

Form and Spirit: A Study of the Differences Between the Tale of Princess Kaguya and the Chinese Ink-Wash Animation Feeling from Mountain and Water

Sitong Chen

Department of Animation, Kyoto Seika University, Kyoto, Japan
chensitong9958@gmail.com

Abstract. In *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*, Isao Takahata mentioned that he used Chinese ink-wash painting as a visual reference, and tried to bring its brushwork and use of empty space into his animation. However, the film's overall aesthetic remains distinctly Japanese. Most existing studies have focused on the film's narrative and character development, with little attention paid to a deeper question: why is it that foreign artists, even when borrowing ink-wash techniques, find it hard to capture the unique "qi yun" (vital energy and rhythm) that defines Chinese ink-wash art? This paper compares *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* with the classic Chinese ink-wash animation *Feeling from Mountain and Water*. Using comparative analysis and close visual analysis, it looks at elements like line, empty space, and composition, and explores key aesthetic ideas such as "qi yun," "yi jing" (artistic conception), and "expressing character through objects." It also considers the historical context of how modern Japan encountered Western art, as well as its native tradition of "mono no aware," in order to better understand the aesthetic differences between the two works. The findings suggest that *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* adopts ink-wash techniques primarily at the formal level. While it borrows some visual elements from Chinese ink-wash art, it still carries traits that are more typical of Western painting. The treatment of line and space does not produce the poetic atmosphere associated with Chinese ink-wash painting, nor does it achieve the effect of "expressing character through objects." This further reveals a key point: the uniqueness of Chinese ink-wash painting does not lie in its visual form, but in its expression of mood and philosophical spirit, which is deeply rooted in China's long cultural tradition. This may be the real reason why it is so difficult to truly replicate across cultures.

Keywords: animation art, Chinese ink-wash painting, cross-cultural visual expression, artistic style, Japanese aesthetics

1. Introduction

Animation has gradually become a medium for cultural dissemination, and traditional artistic elements have been increasingly integrated into animation creation. Traditional Chinese aesthetics have once again attracted public attention. Many animated works have begun to incorporate Chinese

aesthetic elements such as ink wash, negative space, and classical patterns. However, in cross-cultural creation, creators may draw inspiration from the external forms of traditional painting but may not necessarily be able to capture its inner aesthetic spirit. The Japanese animated film *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* is a clear example of this. During its production, Isao Takahata explicitly drew on Chinese ink-wash painting as a visual reference, seeking to incorporate its brushwork and use of negative space into the film. Yet the work as a whole ultimately carries a strong Japanese artistic sensibility and does not achieve the unique poetic atmosphere typical of Chinese ink-wash painting. Most existing studies have focused on production techniques, visual forms, and cultural symbols in animated works, leaving room for discussion on how traditional artistic elements are transformed in different cultural contexts [1, 2]. This paper examines *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* and the Chinese animated film *Feeling from Mountain and Water*, exploring the similarities and differences between Chinese and Japanese approaches to ink-wash aesthetics and examining how Japanese painting traditions and aesthetic concepts shape the visual expression of the two works. Through literature review and comparative analysis, this paper looks at visual elements such as line, negative space, and spatial composition, as well as aesthetic concepts like "qi-yun" (vital energy and rhythm) and "yi-jing" (poetic atmosphere). The study aims to deepen our understanding of the appeal of Chinese ink-wash art and to offer insights for animation art design.

2. Differences in visual language

2.1. Lines

Feeling from Mountain and Water embodies the characteristic use of lines to shape forms in Chinese ink-wash painting. Lines are not merely used to outline the contours of objects; their density, thickness, and variations in ink shading also help define the forms, giving mountains, rocks, trees, and other elements a sense of volume, texture, and spatial depth. In contrast, the lines in *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* mainly serve to depict the external shapes of objects, outlining clothing details and the contours of characters and objects. The lines are generally uniform in thickness and lack the expressive qualities associated with Chinese ink-wash painting, which is closely rooted in the tradition of calligraphy. Su Shi wrote in *On Calligraphy*: "Calligraphy must possess spirit, energy, bone, blood, and flesh; if any one of these five is missing, it cannot be considered complete calligraphy." Calligraphy emphasizes the force, momentum, and direction of brushwork, requiring that each stroke have bone-like strength, flesh-like substance, and a sense of vitality. The lines in Chinese ink-wash painting similarly combine boldness with refinement, while exhibiting rich internal variation. The most distinctive feature of lines in Chinese ink-wash painting is that the form of an object and the process of brushwork can be completed within a single stroke. Take works featuring orchids as an example: the lines of the orchid intertwine and coil around one another, extending naturally according to the plant's growth posture, while the rise and fall of the brushstroke follow the plant's growth trajectory.

2.2. Negative space

Negative space is a crucial expressive technique in ink-wash painting. From a philosophical perspective, the use of negative space in Chinese ink-wash painting is closely tied to traditional Chinese conceptions of space, emphasizing the beauty of simplicity through the interplay between the tangible and the intangible and the principle of achieving more with less. In ink-wash painting, a single area of negative space can carry multiple meanings. The blank space in a painting is not

merely an area left undrawn; rather, it forms the whole composition together with the depicted elements. The interplay between the visible and the hidden creates the unique charm of ink-wash painting. The mist between mountain peaks and the empty space where sky meets water are not omissions in the composition, but essential elements used to build spatial depth and evoke a poetic atmosphere [3].

In *Feeling from Mountain and Water*, the negative space in the background blends with the lines and ink tones. The ink around mountains and trees gradually fades, merging seamlessly into the surrounding empty space and creating a harmonious interplay between the tangible and the intangible. In contrast, the use of negative space in *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* serves a more explicit purpose. The figures, costumes, and scenery typically have clearly defined outlines, making the distinction between concrete elements and the surrounding white areas much clearer. Here, negative space mainly serves as a backdrop against which the figures and scenery are emphasised.

Thus, although both works employ the artistic technique of negative space, *Feeling from Mountain and Water* and *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* show distinct visual differences. These differences concern the relationship between negative space and depicted elements, as well as the underlying aesthetic logic of each work. *Feeling from Mountain and Water* embodies the "interplay between the tangible and the intangible" characteristic of Chinese ink-wash painting. The empty space interacts with the mountains, rocks, trees, and water surfaces, collectively contributing to the overall artistic atmosphere. In contrast, the negative space in *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* aligns more closely with the aesthetic tendencies of "emptiness and tranquility" and "simplicity" found in traditional Japanese art, serving primarily to separate and define the individual elements within the composition.

2.3. Space

In *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*, spatial depth is conveyed in certain scenes through the relative sizes and foreground-background relationships of characters, architecture, and objects, directing the viewer's gaze towards a relatively fixed vantage point. The foreground, middle ground, and background are clearly defined; characters are placed within a distinct environment, and the composition tends to be character-centered. In *The Lofty Aspirations of Forests and Springs*, Guo Xi proposed the "Three Distances" method—namely, "height-distance," "depth-distance," and "flat-distance" [4]. Height-distance emphasizes looking up from the foot of a mountain toward its summit; depth-distance depicts a view extending from the front of a mountain to its rear; and flat-distance unfolds the line of sight from near to far. These three viewing methods show that Chinese ink-wash painting is not limited to a single perspective in conveying spatial depth. In *Feeling from Mountain and Water*, one can observe visual representations closely aligned with this concept of landscape space. The arrangement of mountains, rivers, and other elements does not follow the rule of focal perspective—where "near objects appear larger and distant objects smaller." Instead, the composition develops through variations in the density and spacing of its elements. Rocks, trees, and figures appear in different spatial segments, and the elements themselves serve as visual guides, directing the viewer's gaze along the contours of the mountains, the flow of the rivers, and the overall arrangement of the scenery. As Guo Xi stated in *The Lofty Aspirations of Forests and Springs*: "It is widely held that landscapes are meant to be walked through, gazed upon, explored, and inhabited." Space is not merely for viewing; it invites one to "wander" within it. The spatial differences between the two works go beyond the distinction between "linear perspective" and "radial perspective"—they reflect fundamentally different ways of seeing.

3. Fundamental differences in the essence of "qi yun" and "yi jing"

3.1. Core characteristics of chinese ink-and-wash animation

The aesthetic essence of Chinese ink-wash animation is rooted in the traditional painting philosophy of "the unity of heaven and humanity" [5]. This is not merely an abstract concept; in artistic practice, it suggests that humans and nature are not viewed as clearly separate entities. Characters are not independent observers standing apart from the landscape, nor is the landscape simply a backdrop serving the plot. Instead, the two intertwine to convey the overall meaning of the work. Take *Feeling from Mountain and Water* as an example. Its mood of sorrow and detachment is expressed not only through the characters themselves, but also through the landscape and the atmosphere created by brushwork and ink. The work does not rely on intense plotlines involving life-and-death separation; the scenery itself is capable of conveying the characters' emotions. This approach—in which emotion is conveyed through scenery and brushwork—also provides a useful basis for comparing its aesthetic logic with that of *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* in the following discussion.

3.2. The absence of "qi yun" and "yi jing": the aesthetic shortcomings of *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*

"Qi yun" is a key aesthetic concept in traditional Chinese painting. In his "Six Principles," Xie He placed "vitality and rhythm" at the top of the list. "Qi yun" does not refer to the accurate depiction of an object's external form, but rather to the vitality and spiritual charm conveyed through brushwork, ink, lines, and the overall rhythm of the composition. "Yi jing" manifests in the emotional connection between scenery and figures. The landscapes, figures, negative space, and spatial arrangements are not merely independent elements; they resonate with one another, allowing limited visual elements to evoke meanings beyond the frame and create room for imagination. Thus, "yijing" is not dependent on any single element, but is formed through the interplay of emotion and scenery [6]. In *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*, emotions arise primarily from the story's conclusion and the characters' fates. When Princess Kaguya, distressed by the guests' gossip at the banquet, rushes out of the mansion, her swift movement, billowing robes, and changing expressions convey the release of her long-suppressed emotions [7]. The arrival of the messenger from the Moon Palace, along with the characters' parting and their ultimate fates, further deepens the work's tragic tone. As a result, emotional expression in the work revolves largely around the characters' actions, facial expressions, and destinies. The mountains, forests, flowers, and grasses mainly serve as the setting for the characters' activities; the work does not rely on scenery or brushwork alone to convey the characters' emotions or the atmosphere of sorrow.

3.3. Why is it difficult to translate the aesthetic of "depicting people through objects" in Chinese ink painting

In traditional Chinese art, natural objects are not merely depictions of scenery; they are often infused with human emotions, character, and spiritual meaning. Bamboo can represent the integrity of the cultivated gentleman; the full moon can evoke longing; and a solitary boat can symbolise human loneliness. When these natural objects appear in works of art, they present not only their outward forms but also carry expressions of character, spiritual states, and emotions. These cultural meanings are not inherent to the objects themselves, but have gradually formed over the course of

long-term cultural development. Through their observation of nature, literati combined the forms, growth characteristics, and environments of natural objects with human emotions and spirituality, capturing them in poetry and literary works. Through this long cultural accumulation, certain natural phenomena gradually became imbued with significance that transcends their physical forms. Therefore, "expressing human character through objects" is not merely a painting technique, but a mode of expression rooted in a long process of cultural development. Consequently, regarding *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*, even though the work visually employs ink-wash-like lines and extensive use of negative space, this does not mean it possesses the aesthetic connotations of traditional Chinese ink-wash painting.

4. Tracing the origins of differences

4.1. The influence of western art on Japan

Following the Meiji Restoration, Japan's social system underwent tremendous changes. In 1876, the establishment of the Technical Art School under the Ministry of Industry marked an important stage in Japan's large-scale introduction of Western art and culture. Western painting emphasizes realistic observation, sketching, perspective, and the depiction of light and shadow, which had a significant impact on modern Japanese art [6]. This led modern Japanese painting to diverge into two distinct paths: "Western-style painting" (yōga), which primarily used Western materials and techniques, and "Japanese-style painting" (nihonga), which built upon traditional Japanese painting while incorporating certain Western observational methods and expressive forms. These visual concepts—refined through such fusion and adaptation—were subtly carried forward into subsequent artistic creation, and traces of them can be seen in the imagery of *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya*. The visuals retain a watercolor-like effect. Although they incorporate numerous ink-wash-like elements—such as hand-drawn lines and negative space—they still exhibit a clear sense of form. Characters, costumes, and objects are defined by lines, with spatial structure conveyed through perspective and variations in light and shadow. Furthermore, as a modern visual medium, animation relies on the principle of creating the illusion of motion through a sequence of still frames, placing high demands on continuity and controllability. This production method differs from the creative process of traditional Chinese ink-wash painting, which emphasizes improvisation and the execution of a single, fluid stroke. Due to these objective limitations of the medium, *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* can only simulate the visual appearance of ink-wash painting; it is difficult to replicate the spirit and vitality that arise from the spontaneous brushwork of traditional ink-wash art [8].

4.2. The expression of Japan's own aesthetic sensibilities

The visual style of *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* is not a direct reproduction of Chinese ink-wash painting; rather, it reflects the combined influence of traditional Japanese painting, modern artistic expression, and the animation medium. Japan's "mono no aware" aesthetic also influences the emotional expression in the film. "Mono no aware" refers to a heightened awareness of the transience of beauty and the bittersweet emotion it evokes. Under this aesthetic framework, natural landscapes are often used to reflect the impermanence of human existence; emotions ultimately find their anchor in human life experiences and individual destinies, rather than dissolving into the natural scenery [9]. In this work, "mono no aware" primarily revolves around Princess Kaguya's life experiences, the characters' fates, and the passage of time. Unlike Chinese ink-wash painting, which often relies on landscapes and poetic atmosphere to convey human emotions, the natural scenery in

The Tale of the Princess Kaguya is more closely tied to the characters' experiences and the progression of the story [10]. The film primarily conveys emotions through the characters' expressions, movements, and physical transformations, thereby directing attention more toward the characters themselves. Therefore, even though both works superficially employ painting techniques such as ink wash and negative space, their underlying aesthetic logics remain distinct.

5. Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the ink-wash techniques in *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* and explored its similarities and differences with Chinese ink-wash art. The study reveals that, although the work employs similar painting techniques, its aesthetic connotations differ significantly from those of Chinese ink-wash art. Moreover, it has developed a unique visual language shaped by multiple influences. The analysis shows that Chinese ink-wash painting places greater emphasis on the beauty of artistic conception, whereas *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* integrates Japanese and Western painting traditions and aesthetic concepts to convey emotion through characters, natural environments, and the overall atmosphere of the composition. This study has certain limitations. Since it primarily focuses on *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* and *Feeling from Mountain and Water*, the scope of analysis is limited. Future research could examine a broader range of works from different cultural contexts and further explore how traditional artistic elements are transformed and adapted across cultures.

References

- [1] Lei, Y. (2012). The creation of animation and the integration of traditional Chinese cultural elements. *Journal of Henan Normal University* (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition), 39(6), 264-267. <https://doi.org/10.16366/j.cnki.1000-2359.2012.06.019>
- [2] Chunlei, L. (2019). Construction of traditional cultural symbols in animated films from the perspective of the "New Chinese Animation School". *Drama House*, (12), 75-77.
- [3] Huang, X. (2026). The aesthetic mechanism and cultural connotation of blank-leaving art in Chinese landscape painting. *New Legend*, (29), 59-61. <https://doi.org/10.26938/j.cnki.CN42-1794/Z.2026.29.019>
- [4] Cheng, S. (2026). A study on Guo Xi's "Three Distances" theory. *JinGu WenChuang*, (22), 80-83. <https://doi.org/10.20024/j.cnki.CN42-1911/I.2026.22.024>
- [5] Lu, L., & Li, P. (2026). Painting principles into artifacts: Image composition of Guangxi meiping vases in the Ming Dynasty and spatial expression in Chinese painting. *Zhongyuan Literature*, (11), 198-200.
- [5] Lu, L., & Li, P. (2026). Painting principles into artifacts: Image composition of Guangxi meiping vases in the Ming Dynasty and spatial expression in Chinese painting. *Zhongyuan Literature*, (11), 198-200.
- [6] Zhang, S. (2005). The introduction of western painting techniques and the practice of early Japanese western-style painters: A facet of the "westernization" of Meiji Japanese art. *New Arts*, (4), 35-37.
- [7] Zhu, T. (2024). A study on the artistic expression of ink art in Chinese animation. *Art Education Research*, (9), 120-122.
- [8] Hu, M. (2023). A study of the development history and stylistic features of Chinese ink painting. *Pacific International Journal*, 6(1), 71-76.
- [9] Wang, J. (2025). The artistic conception expressed through brush and ink in Chinese painting. *Cambridge Arts and Humanities Research*, 2025(3), 27-31.
- [10] Zhu, X. (2023). *A study on the ink-wash animation film Shanshuiqing* [Master's thesis, Southwest Minzu University]. <https://doi.org/10.27417/d.cnki.gxnm.2023.000374>