

# **Until the Mountain Is Covered by the Snow**

by

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## Declaration of Committee

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## **Abstract**

Growing up in the 90s and inspired by the philosophy and aesthetics of an 'East meets West' art education led by a group of New Confucian exiles in British Hong Kong, my practice is an ongoing negotiation of Hong Kong's reality coinciding with its drastic social changes over 30 years which is reflected in my practice a result of my homeland's decolonisation from constitutional monarchy to Britain and China. Drawing on diary entries since I left Hong Kong for Vancouver in 2022 and reflecting on the conversation between Yang Lian and Gao Xingjian, two Chinese writers in exile, I ask how self-exile has altered my perception of my relationship to land/home, and how this has transformed my thoughts on the idea of "landscape." Taking my painting "Mountain de-bonding" as an example, I examine how the work has changed from its original plan to its realization in Vancouver.

**Keywords:** self-exile; Hong Kong diaspora; landscape; Shan-Shui; transnational

## **Dedication**

To my parents, wife and kids. Hong Kong and Vancouver, Canada

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor Judy Radul, a knowledgeable and insightful artist who gave me the strength and support; Laura Marks, a passionate and wonderful scholar who encourages me even before I come Vancouver; Faculty of School of Contemporary Art and Simon Fraser University offers me a place where I could consolidate my thoughts in a such difficult time in my life; Hong Kong, the city where inspired me most and Vancouver, a beautiful city offers me a breathing space within the chaotic world.

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**Defence Statement:**

*Until the Mountain Is Covered by the Snow, 2024*

Tung Pang Lam



We were born into a given history to explore the unknown land.

Tung Pang Lam  
Vancouver, Canada, Jan 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024

I was born in 1978 in the British colony of Hong Kong. This was the year that *China* opened its door to the world through Deng Xiaoping's new Open Door Policy, changing the nation's focus from "class struggle" to "economic construction." From the time the Communist Party took power in 1949 and embraced the Yan'an Policy on Art and Literature, until the end of Cultural Revolution in 1976, "artists were repeatedly re-educated and required to indicate their own political stance, so that art could be made a tool of political tasks."<sup>1</sup> Writers who lived through the Cultural Revolution then 1989 Tiananmen Square incident in China and eventually went into exile, both Yang Lian (b. 1955) and Gao Xingjian (b. 1940) expressed the need to free themselves from constraints placed on the individual. In their conversation "What We Gained from Exile" in 1993<sup>2</sup>, they criticized the collectivistic social environment for its effect on independent thought and individual freedom: "this then hinders and even destroys the internal connections between the 'self'... Even to say 'intellectual', for instance, in Chinese – literally, 'knowledgeable social element (知識份子)' – emphasises the 'social element' in knowledge. So today, doesn't everyone – especially Chinese writers in the diaspora – have an inescapable duty to take language and turn it upon the self, the individual; to use it to interrogate the self?"<sup>3</sup>

After entering exile, Gao Xingjian stated that "...writing is for the self and for one's own pleasure. I regard writing as the winning of a kind of freedom, a kind of luxury, and so I'm

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<sup>1</sup> Lü, Peng. *Pure Views* = 中國新繪畫. Milano: Charta, 2011. P.16-17

<sup>2</sup> The conversation is published in German: Gao, Xingjian, and Lian Yang. *Was hat uns das Exil gebracht?: ein Gespräch zwischen Gao Xingjian und Yang Lian über chinesische Literatur*. Berlin: DAAD Berliner Künstlerprogramm, 2001. French: Gao, Xingjian, and Lian Yang. *Visite à Gao Xingjian et Yang Lian: conversation*. Paris: Caractères, 2004. Italian: Gao, Xingjian et al. *Il pane dell'esilio: la letteratura cinese prima e dopo Tiananmen*. Milano: Medusa, 2001. Chinese: 楊煉. 發出自己的天問：楊煉詩與文論. 釀出版, 2015. Part of the conversation translated into English by Ben Carrdus is found on Yang Lian's website: [https://yanglian.net/yanglian\\_en/talk.html](https://yanglian.net/yanglian_en/talk.html). The one I refer and cited is based on the Chinese Edition. (2015)

<sup>3</sup> The Language of Exile Gao Xingjian & Yang Lian, Selected part of What We Gained from Exile, a dialogue between Gao Xingjian and Yang Lian, *Yang Lian*. [http://yanglian.net/yanglian\\_en/works.html](http://yanglian.net/yanglian_en/works.html)

even more aware of the approach to language.”<sup>4</sup> in late 1970s, a movement called misty poets because their work has been officially denounced as "obscure", "misty", or "hazy" poetry, one of the important poets, Yang Lian noted: “in the early 1980s, for example, with the emergence of Misty Poetry, no matter how immature it might seem, the biggest difference from previous poetry was the attempt to describe personal feelings in a more individualistic language.”<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to Yang and Gao, who had to fight their way towards a language of the self and a place of individual creative freedom, I was born to “unsacrifice freedom” which is a freedom for which I did not sacrifice, and which I understood (at that time) to be uncontested. As an artist in the colonial Hong Kong of the late 70s, freedom of expression and art for personal pleasure is never a question and I never have to fight for.

### **Hong Kong is the mist of China**

During art school, I neither had to develop art for political ends, nor face the demand that art should serve the interests of national propaganda. The self-awareness, individualism and freedom of expression I experienced were “unsacrifice freedom” I took them for granted from the start, when I first studied Chinese Art at New Asia College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

In 1949, a group of leading intellectuals known as the New Confucians, including Ch'ien Mu, Zhang Pijie and Tang Chun-I, fled to Hong Kong from mainland China. They believed that “traditional Chinese culture on the mainland was being eroded” and established the New Asia College in Hong Kong as a "site of education" dedicated to preserving Chinese traditional culture. The guiding principle of this educational effort to preserve Chinese culture is known as the "New Asia Spirit.”<sup>6</sup> Concurrently, Hong Kong had become a crucial hub for bridging Eastern and Western cultures. Ch'ien Mu, the founder of the College, said

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<sup>4</sup> The Language of Exile Gao Xingjian & Yang Lian, Selected part of What We Gained from Exile, a dialogue between Gao Xingjian and Yang Lian, *Yang Lian*. [http://yanglian.net/yanglian\\_en/works.html](http://yanglian.net/yanglian_en/works.html)

<sup>5</sup> 楊煉. 流亡使我們獲得了什麼?. 發出自己的天問: 楊煉詩與文論. 釀出版, 2015, 頁 207

<sup>6</sup> 區志堅, et al., editors. 北學南移: 港台文史哲溯源. 文化卷. BOD 一版., 秀威資訊科技股份有限公司, 2015. 頁 242

“[the school] integrated [the] scholarly spirit of the Song and Ming academies into the tutorial system of western universities. [With] Humanity as its basis, the College also aimed to facilitate cultural exchanges between East and West, and to advocate for peace and the well-being of the human race.”<sup>7</sup> The New Asia College and the New Confucians was my earliest exposure to ideas of exile, ancient Chinese art and philosophy and cultural hybridity.

In four years of university life, I learned both art practice and its history, spanning ancient art, European and Chinese Art, and early twentieth century American Art. It was not possible to learn any one subject in great depth, but we swam freely in the vast “ocean” of knowledge and possibility. When I used the form of Chinese Art, I was never motivated by the impulse to assert the glory of Chinese Art. Instead, my use of the art form stemmed from an appreciation of the aesthetic and philosophy that I gleaned through my studies. Looking back now, it is apparent that the “unsacrifice freedom” I experienced had been continually challenged by Hong Kong’s political situation from the 1980s to 2020.

I was the first generation in my family to be born in Hong Kong. My childhood memory consists of visiting relatives in mainland China three to four times a year, each trip marked by two-day non-stop bus rides full of shocking sceneries through the window. I was shocked by the people and landscape because I assumed China is where my culture is rooted but it seemed to be a completely different place. Slogans are on wall and billboard everywhere, they speak different language, write Chinese in different way and the social system is also different.

China was a place that was so close, and yet so far.

Chinese was also a culture that was so close, and yet so far for me.

Compared to the New Confucians, I am more critical of my relationship with Chinese culture. Yang Lian once said that “There is a logical relationship that must be reversed: we used to believe that we were subordinate to a mother entity, such as our individual belonging to China, our language belonging to the Chinese literary tradition; in fact, this logical relationship should be the opposite, China is subordinate to each of us, without

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<sup>7</sup> 錢穆. 本院沿革、旨趣與概況. 新亞校刊. 創刊號第 1 期, 1952 年 6 月 1 日, 頁 24

living individuals, the so-called term "China" is just an empty term; likewise, without individualistic literary creations, the so-called Chinese cultural tradition has no foundation, it is also an empty term. Therefore, the entire relationship between cause and effect must be reversed and reconstructed.”<sup>8</sup> I read Yang’s statement as a call for decolonization, changing the narrative relationship between the individual and the nation to establish the individual as the centre or the point of origin. This is antithetical to the National Security Law introduced in Hong Kong in 2020, which (over)emphasized the nation, and sought to place the nation on top of the individual. This is but one moment in a long history of tension between Hong Kong and China stretching from the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984 to June 4, 1989, the National Education Program (2012), the Umbrella Revolution and Occupy Central (2014), to the 2019 Pro-Democracy Protests, each step in the escalating the tension led me closer to self-exile.

The ongoing tension between Hong Kong and China has led me to question my practice, which was inspired by Chinese Art. In *The Distant Mountain*, James Cahill interpreted Joseph Levenson’s idea as follows: “in intellectual and cultural history, *tension* is a condition of health and...the periods of greatest creativity are those in which the issues are clearly defined and carry urgent meaning for the people engaged with them.”<sup>9</sup>

Tension is always present between our “given history” (the material and social conditions that are given to us as a result of the accumulation of many historic moments) and our individual will or desire. When that tension become insurmountable, the idea of exile emerges. After the National Security Law was passed in 2020, I came to realize that whether or not I left Hong Kong, I was already in self-exile due to the irresolvable tension between my ‘self’ and the totalitarian state that Hong Kong had become under Chinese rule.

Comparing to this new experience for my generation, Gao and Yang, describing their experience with totalitarianism and exile in their conversation—in doing so they emerge clearly as my intellectual forerunners. Indeed, if we were to examine history, both ancient

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<sup>8</sup> 楊煉, 朱又可. 被偷走的骨灰甕：楊煉文學訪談錄, 2020, 頁 101

<sup>9</sup> Cahill, James. *The Distant Mountains: Chinese Painting of the Late Ming Dynasty, 1570-1644*. 1st ed., Weatherhill, 1982. p.3

and modern, domestic and foreign, which *intellectual creator* has not been some kind of exile? “Whether one is abroad or remains in what is considered their own land, *an intellectual creator* must actively create their own exile, distancing themselves from the original entity they belonged to (whether it is called homeland or mother tongue).”<sup>10</sup>

## Language in Exile

As an exile in Paris, Gao Xingjian continued experimenting with language in his writing, “When other factors no longer exist, you’re left facing only your language. I’d say a writer has a responsibility only to his language; he is not responsible for the ‘motherland’, or the ‘people’.”<sup>11</sup> For Yang Lian, “the inherent characteristics of the Chinese language, such as syntactic freedom, flexible parts of speech, the interchangeability of tense and person, and even the possibility of omission, not only pose challenges for translation but also provide opportunities for contemporary Chinese writers. They allow us to explore ways to express the human existence through them.”<sup>12</sup>

The challenge for visual language does not come from translation, but how does the presented visual experience connect to one’s existence? An image speaks for itself; it can arouse emotions, questions or critiques without the need for translation. Culture may be a boundary in visual interpretation. But isn’t landscape a common language for humanity? Isn’t the boundary of culture in fluidity and unfixed? Even the idea of landscape could be very different from one culture to another, but the syntactic freedom and flexibility is also found in the language of Landscape Painting. If Hong Kong is the mist of China, can I further elaborate that landscape is the mist of different cultures, which exists everywhere and in-between?

In Chinese culture, landscape painting, more specifically Shan Shui (literally “Mountain” and “Water”), has been the dominant subject of Chinese painting ever since it emerged

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<sup>10</sup> 楊煉, 朱又可. 被偷走的骨灰甕：楊煉文學訪談錄, 2020, 頁 101

<sup>11</sup> The Language of Exile Gao Xingjian & Yang Lian, Selected part of What We Gained from Exile, a dialogue between Gao Xingjian and Yang Lian, *Yang Lian*. [yanglian.net/yanglian\\_en/works.html](http://yanglian.net/yanglian_en/works.html).

<sup>12</sup> 楊煉. 流亡使我們獲得了什麼？. 發出自己的天問：楊煉詩與文論. 釀出版, 2015, 頁 213

as the pre-eminent art form of the Northern Sung (960-1279) period.<sup>13</sup> Some argue that the idea of Shan Shui was established as early as in the literature of the Tang dynasty (618–907)<sup>14</sup>. Many scholars have written on the subject of Shan Shui from a wide range of perspectives, for instance, the philosophical connection between Shan Shui and Daoist, Confucian and Buddhist thought. As an artist, I would like to offer my personal perspective.

I started exploring Shan Shui when I returned to Hong Kong from London in 2006. I found that reading Chinese Shan Shui paintings was a way to soothe my spirits amidst a chaotic world, that fabricating a landscape was a simple joy much like a child imagining a playscape in the intimate confines of one's home. I spent several years in the New Asia College Ch'ien Mu Library, categorizing and extracting a few thousand images from thousands of Chinese paintings. This formed the database of my language, the language of Shan Shui painting. But Shan Shui is not about the images or the superficial style; there is always a reason behind why and how the painting was composed.

In 2015, as I continued developing my Shan Shui data base through my research, I found 213 sacred mountains, each delineated in black lines, forming a semiotic model of traditional mountain ink paintings illustrated in *Mountains and Rivers* canon under the *Geography* section of the seminal work, *The Complete Classics Collection of Ancient China* (古今圖書集成, 1725), the largest woodblock-printed encyclopedia of premodern China.<sup>15</sup> The encyclopedia has four different prints.<sup>16</sup> My research was based on a reduced size edition of the 1934 text published by Zhonghua Shuju Press (中華書局) in Shanghai collected by the library at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. I planned to compose a painting of a single huge mountain based on the 213 mountains from the encyclopaedia. These were the images of all the mountains described by the last Chinese Empire. Now, I wanted to bond them together. This single image of one mountain would confront anyone standing in front of it with its vast tradition and history. I imagined the

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<sup>13</sup> Fong, Wen. *Summer Mountains: the Timeless Landscape / Wen Fong*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1975. p.9

<sup>14</sup> See. "Art into Landscape and The Language Takes Shape" by Sullivan, Michael. *Symbols of Eternity: The Art of Landscape Painting in China*. Stanford University Press, 1979. pp.19-39

<sup>15</sup> It contained 10,000 volumes, divided in six parts with 32 "canons" dealing with 6,117 themes, covering works on science, geography, history, philosophy, literature, politics, economics, art, education and more.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.chinaknowledge.de/Literature/Science/gujintushujicheng.html>

scale of the work to be at least H4m x W10m (13x32ft) where the audience, including myself, would have to look up at the image of one huge mountain. The planned title was *Mountain-Overlapping* (疊山圖).

James Cahill noted that "...landscape imagery in China, from beginning to end, is an open signifier into which a diversity of meanings can be fitted, with appropriate alterations and additions, often including inscriptions that clarify the particular purpose to which the nature imagery is being put on this particular occasion. Sweeping claims about the nature and origin of Chinese landscape representations, then, can be of only limited application with regard to actual works of art."<sup>17</sup> My question is: how can what once inspired me make sense in my current understanding of the world? While I was expanding my data base of Shan Shui, the tension and conflict between Hong Kong and China intensified. In 2012, the announcement of a national education program led tens of thousands of people to protest outside government headquarters.<sup>18</sup> In 2014, the Umbrella movement and Occupy Central unfolded across Hong Kong.<sup>19</sup> In 2019, there were anti-extradition protests and crackdowns, followed by the introduction of the National Security Law in 2020.<sup>20</sup> As the tension built, my questioning intensified.

I once understood Landscape (Painting) as "Land" for "escape", however the world around me has only become increasingly chaotic, and simple pleasures have become difficult to find. Even more importantly, I am questioning my satisfaction with simple pleasures, which no longer seemed to reflect the world in which I am living.

China has thousands year of history and no shortage of examples of how artists dealt with the chaos of the world, especially during the change of dynasties. Like The Four Great Monk painters during the late Ming to early Qing dynasty (late 16<sup>th</sup> to early 17<sup>th</sup> century) –

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<sup>17</sup> Barnhart, and Barnhart, Richard M. *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting* / Richard M. Barnhart et Al. Yale University Press; Foreign Languages Press, 1997. P.8

<sup>18</sup> More details: Wong, Joshua, and Ai Weiwei. "ACT III: THE THREAT TO GLOBAL DEMOCRACY." *Unfree Speech*, Penguin Publishing Group, 2020.pp15-34

<sup>19</sup> Law, Nathan, and Evan Fowler. Chapter 3, resistance and civil society, *Freedom: How We Lose It and How We Fight Back*. The Experiment, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> For details of political change in Hong Kong, read: Davis, Michael C. *Making Hong Kong China: The Rollback of Human Rights and the Rule of Law*. Published by the Association for Asian Studies, 2020.

*Hongren, Kuncan, Bada Shanren, and Shitao* – those artists are known as *yimin* (遺民) painters, both their life and painting style responded to drastic changes and expressed the idea of reclusion as a form of resistance to the regime through Shan Shui. The idea of reclusion can be dated back to Zou Si (253-307) and Lu Ji (261-303), two acclaimed literary figures during that tumultuous time. The culture of discouraged political engagement led to the development of an interest in Nature, and an appreciation for landscape as subject for poetry and the symbolic meaning of reclusion: “by depicting trees growing up-side down and cliffs suspended in the air, they could imply that they lived in a world that had been turned on its head.”<sup>21</sup>

“Against our recent social backdrop, the conception of Chinese painting and Chinese Shan Shui appear increasingly blurry and abstract to me. Diverse landscapes are bred from diverse climates. Art and nature are intrinsically innocent. It is the urge to control free thinking that taints and convicts the landscape. Let us set our landscape free, let us breathe and think freely!”

Tung Pang Lam  
Hong Kong, 3 May  
2022

This is how I found my connection to Shan Shui at the same time that I felt I was losing my city, Hong Kong. I have become the *yimin* (遺民) of my city.

I never thought that the once freest and most contemporary Asian City, Hong Kong, would one day become a totalitarian state. The oppression came from once the so close and so far, China.

### **Mountain de-bonding**

“The broken landscape formed by the broken world inspired the broken language, spoke by the broken strokes...”

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<sup>21</sup> Barnhart, and Barnhart, Richard M. *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting / Richard M. Barnhart et Al.* Yale University Press; Foreign Languages Press, 1997. p.252



Tung Pang Lam  
Vancouver, Canada, 2024

After nine years, I rediscovered the concept of *Mountain-Overlapping* while relocating myself to Vancouver.

The mountainous landscape I have created with a charcoal and ink on plywood is like a mirror for my journey across the Pacific. This journey, with the awareness of self-exile or a walk away from home, started with my question to the culture that once influenced me. As I wrote:

“Two months before my departure, in my studio in Hong Kong, I developed a new visual language of charcoal and ink that foresaw the sense of losing language, which I called “the broken stroke” as my language was breaking down and disintegrating. Compared to the landscape paintings that I did before, which were inspired by the style of Chinese Ink Shan Shui (Landscape), this body of works are composed by broken strokes instead of constructive lines. The subject matter landscape is harder to recognize as a result of collapsing of lines, like flakes, covering each piece.

In that moment, I profoundly questioned the culture -- the Chinese culture -- that I was once deeply influenced by, but now found myself questioning ceaselessly as I experienced the terrible oppression by the so-called Chinese government. Should one separate the culture from the regime? And how? I found my body and mind falling apart.”

This strong sense of falling apart needed to be expressed in short and broken brushstrokes, some strokes as thin as a knife slicing the images of mountains. Instead of creating the single image of a mountain as planned in 2015, I then spread the 213 mountains along the wooden panels in 3 parts, each part composed by 12 pieces 2.4m H x 1m in W (8ft x 39.4ft). Part one of this work was completed in early 2024 and was shown at China Institute in New York City, Part 2 is what I have presented as my MFA Thesis work in July 2024, and Part 3 is still in development. Instead of looking up a giant monumental painting, it was expanded into a longer, immersive piece. I walk from one end to the other, as if writing with unrecognized short broken strokes along the mountain images. The time I spent on the surface are my questions to my culture: the mountains are being distorted,

broken apart. It is neither Shan Shui nor landscape, it is a movement between construction and deconstruction of the language I carried. Each stroke is against the projected mountain image, then the image of mountains is broken into flakes.

“For me, Shan Shui is not only a subject matter, it’s a verb, a verb related to the thinking process.”

Tung Pang Lam  
Vancouver, Canada, May 3, 2024

Yang Lian once said: “All our external wanderings are actually part of our inner journey.”<sup>22</sup> I would add that the inner journey must then be reconnected to the outer world by questions. This cycle of external wandering, inner journey, and outward questioning connects us to the world and generates the energy that propels us forward. I found my landscape once again nine years later on a distant shore. Every one of us may carry our own mountains and may, one day, break it.

Mountains form where two continental plates collide. Since both plates have a similar thickness and weight, neither one will sink under the other. Instead, they crumple and fold until the rocks are forced up to form a mountain range. As the plates continue to collide, mountains will get taller and taller.<sup>23</sup>

When self is colliding with others, “Mountains” are formed.

For this defense statement, I would like to end with a quote from Yang Lian:

I might write dark poetry, but in doing so, this is light.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> 楊煉, 朱又可. 被偷走的骨灰甕：楊煉文學訪談錄, 2020, 頁 151

<sup>23</sup> American Museum of Natural History. <https://www.amnh.org/explore/ology/earth/power-of-plate-tectonics/mountains>

<sup>24</sup> 楊煉, 朱又可. 被偷走的骨灰甕：楊煉文學訪談錄, 2020, 頁 101

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## Figures

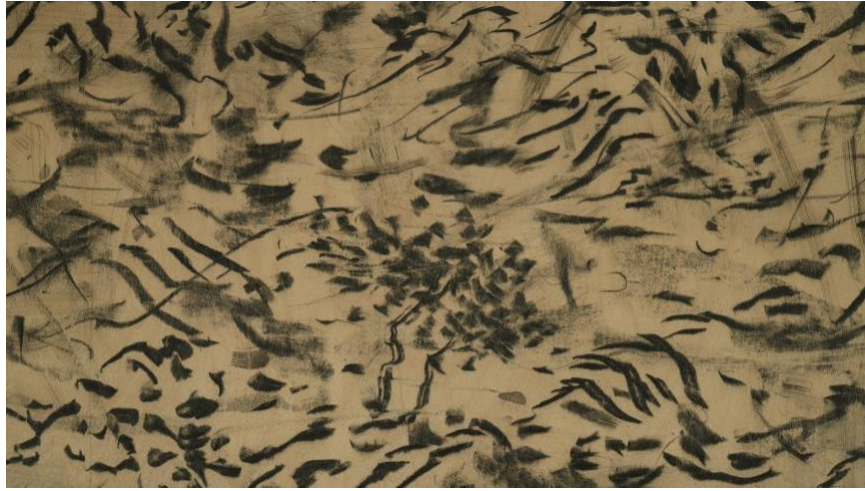


Figure 1 details of Mountains de-bounding(pt.2)



Figure 2 Installation view of Mountain de-bounding (pt.2) in graduation project: Studio Open.





Figure 3 Mountains de-bonding (pt1), China Institute, NYC, 2024

Artistic Research Data

- Chinese Painting
  - Chinese Landscape Ink Painting
- Japanese and Korean Ink Painting
- Indian Ink Painting
- Japanese Woodblock Prints
- Chinese Woodblock Prints
  - Chinese Landscape Woodblock Prints

欽定古今圖書集成  
方輿彙編山川典

一壘山圖

213 Mountains

Composed by  
213 Mountains

Figure 4 Original plan of the painting in 2015, called Mountain-Overlapping.



Figure 5 Illustrations in The Complete Classics Collection of Ancient China, (古今圖書集成), the 1934 version published by Zhonghua Shuju Press (中華書局)

**Appendix A: From Hong Kong to Vancouver, Self-exile in the rhythm of broken stroke**

**Tung Pang Lam**

**Professor: Eldritch Priest**

**CA812**

**December, 2023**

***Freedom is like Air, you can't see it until you lose it.***

*Tung Pang Lam, 2023*

*while sitting at David Lam Park, Vancouver, Canada*

## **Uproot**

In flight, one is rarely alone. Instead, you are accompanied by questions and self-doubt about the decision to leave and reasons to stay. Above all, there is the question of where you speak from when you have lost the ground beneath your feet. At least this was the case for me.

In 2022, at the age of 44, I came to Vancouver as a student and considering myself as “self-exile” to escape the increasingly impossible situation in post-2019, Communist-ruled Hong Kong. Since then, I have been haunted by what being in exile means for me and my art practice. In my search for answers, I found myself asking: ***How are artists shaped by cultural displacement? How do the conditions and experiences of exile shape their art, writing, and expression? How does non-native cultural immersion influence the mind—and, thereby, how the mind codifies experiences and reflections into physical representations? How might the transnational experience factor into the creative process of artists in exile?***

While trying to answer these questions, I thought of two Czechoslovakian authors, Milan Kundera (b.1929) and Ivan Klima (b.1931). Both writers lived through two totalitarian regimes—Nazism and Communism, but they made very different choices and lived very different lives after the Communist government came to power when they were in their forties. While they were both outspoken and insightful in their criticism of the Communist regime, the former chose exile in France and the latter remained in his homeland. Another novelist who came to my mind is Gao Xingjian (b. 1940, China), who moved to Bagnole, near Paris, France at the age of 47 as a political refugee. Formerly a party member, Gao is novelist, playwright, critic, painter, photographer, film director, and translator who in 2000 was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. After the 1989 massacre of protesters in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, Gao resigned his membership in the Chinese Communist Party. Responding to the popular Communist aphorism that 'art must be in service of



politics', "[Gao] has also written theoretical texts proposing not a major principle or ism, but the opposite, the absence of ism and a "cold" literature, free of all political or ideological influence."<sup>25</sup> I saw a kinship between myself and these three authors, who entered some form of exile after finding themselves at odds with Communist regimes in their forties and had to find a way to continue their artistic expression under vastly changed circumstances, and I decided to look to them in my exploration of exile in order to make sense of my own situation.

## Self-Exile

Throughout history, there have always been artists and writers in exile: from Chinese scholars who became hermits to escape the persecution of the imperial court, to European artists and intellectuals who made their way to America throughout the 19th and 20th centuries to escape authoritarian regimes.<sup>26</sup> Today, human displacement seems to be a norm rather than an exception around the world. According to the United Nations Human Rights Commission's *2023 Mid-Year Trends* report, the global population of displaced peoples reached 110 million by the end of June 2023,<sup>27</sup> and that number is still growing with the continuation of the Russian-Ukraine war, the Israel-Hamas war, and countless other conflicts all over the world that are overlooked because they are not front page news. The effect of this migratory trend has been so profound that Edward Said suggested that "Modern Western culture is in large part the work of exiles, emigres, refugees." (p.173).<sup>28</sup> The impact of exiled artists on culture has been well documented by scholars such as Sabine Eckmann in "Exile and Modernism: Theoretical and Methodological Reflections on the Exile of Artists in the 1930s and '40s" (2019), and important exhibitions such as *The Warmth of Other Suns: Stories of Global Displacement* (New York, 2019) and *Forced*

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<sup>25</sup> Dutrait, N. (2010). "Without ism" An Ism for One Man. *China perspectives*, 2010(2 (82)), pp.6–11.

<sup>26</sup> McCabe, Cynthia Jaffee., and Hirshhorn Museum Sculpture Garden. *The Golden Door : Artist-Immigrants of America, 1876-1976 / Text by Cynthia Jaffee McCabe ; Introduction by Daniel J. Boorstin*. Published for the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, by the Smithsonian Institution Press : paperback ed. for sale by the Supt. of Docs. U.S. Govt. Print. Off, 1976.).

<sup>27</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "2023 Mid-Year Trends." Produced by UNHCR, 25 October 2023.

<sup>28</sup> Said, Edward W. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Harvard University Press, 2001.

*Journeys: Artists in Exile in Britain c. 1933-45* (London, 2009). Among the many forms of displacement and migration, I am most interested in the figure of 'the exile' because I am now one of them in the aftermath of Hong Kong's 2019 Pro-Democracy Movement. As a practicing artist currently in exile, I have a deep personal interest in the relationship between expressive language and the experience of exile, and how this could relate to my own practice and way of being as a transnational subject.

So what do we mean by exile? According to Paul Allatson (2005), "most commonly exile is defined as banishment, a physical separation and a geographical dislocation from home enacted by a state's or a regime's legal system, and intended to prevent certain social actors or groups from initiating change at national or regime levels."<sup>29</sup> This is often the case for political exiles who face the possibility of persecution or arrest if they return to their homeland. There is also the possibility of internal exile, where the state "discriminate[s] against internal communities and individuals so they are exiled at home, their potential to disrupt or challenge the state's operations accordingly limited" (Naficy 1996). However, writing in 2016, Herlihy-Mera Jeffrey and Vamsi K. Koneru argued that exile can also be "nongeographic" but instead "philosophical and nonphysical," grounded in "the experience of otherness."<sup>30</sup> In other words, exile does not necessarily need to involve physical displacement; it can be a state of mind.

*"any kind of spiritual life at all is directed in the end toward freedom. That's why it [the Communist regime] did not hesitate to forbid practically all Czech culture"*<sup>31</sup>

Ivan Klima

I describe myself as a self-exile because no one made me leave my hometown of Hong Kong, but I felt I had to leave. In this way, self-exile is a mix of internal exile and physical exile. My departure from Hong Kong after 2019 is a voluntary exile in the sense that I was not actively banished or pushed out by the state. In fact, many friends tried to point out

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<sup>29</sup> Paul Allatson, and Jo McCormack. "Introduction: Exile and Social Transformation." *Portal* (Sydney, N.S.W.), vol. 2, no. 1, 2005, p.3

<sup>30</sup> Herlihy-Mera, Jeffrey and Vamsi K. Koneru. "A Logic of Exile: Cultural Distance and the Plasticity of the Mind." *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, vol. 18 no. 1, 2016, p. 1-6.

<sup>31</sup> Klima, Ivan, and Philip Roth. "A Conversation in Prague." *New York Review of Books* 37, no. 6 (12 April 1990), p.14-22.

that landscape paintings were not political and were unlikely to be censored under the national security law.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, under this new law which came into effect on June 30, 2020 after being passed unilaterally by the Chinese Communist Party, “virtually anything could be deemed a threat to ‘national security’.” Shortly after the law was passed, “[p]eople were arrested for possessing flags, stickers and banners with political slogans. Police and officials have also claimed that slogans, T-shirts, songs and pieces of white paper could endanger national security and lead to criminal prosecution.”<sup>33</sup> The city I knew disappeared and turned into something so completely different that somehow, without going anywhere, people in Hong Kong had already become exiles in their hometown, myself included. Objectively speaking, no one was telling me to leave. Yet if you cannot breathe at home, you have no choice but to flee.

### **Hong Kong: my inspiration of Hybridity and Freedom**

Said (2001) observed that: “Seeing ‘the entire world as foreign land’ makes possible originality of vision. Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is contrapuntal” (186). In practical terms, I came to understand what Said describes as “the plurality of vision” as the gap between two languages. However, by languages I am not only referring to the written and verbal language, but all the tools for communication and expression that provokes the mind and draws attention to the parallels between two or more sides.

I learned and was inspired by this sense of hybridity, fluidity, and freedom in my hometown, Hong Kong, which also formed the foundation of my practice.

Before being returned to China in 1997, Hong Kong was once a British Colony. China was forced to cede Hong Kong island to Britain after the First Opium War in 1842, and the

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<sup>32</sup> *Hong Kong national security law: What is it and is it worrying?* BBC, 27 June 2022, [www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-52765838](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-52765838).

<sup>33</sup> Amnesty International. "Hong Kong's national security law: 10 things you need to know," Amnesty International, 17 July, 2020, [www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/07/hong-kong-national-security-law-10-things-you-need-to-know/](http://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/07/hong-kong-national-security-law-10-things-you-need-to-know/).

Kowloon Peninsula after the Second Opium War in 1860. In 1898, the New Territories along with 235 islands were leased to the British under the Convention of 1898.<sup>34</sup> Like many harbour cities, Hong Kong has a long history of being a place of refuge for emigrants in the region. As a treaty port and, later, a British colony, it was also a contact zone for many cultures.

After World War II, Hong Kong provided refuge for many scholars fleeing the civil war between the Nationalist and Communist armies in Mainland China, including those who set up the New Asia College at the Chinese University of Hong Kong where I received my earliest Fine Art Education. The college was founded with a vision of East meets West, which would “combine the essence of the scholarship of the Song and Ming academies and the tutorial system of Western universities.”<sup>35</sup>

My awareness of multiple languages and multiple cultures that exist simultaneously while keeping distinct characteristics that can cross-over, merge, or exist side by side started here. I was exposed to the free flow between languages, cultures, and ideas, largely focused around Western European, American, and Chinese culture.

## **Language & Exile**

As an artist preoccupied with language and text, exile is not just about physical displacement from the land of my hometown, but being cut off from the entire geographic, historic, cultural, and interpersonal context that makes language its own living organism. Describing the significance of language in the experience of exile, Paul Allatson stated: “The experience that is encoded in, and expressed through, language is shared by language-using agents, whose relationships shape the choices of meaning they make.” Furthermore, he noted, “the way the meaning or experience is structured (the text-making component) depends on the context of the interaction and the purpose of the communication.” In other words, language simultaneously shapes and is shaped by our

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<sup>34</sup> Leung, Chi-Keung. "Hong Kong, administrative region, China." Encyclopedia Britannica, [www.britannica.com/place/Hong-Kong](http://www.britannica.com/place/Hong-Kong).

<sup>35</sup>New Asia College. "History." New Asia College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2023, [www.na.cuhk.edu.hk/discover-new-asia-college/history/](http://www.na.cuhk.edu.hk/discover-new-asia-college/history/)

experience of the world around us, in relation to the people around us (the “other language-using agents”).

Before I left Hong Kong, I had a memorable conversation with the profound Hong Kong writer Hon Lai-chu<sup>36</sup>. We talked about the relationship between language and hometown and the fact that we will lose our relationship with our hometown, Hong Kong, if we are in exile. Hon said she would rather stay in Hong Kong to position herself as a witness of the times. Her sentiment reminded me of old interviews with Ivan Klima, who famously chose to return to Czechoslovakia after the Communist regime rose to power. In one interview, he said: “I decided to go back. I decided it was better to go back to be in my own surroundings, where I was able to understand people better than in the U.S.”<sup>37</sup> “For me it is much better to stay at home than to be exiled. It is very difficult to overcome the fate of exile, because it is very difficult to share all [your] problems with people - to perfectly understand their behaviour and their way of acting....”<sup>38</sup> For Klima, staying at home was essential for maintaining his connection to the environment and the people there, who he could understand more perfectly than people in the U.S. because of their shared language and experience, and a lifetime of observation. These were the conditions he needed to continue his work as a writer, so he chose to stay.

But what Hon said also made me think of a quote from Gao Xingjian, who said: “A writer is the witness to his own time, and literature constitutes a vivid testimony for humankind. Literature is more real than history, which is written under the influence of political power.”<sup>39</sup> Considered in this light, the question that we are confronted with as artists is not

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<sup>36</sup> Born in 1978 in Hong Kong, Hon Lai-chu began writing at the age of ten. Dong Qizhang has said that she “possesses an innate and precociously odd tactile sense of the world.” She finished her first work, *The Water Pipe Forest*, while still in middle school...Of her work currently in print in Taiwan, her collection of short stories *The Kite Family*, her novel *Grey Flower* (which won Honorable Mention in Third Annual Dream of Red Mansions Literary Awards), and *Body Seam* all display her distinctive “anti-realist” aesthetic. In 2011 she went to America to attend the University of Iowa’s International Writing Program. At present, a number of magazines based in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong feature her columns. (<https://paper-republic.org/pers/han-lizhu/>)

<sup>37</sup> Trucks, Rob. “A Conversation with Ivan Klima.” *New England Review*, vol. 20, no. 2, Spring 1999.

<sup>38</sup> Parr, Elizabeth A. “IVAN KLÍMA -- Documenting history through literature.” *New Presence: The Prague Journal of Central European Affairs*. Winter 2003, Vol. 5, Issue 4, pp. 37-40.

<sup>39</sup> Xingjian, N. L. G., & Lin, S. L.-C.. “Between Homeland and Heartland: An Interview with Nobel Laureate Gao Xingjian.” *World Literature Today*, 82(3), 2008, pp.12–14.

whether to stay or go, but a question of vantage point in relation to our own creative language. As an artist, how does one bear witness to the times? From what standpoint should I make my testimony for humankind to avoid being pressed into service by the influence of political power?

### **Broken language from the broken life**

Two months before my departure, in my studio in Hong Kong, I developed a new visual language of charcoal and ink that foresaw the sense of losing language, which I called “the broken stroke” as my language was breaking down and disintegrating. Compared to the landscape paintings that I did before, which were inspired by the style of Chinese Ink Shan Shui (Landscape), this body of works are composed by broken strokes instead of constructive lines. The subject matter landscape is harder to recognize as a result of collapsing of lines, like flakes, covering each piece. I made ten pieces of 2x2m panels and left them in the studio before moving to Vancouver. In that moment, I profoundly questioned the culture -- the Chinese culture -- that I was once deeply influenced by, but now found myself questioning ceaselessly as I experienced the terrible oppression by the so-called Chinese government. Should one separate the culture from the regime? And how? I found my body and mind falling apart.

There are echoes of my internal turmoil during this time in the writings of Klima. Describing the strange kind of exile experienced by Klima, Hausler wrote: “[Klima’s] books written during the stagnant, final two decades of the Czechoslovak Communist regime (1968-1989)...are thematically linked by the loneliness of exile in one’s native land. Klima writes in *Love and Garbage*, “I had been living in a strange kind of exile...hemmed in by prohibitions. I was not allowed to enter into life except as a guest, as a visitor, or as a day-wage laborer in selected jobs.”<sup>40</sup> This sense of alienation from my hometown, my culture, and my practice is the state I found myself in at the end of 2019.

### **Lost in Transition**

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<sup>40</sup> Hausler, Pete. “A Strange Kind of Exile— Hope and Despair in Ivan Klíma.” *Agni*, no. 48, 1998, pp. 246-251.

In *Exile and Creativity: Signposts, Travelers, Outsiders, Backward Glances*, Marc Rochester argues that “When it comes to exile, artists would seem to be in a better position than writers. Somehow, the visual world loses less in translation.”<sup>41</sup> This seems to be borne out in Milan Kundera’s lamentations about the vagaries of translation for a writer in exile in *The Art of the Novel*: “In 1968 and 1969, *The Joke* was translated into all the Western languages. But what surprises! In France, the translator rewrote the novel by ornamenting my style. In England, the publisher cut out all the reflective passages, eliminated the musicological chapters, changed the order of the parts, recomposed the novel.... Another country: the translation was done from the Czech...The long sentences that in my original go on for a whole paragraph at a time are broken up into a multitude of short ones...The shock of *The Joke*’s translation scarred me forever. All the more because for me, since practically speaking I no longer have the Czech audience, translations are everything.”<sup>42</sup>

Unlike Kundera, as a visual artist, I do not need to contend with the problem of translation as such, instead I must deal with the problem of *transition*. The main difference between visual art and literature for me, is the different experience of time and space in the art form itself. If we think of literature as drawing a line among the stars to form a constellation or a narrative, visual art is about covering the stars you do not want to see. That is, to frame the area you want to look at. From modernism to post modernism, the focus has always been on framing and un-framing. My practice is concerned with what you say with the frame which, in the case of my installation works like the Curiosity Box, are “books” of non-linear spatial text that can be read. But what should I write if my language is out of context or if my language is not the right language for expressing my new experience?

Exile has placed me in a state of Aphasia, where language feels slippery and beyond my reach. Like Kundera, I have lost the audience of my hometown, and must find a way to make my work intelligible outside of it. Describing this conundrum, Allatson and McCormack write, “In the first place, exiled individuals may be linguistic outsiders in the exile space, and may experience exclusions in discourse, or may agonize over being forced by circumstance to give up the languages they have always used in constructing

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<sup>41</sup> Rochester, Marc. *Exile and Creativity: Signposts, Travelers, Outsiders, Backward Glances*. Duke University Press, 1998.

<sup>42</sup> Kundera, Milan. *Art of the Novel*. Faber, 2005, p.121

their national or ethnic identities.”<sup>43</sup> They continue, “being in exile, therefore, is not just a removal from a cherished geographical space, but a removal from a context of culture within which language plays an important role as “social semiotic” (Halliday 1978) and means of inventing identity and creating solidarity.”<sup>44</sup>

Chinese language and culture have had a deep influence on me and my practice, but now, after I experienced the intense social rupture and chaos of the 2019 Hong Kong Pro-democracy Movement and its aftermath, I have been propelled into my current state of self-exile and a pressing need to find a new language to express what I have experienced from my new transnational state. In what ways can the cultural grounding of my first forty years make sense in the context of my new experience? Much like the exiles described by Allatson, I am finding it impossible to abandon my language and culture completely and ignore how it operates in the “here and now.” Therefore, I am restarting myself by giving awareness to the presence of my body in this city, Vancouver, and moving myself around in the hopes of eventually finding a way to land. I am also starting again from where I dropped the broken stroke of charcoal on plywood, depicting the mountains and landscape.

*“I must formulate my work so that it is understood by everyone. I have become more universal. Czechoslovakia becomes an imaginary country, a microcosm of the world.”*<sup>45</sup>

*Milan Kundera*

### **Is there another genre?**

For me, self-exile has meant moving my body away from its vanished hometown, instead of remaining stuck in place. Before leaving for Vancouver, I had been stuck in a sort of “error mode” since 2019, when my imaginary exile suddenly became all too real. Like many people in Hong Kong, I struggled with the decision to stay or go. What I have come

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<sup>43</sup> Allatson, Paul and McCormack, Jo. *Exile Cultures, Misplaced Identities*. Eds Paul Allatson and Jo McCormack. Rodopi, 2008, pp. 81-82.

<sup>44</sup> Allatson, Paul and McCormack, Jo. *Exile Cultures, Misplaced Identities*. Eds Paul Allatson and Jo McCormack. Rodopi, 2008, pp. 81-82.

<sup>45</sup> McBride, Stewart. “CZECH NOVELIST KUNDERA; Comedy 'deep Enough for Tears'.” *The Christian Science Monitor* (1983), 1981.



to realize is that whether one chooses to stay or go, it is really the same choice. When the state is determined to control the cultural narrative, exile is a foregone conclusion, and the choice is no choice at all.

There is a tension between the self and society, which comes from the push and pull between individual freedom and collective consciousness that we all must navigate. As an artist, this gap of self and society, where you put yourself in this gap and the distance between two, is where you position your practise as a human being living in a society that you ultimately cannot fully escape. This is how I understand Gao's "cold" literature. Standing far away from the fever of politics and propaganda, he places his focus on "the fragile individual." Similarly, when Kundera fled to France, he "suffered by politics" and sought to transcend it in his craft.

As I pick up the broken stroke of my broken language again, I think of Klima, Kundera, and Gao, all of whom found themselves in some form of exile for political reasons but ultimately rejected the idea that literature or art should make politics its primary concern.

Gao said:

*"Writers are not warriors, and the aim of literature should not be to critique or reform society. Granted, a writer can have his or her own political views, but these views don't necessarily have to be manifested in literary creation. I believe that a writer can be true to himself or herself when he or she focuses on the fragile individual."*<sup>46</sup>

Kundera wrote:

*"I wound up having some odd conversations," he continued. "Are you a Communist, Mr. Kundera?" 'No, I'm a novelist.' 'Are you a dissident?' 'No, I'm a novelist.' 'Are you on the left or the right?' 'Neither. I'm a novelist.'"*<sup>47</sup>

Klima stated:

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<sup>46</sup> Lin, Sylvia Li-chun. "Between Homeland and Heartland." *World Literature Today*, vol. 82, no. 3, 2008, pp. 12-14

<sup>47</sup> Kundera, Milan. *Testaments Betrayed: an Essay in Nine Parts / Milan Kundera; Translated from the French by Linda Asher*. HarperCollins Publishers, 1995, pp.155-156

*"I gradually came to realize that there were two kinds of freedom, internal and external. One can behave unfreely even in free circumstances, and one can behave freely (with all the risks it entails) in unfree circumstances."<sup>48</sup>*

As an artist in exile severed from my mother tongue, these are the words I keep close as I continue to look for the language of my exile beyond the borders of my hometown Hong Kong. The experience of Otherness has created some sort of third space -- either here or there, floating in between, it becomes the ground for my art practice that has fluidity in its nature.

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<sup>48</sup> Klima, Ivan. *My Crazy Century*. Translated by Craig Stephen Cravens, Grove Press, 2014, p.415

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