The unconventional juxtaposition of the poem and the painting makes this 1987 work by Charles Chu (1918–2008) difficult to interpret. The highly saturated ink of the calligraphy calls upon one’s attention immediately. The line of writing situated in the center eclipses the lighter shades of the landscape underneath. Although this type of overlapping composition often destroys the integrity of a work, it is simply not the case in this one. The synthesis, however, evokes a natural connection between the poem and the painting, and a conversation between the viewers and the artwork. The sense of coherence is accomplished by the implicit expression of water that connects the entire work. The painting and the poem both emphasize the clarity and fluidity of water in unconventional manners. Through the practice of extreme simplicity and asymmetrical devotion of energy, characteristic of Zen aesthetics, water facilitates the balance between the poem and the painting, and creates a holistic viewing experience charged with a poetic mood.

Both the poem and the painting present an asymmetrical distribution of energy in the rendering of the scene and emotion. The poem balances the explicit description of the scene with the implicit suggestion of the mood. Surrounded by the vast mountain, someone flows with the water in a boat. Listening to the sound of the water and accompanied by the beautiful moon, he drinks wine and recites poems. The writing presents a comprehensive combination of sensory experiences, yet suggests a mood of nostalgia. In this case, the asymmetrical energy is created by the directness of the scene descriptions and the indirectness of the mood expression. The couplet reads:

High mountains and flowing rivers [inspire] thousands of poems.
Under the bright moon and in the gentle breeze, the boat is filled with wine.

In the painting, a similar technique of balancing is used in the different ways to present the natural elements. The composition of the painting follows a basic three-layered structure. The water and the boat are in the foreground, and the gloomy sky in the upper left corner almost blends into the vast mountain in the middle ground. Although the painting is based on a traditional layered structure, the diagonal line in the middle, that is, the streams and waterfalls, sets the asymmetrical tone for the painting. The high mountain is depicted vertically and is severed by the flowing water. Severed by the mountain, the sky dialogues with the boat in a remote parallel. The interplay of the horizontal and vertical lines in the three-layered structure echoes the innate dynamism of nature.

In addition to the diverse compositional designation, the ways of presenting the mountain and water are unique yet extremely simple. With varied brushwork the mountain is painted with broad shades of grey mixed with blue or green pigments. Thin, dry brushes with thicker ink tone are applied to depict the special details of the mountain ridges. The broad strokes vividly express the mightiness of the mountain, and the small and detailed touches expresses the protruding roughness
of the ridges. The vast expanse of the mountain is depicted with a light wash, while the ridges near the flowing water are accentuated with a darker brush. Different brush strokes and different shades provide some richness to the visual variations, but the mere reliance on ink emphasizes the simplicity in portraying the different texture of the mountain.

The presentation of the water in the painting is different from that of the mountain. Although the mountain is already a simple combination of ink shades and brush strokes, the water exemplifies even further the concepts of Zen — simplicity, asymmetry and profound subtlety. Instead of using ink marks to validate the presence of the water in the mountains and at the foreground, the artist applies the technique to leave negative space for multifaceted interpretations. In xu, the empty, the water becomes visible through the presentation of shi, the solid, represented by the mountain. Light shades of grey become saturated as it moves closer to the nearly blank diagonal line, which is in fact the flowing water. Nothing seems to highlight the presence of the water, and yet it becomes evident because of the intensely textured mountain cliffs that surround it. Besides the evidence provided by the mountain, the little boat substantiates the presence of a large body of water in the foreground. Without any effortful depiction of the waves, the water reveals itself with the help of the floating boat. Through distinct artistic expressions, the painting demonstrates both the flowing dynamism and static tameness of the water. Therefore, the limited technique used to depict the mountain and the water illustrates the Zen simplicity. The disproportional efforts that the painter put into the rendering of the mountain and the water displays an asymmetrical distribution of energy. The complete void of the water in the foreground understates its presence, but the little boat suggests its presence subtly. This subtlety, conversely, suggests something profound: the implicit revealing of the water's presence internalizes Zen notion of emptiness, which evokes a sense of tranquility.

Even though a careful analysis helps the viewers to understand the Zen characteristics, the balance and interaction between xu and shi in both the poem and the painting create a complex and struggling viewing experience. The simplicity and transcendence of nature may calm the passenger in the boat, and encourage him to reflect on himself through wine and poems, but it is not the case for the viewers. From their perspective, it is easy to get lost in this overlapping composition, the indecipherable calligraphy, and the elusive and changeable brushwork. However, the way in which the water across different forms creates a continuous and coherent thread inspires in the viewers a transfer of the mood. The unreadability of the poem creates new way to understand its textuality as an unconventional visual pattern, thus adds more characteristic to the landscape. The Chinese characters, which are composed of spontaneous brushstrokes, converse with the flowing water, which unifies the painting with the spontaneous spirit of Zen.

The water in this work demonstrates the essence of unified clarity. In addition to the painted streams and waterfalls that connect the entire composition, the character shui, water, in the poem, rather than in a conventional written form, resembles the image of water flowing from the mountain ridges into the large body of water in the foreground. The pictographic form of shui unifies the poem and the painting as one. The juxtaposition of the poem and painting changes the reception of the overall work. Through the power of art, this artwork by Chu creates a visual and conceptual reality through an aesthetic, poetic and philosophical process.