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# Educators' Artmaking Collaboration and Reflection: 3D Pop-Up Chinese Landscape Painting

Lei Wang and Ling-Yu Chou

Art education must evolve with the shifting social, cultural, and political landscape (Bertling & Moore, 2021; Chung & Allen, 2023). Currently, we sense accessing diversity programs is becoming increasingly difficult, and many people only understand other cultures in a shallow way. For international students, changing immigration policies and increasing uncertainty in the United States make school life even more challenging. In our 3D pop-up landscape painting workshop, we apply the collaboration and reflection process to build on the framework of culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP; Buffington, 2019; Overby et al., 2022; Paris, 2012). The workshop's goal was to promote the sustainable development of multicultural education and cultural resource sharing. We also advocate for the implementation of equity, diversity, and inclusion (ED&I) principles in art education to foster a more inclusive and culturally responsive learning environment.

Despite the current social, cultural, and political challenges to CSP and ED&I practices, we chose to take action. Instead of being passive observers, we aimed to become active promoters of cross-cultural exchange, as Kantawala (2023) noted: "Practices are interwoven with inspiration, challenge, and change. These intricate threads shape teaching approaches, urging us to persistently re-frame our perspectives" (pp. 6–7). We explore intersections and cultural flows through ongoing dialogue and artistic collaboration. Therefore, we proposed our research questions: How does collaborative art practice among graduate art educators promote ED&I through CSP? How does CSP influence art educators' future curriculum development?

As art educators and artists arriving from mainland China and Taiwan, we are adapting to a new cultural environment while still being influenced by our deep, lifelong connection to Eastern aesthetics and cultural heritage. As teaching assistants at The University of Arizona, we enthusiastically integrated our cultural heritage into our classroom. However, our expectations soon collided with reality as students' reactions revealed cultural barriers and stereotypes. Transitioning from being part of the cultural majority in our home countries to being in the minority in American society made us feel vulnerable and uncertain about our evolving identities. This challenge shaped our journey and motivated us to engage in meaningful intercultural dialogue.

In October 2024, we organized a 3D pop-up Chinese landscape painting workshop as part of the Asian Art and Visual Culture general education course designed for 1st-year nonart majors. The workshop introduced the history of Chinese landscape painting. During hands-on activities, students showed interest

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in the history and materials behind this art form. They explored the philosophical concepts and historical evolution of Chinese landscape painting by incorporating ink, calligraphy brushes, and 3D paper-folding techniques. This approach helped students grasp the fundamentals of Chinese traditional principles, including layered composition, multiple perspectives, and unique aesthetics.

When we reviewed student feedback, we encountered critical perspectives, such as "I have never been to Asia, so I cannot picture what a Chinese landscape should look like. I am not sure how it connects to my life" (Student A, personal communication, September 26, 2024). This response prompted us to initiate a reflective and collaborative artistic project, exploring ways to integrate Chinese traditional art forms with the cultural and natural landscapes of Arizona. Through this transformative experiment, we aimed to deepen students' understanding of Chinese art and its cultural significance, encourage them to express their cultural identities, and foster an appreciation for diverse backgrounds.

## Promoting ED&I Through CSP

The theoretical foundation of this study is rooted in CSP. Paris (2021) argued that culture is dynamic and fluid. It encompasses both the historical aspects of heritage and contemporary community life, evolving alongside the cultural expressions of younger generations.

Building on this perspective, CSP also challenges the dominant education framework centered on Whiteness and colonial perspectives, advocating for the preservation and growth of cultural diversity. Originally introduced by Paris (2021) and developed from Ladson-Billings's (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy, CSP values students' cultural backgrounds while supporting their ability to retain cultural practices throughout the learning process, fostering cross-cultural understanding and

integration. As Paris and Alim (2017) asserted, CSP positions the classroom as a space for maintaining, respecting, and continuing diverse cultural practices, ultimately fostering transformative learning.

ED&I theory emphasizes showcasing artists from diverse cultural backgrounds, challenging the Eurocentric focus on figures like Picasso, Rembrandt, and Van Gogh and broadening students' perspectives (Kraehe & Acuff, 2021). Moreover, ED&I is about "thinking critically, taking action, and intentionally creating change for a more inclusive classroom" (Hunter-Doniger, 2024, p. 13). Building on these principles, CSP further extends ED&I in art education.

CSP promotes preserving, innovating, and integrating culture, closely aligning with ED&I principles to advance inclusivity and challenge biases. Integrating both approaches helps dismantle Eurocentric dominance in traditional art education and pedagogy. Both frameworks emphasize the fluidity of culture and encourage educators to incorporate diverse cultural expressions into their teaching. This approach enables students to honor their cultural identities while understanding and embracing those of others.

In this study, we applied the CSP framework while following ED&I principles to support our students' learning and our own collaborative artmaking as educators. While we guided students in exploring culturally sustaining approaches through their classroom projects, we also engaged in a reflective, collaborative art project between the two authors to examine our evolving identities as art educators. This project retained elements of traditional artistic expression while embracing modern and localized interpretations. Specifically, we combined the philosophical and aesthetic concepts of Chinese landscape painting with the local environment and community life in Arizona. Through this process, we encouraged open dialogue, encouraged flexible thinking, and promoted a more inclusive and sustainable approach to art education.

## Concepts and Historical Development of Chinese Landscape Painting

Chinese landscape painting, or *Shan shui* (mountain-water painting), captures the profound relationships in nature, evolving from decorative uses in the Han dynasty to a significant art form during the Tang and Song dynasties. Central to this evolution is Xie He's six laws of painting (六法), a milestone in Chinese painting history for its lasting influence on creation, evaluation, and appreciation (Wang, 2021, p. 234). The six laws include:

1. Spirit Resonance (气韵生动): creating lifelike, rhythmic vitality;
2. Bone Method (骨法用笔): building structure through brushwork;
3. Correspondence to the Object (应物象形): portraying forms as they are;
4. Suitability of Colors (随类赋彩): applying color appropriately;
5. Composition (经营位置): making artistic arrangements; and

6. Transmission by Copying (传移模写): copying classical masterpieces (Turner, 2009, p. 110; Wang, 2021, pp. 235–236).

During the Song dynasty, landscape painting reached peaks of realism and idealism, becoming recognized as a fine art (Bush & Shih, 2012). Song painters faithfully "rendered 'the outer form of things,' the visual qualities of the thing painted" (Silbergeld, 2015, p. 477). Artists like Fan Kuan and Ma Yuan created majestic landscapes, reflecting balance and harmony through composition and brushwork. In later periods, such as the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, landscape painting emphasized personal expression, individualism, and innovation, especially in literati art. Even in the 20th century, painters like Qi Baishi and Wu Guanzhong blended Xie He's guidelines with modern styles. Leung (2021) noted that "Chinese landscape painting depicts the outward appearance of nature but is equally concerned with the movements of the energies that infuse the natural world with life" (p. 210).

Fuguan Xu (1991) described the "spirit of Chinese art" (title) as a spiritual fusion of daily life with the natural landscape, aligning with Jullien's (2009) notion in *The Great Image Has No Form* of expressing thoughts through formlessness in landscape painting. Chinese landscape painting emphasizes the interaction of contrasting forces—mountains' verticality against water's horizontality, solidity versus fluidity, and permanence versus change. This dynamic interplay portrays nature as an evolving process rather than a static object.

Northern Song painter Guo Xi, in *Instructions on Painting Landscapes* (2010), detailed the "three distances" (三远)—high (高), deep (深), and level (平)—guiding viewers to perceive infinite possibilities within a frame. Viewpoints shift fluidly—distant gazes, close-ups, overhead views, and long perspectives—capturing a diverse and ever-changing field of vision. This philosophy (Chai, 2021; You, 2005) elevates Chinese landscape painting beyond technical skill, reflecting harmony between heaven and earth. It embodies continuity, symbolism, and the unique spirit of Chinese art.

In our Chinese landscape painting workshop, we included Fan Kuan's *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* (Figure 1), a masterpiece from the Northern Song dynasty. This painting was used to introduce students to traditional composition techniques and philosophical concepts. It exemplifies the three-distance method (high, deep, and level distance), creating a grand spatial order typical of Song landscape art. The towering central peak dominates the scene, while textured brushstrokes add solidity to the mountains. Layers of mist-shrouded forests and a winding path guide the viewer's eye, embodying the traditional Chinese ideal of a space that is not only viewable but also livable and wanderable (可游、可望、可居).

In Figure 1, we added the white contour lines to highlight the layered spatial composition of the painting and to help students better understand its structural depth. Beyond its technical mastery, this painting reflects the philosophy of harmony between humanity and nature (天人合一). The contrast between vast mountains and tiny human figures emphasizes nature's grandeur



**Figure 1.** Fan Kuan, *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* (ca. 960–1279) (Song dynasty). Ink and light colors on silk, 81.3 × 40.7 in.

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**Using A4 paper, Chinese ink, and brushes, they experimented with Xie He’s six principles and Guo Xi’s three-distance perspective method. Students engaged in layered composition and created depth by using folding and tearing techniques.**

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and humanity’s humility. The interplay of mist and solid forms (虚实相生) adds poetic ambiguity, inviting contemplation.

### **Initial Curricular Practice**

Building on the 3D pop-up Chinese landscape painting workshop, we guided students in applying traditional Chinese artistic principles using a hands-on activity. Using A4 paper, Chinese ink, and brushes, they experimented with Xie He’s six principles and Guo Xi’s three-distance perspective method. Students engaged in layered composition and created depth by using folding and tearing techniques. This hands-on exploration (Figure 2) helped them connect artistic techniques with cultural meaning. We invited students to share their perspectives, which fostered critical reflection and dialogue and provided insights into their creative process and interpretations of Chinese landscape aesthetics.

### **Students’ Artworks and Critical Feedback**

Students found engaging with traditional Chinese painting both enjoyable and challenging. While they appreciated the creative process, many struggled with controlling the brush and ink, particularly in achieving depth and precision. As one student said, “Using the ink and brushes to create dimensions was harder than I expected, which made me appreciate the skill involved” (Student B, personal communication, September 26, 2024). Despite these difficulties, they greatly admired the technical expertise required.



**Figure 2. Students' artworks, 2024. Chinese ink paintings. Photo courtesy of the authors.**

However, some felt the workshop focused more on technique than the cultural significance of Chinese art, making it feel like a skill-based exercise rather than an immersive experience. A student said, “We enjoyed the art project, but we wish there were simpler techniques that would allow us to have a more immersive experience and connect more deeply with the artistic and cultural aspects of Chinese painting” (Student C, personal communication, September 26, 2024).

Additionally, students expressed a desire for greater creative flexibility. One stated, “It would be cool to connect it to local landscapes.” Students were interested in incorporating personal or local elements, such as Arizona landscapes, but they were uncertain whether such modifications were encouraged. Another student stated, “The project could be more open and creative” (Student D, personal communication, September 26, 2024). They suggested that allowing for more open-ended artistic interpretation would make the project more engaging and personally meaningful.

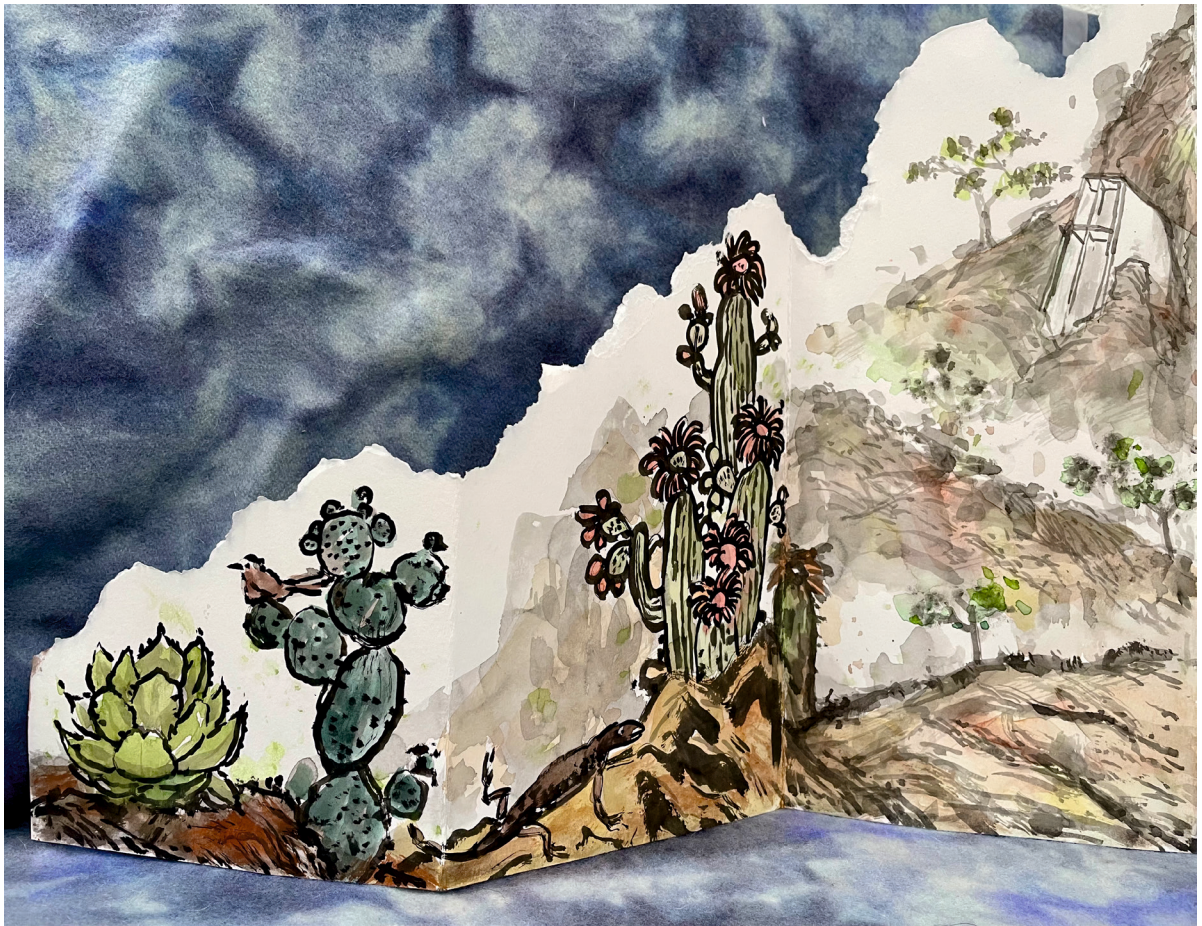
### **Art Educators' Collaborative Artmaking and Pedagogical Reflections**

Inspired by the students' feedback and reflections from our workshops, we, the two authors, initiated our own collaborative art project to explore further the pedagogical and cultural implications of our teaching practice. In this collaborative process, each of us created four independent yet interconnected images, presenting the natural landscapes of Arizona within a single body of work (Figures 3a–c). This collective visual series highlights the region's unique natural beauty.

Through this process, we found that creating interrelated artworks allows us to communicate ideas through visual elements and emotional expression. This fosters connection in cultural exchange and demonstrates the power of cross-cultural dialogue. However, we also realized that teaching Chinese landscape painting techniques alone does not equate to practicing CSP. CSP goes beyond the transmission of traditional techniques—it focuses on creating a learning space where students can connect these techniques to their own lived experiences, reinterpret cultural meanings, and express multiple identities. Simply reproducing brushwork or compositional methods risks turning cultural knowledge into static heritage. In contrast, CSP encourages dynamic dialogue, reciprocity, and critical reflection. This realization prompted us to rethink our teaching methods and shift from simply demonstrating tradition to co-constructing meaning with students through artmaking and discussion.

Informed by the research of Paris (2021) and Paris and Alim (2017), we identified three core issues in our reflection process. These include sustaining cultural practices, embracing cultural fluidity, and engaging in critical self-reflection, which together inform our understanding and application of CSP. These insights have encouraged us to go beyond our initial instructional goals and engage more deeply with students' cultural identities and sense of belonging.

We found that artistic creation can be an important means for students to express their cultural identities, allowing their cultural heritage to be acknowledged and sustained. In addition, CSP requires encouraging both educators and students to reflect on their cultural practices and discern which aspects are worth



Figures 3a–3c. Collaborative art project, 2024. Chinese ink and watercolor, 15 × 21.3 in.

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**By observing their artworks and engaging in critical dialogue, we actively participated in collaborative creation and reflection. This laid a foundation for future curriculum design that incorporates the local cultural characteristics of Arizona.**

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sustaining and innovating, which ones might be oppressive or restrictive, or which might need transformation.

Building on the insights gained from our collaborative artmaking, we extended our reflection to our teaching practice. Initially, we intended to focus solely on teaching traditional Chinese landscape painting techniques. However, as the course progressed, we began to question: Is this merely the transmission of tradition, or can it also serve as a medium for students to express their cultural identities? Students' feedback prompted us to adjust our approach, making the curriculum more inclusive.

### **Course Summary and Future Prospects**

Through this teaching practice and collaborative experience, we have come to understand deeply that art education is not merely a process of technical instruction. Instead, it serves as a platform for cultural exchange, reinforcement of self-identity, and the promotion of critical thinking.

Looking ahead, we aim to apply this approach to a wider range of courses. Our goal is to create inclusive, interactive learning environments where students can actively exchange cultural perspectives, experiment with diverse artistic media, and learn from each other's experiences. Additionally, we plan to investigate further collaborative artmaking as a pedagogical strategy that brings together learners from different cultural backgrounds to cocreate, negotiate meaning, and appreciate multiple worldviews. This helps nurture globally minded art learners and creators. Further, we seek to emphasize cultural identity expression in future curriculum design, encouraging students to use artistic creation as a way to express themselves and engage in social dialogue. In doing so, we hope to refine our teaching practices, ensuring they embody the principles of CSP and serve as an ongoing exploration of our cultural identity and belonging in this new environment.

### **Conclusion**

In this study, we highlighted several important aspects. First, in the initial workshop, we guided students to explore the cultural background and techniques of traditional Chinese landscape painting. This helped challenge the Western-centered perspective often present in art education. At the same time, students had the

opportunity to experiment with a variety of artistic media and forms of expression. By observing their artworks and engaging in critical dialogue, we actively participated in collaborative creation and reflection. This laid a foundation for future curriculum design that incorporates the local cultural characteristics of Arizona. These efforts not only enriched students' learning experiences but also reflected the influence of local culture, fostered cross-cultural understanding, and deepened cultural connections.

As art educators, we recognize the importance of maintaining and expressing our own cultural identities and rights. For this reason, we intentionally incorporated the principles of ED&I into the early stages of our workshop design. However, when we reflected on the workshop experience, we realized that focusing solely on our own perspectives was not enough. Listening to students' voices, understanding their cultural backgrounds, and integrating CSP into our curriculum design became essential to achieving reciprocity in education and fostering cultural coexistence. Drawing on Paris's (2012) concept of CSP, we continuously explored the fluidity and evolution of community cultural practices while also engaging in self-reflection and critical examination of teaching content.

Building on this experience, we encourage more art educators to stay open-minded in collaborative artmaking and curriculum design. By sharing perspectives and exchanging ideas, we can create new possibilities that transform art education into a meaningful practice of connection and transformation. We view culture as a dynamic process—one that requires educators to understand the cultural contexts of schools and student communities while intentionally incorporating local culture into course content. This approach ensures that art education stays relevant to students' lived experiences and supports the development of cross-cultural visual arts curricula rooted in local cultural identities. ■

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