable from its context—and recirculated as if it were the tradition itself. Such a reduction risks a subtle essentializing in which a living, internally diverse tradition is flattened into a recognizable stylistic brand. The concept of *yijing* is precisely what resists this flattening, since it locates value in an experience that surface features cannot guarantee.

Aesthetic Homogenization

A related risk is homogenization. Large generative models are trained on corpora whose composition reflects the availability and labeling of data, and they tend to converge on the most statistically dominant patterns. When such models are prompted for “Chinese style,” they are liable to produce a narrow, standardized version of it, privileging the most frequently represented motifs and suppressing regional, historical, and individual variation. The plurality of the ink tradition—its many schools, hands, and periods—may thus be compressed into a small repertoire of recognizable effects. Where the tradition prized the singularity of the resonant work, the generative economy tends toward the reproducible average, and this tension between statistical typicality and aesthetic singularity is one of the defining problems of algorithmic ink aesthetics.

Creativity and Human Agency

Finally, the rise of generative AI reframes rather than resolves the question of creativity. Boden (2004) distinguishes combinational and exploratory creativity, which recombine and search within existing conceptual spaces, from transformational creativity, which alters the space itself; current generative systems excel at the former while the latter remains bound up with human judgment about what is worth attempting and why. Hertzmann (2018) similarly locates artistic value in social and interpretive systems rather than in the generative act alone. On this view, AI does not eliminate human creativity; it changes the definition of artistic creation and the role of the artist, shifting emphasis from the execution of the mark toward the framing of intention, the curation of possibility, and the cultivation of meaning. Human agency is displaced but not dissolved, and the cultural fate of ink-wash animation under AI will depend on how deliberately that agency is exercised.

Discussion

Taken together, the three axes of reconstruction and their attendant challenges suggest a reframing of the relationship between tradition and technology. Generative AI does not confront ink-wash animation as an external threat to be resisted or a neutral tool to be adopted; it establishes a new relationship in which the tradition is at once dispersed into data and made newly generative. The recurring anxiety that AI will “replace” traditional aesthetics rests on a static conception of tradition—as if ink-wash animation were a fixed object to be preserved unchanged. The history of the form suggests otherwise. The “Chinese School” was itself an act of reinterpretation, translating the static language of literati painting into the temporal medium of animation and doing so through cross-cultural exchange (Du, 2019; Macdonald, 2016). A living tradition survives not by remaining identical to itself but by being reinterpreted for new media and new conditions.

At this point the strongest objection to the article’s argument must be met directly. If, following Barthes (1977), meaning is produced in reception rather than fixed by the conditions of production, then the machine origin of an image need not prevent a viewer from experiencing *yijing*; a beholder moved by an AI-generated ink landscape has, on this view, received exactly the resonance the tradition prizes, whatever its provenance. The objection is powerful and partly correct, and the article does not deny that generated images can move audiences. Two qualifications, however, keep the analysis intact. First, the conditions of production and the conditions of

reception are distinct questions, and demonstrating that meaning can arise in reception does not show that the tradition's productive logic—the disciplined transmission of vitality through the governed brush—has been preserved rather than transformed. Second, reception is not unconditioned: the resonance a viewer finds depends on interpretive communities and cultural literacy, so the capacity of generated works to sustain yijing over time is itself bound up with whether the surrounding culture retains a substantive understanding of ink aesthetics. Reception-based meaning, in short, relocates rather than removes the article's central concern.

On this understanding, algorithmic ink aesthetics can be read as the latest such reinterpretation rather than as the tradition's negation. What is genuinely at stake is the direction of the reinterpretation. If generative systems are used only to harvest the surface of ink for stylistic novelty, the likely result is the homogenized, meaning-thin imagery that an earlier section warned against. If, however, human practitioners bring to the collaboration a substantive understanding of qiyun, xieyi, yijing, and the poetics of empty space, then generative capacity can be directed toward images and motions that extend, rather than merely cite, the tradition. The decisive variable is not the technology but the depth of cultural understanding that guides it. This positions the artist's role—as aesthetic director and cultural interpreter of algorithmic output—at the center of the tradition's future, and it carries clear implications for arts education, which will increasingly need to cultivate both computational fluency and grounding in aesthetic philosophy.

Two limitations of the present analysis should be acknowledged. First, the study is conceptual rather than empirical; it develops a theoretical vocabulary and does not test its claims against a systematic corpus of AI-generated ink-wash works or against audience reception. Second, generative technologies are evolving rapidly, so specific technical characterizations are necessarily provisional. These limitations point toward productive future work: close analyses of particular AI-assisted ink-wash productions, comparative reception studies examining whether viewers experience yijing in generated works, and practice-based research in which artists and engineers collaborate to encode aesthetic principles more faithfully. The construct of algorithmic ink aesthetics is offered as a framework within which such investigations can be situated.

Conclusion

Generative artificial intelligence is transforming Chinese ink-wash animation from a handcrafted, embodied visual practice into a hybrid form that couples human creativity with algorithmic processes. This article has argued that the transformation is best understood not as imitation but as reconstruction: generative systems decompose the tradition into computable features and recombine them probabilistically, producing a new aesthetic formation for which the paper has proposed the term algorithmic ink aesthetics. Along the way, brushwork shifts from an embodied, indexical trace to an algorithmically simulated mark; authorship shifts from singular intention to distributed human–AI co-creation; and cultural meaning becomes something to be achieved through curatorial and interpretive judgment rather than something guaranteed by visual resemblance.

The significance of AI, on this account, lies not in replacing traditional aesthetics but in reconstructing their visual expression—and in thereby forcing a clearer articulation of what those aesthetics were for. Ink-wash animation is not preserved by remaining unchanged; it evolves through reinterpretation, and its future depends on balancing technological innovation with cultural understanding. Read in this light, algorithmic ink aesthetics represents a new stage in the ongoing evolution of Chinese visual culture: a stage whose value will be determined less by the capabilities of the machine than by the depth of the human understanding that guides it. AI does not

simply reproduce Chinese ink-wash aesthetics; rather, it reconstructs them through algorithmic processes, while the interpretation and cultural significance of this reconstruction remain closely connected to human agency.

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