

THE PRIMACY OF SOFTNESS

A Non-Confrontational Philosophy of Being

Kaixuan Wang

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Foreword

Kaixuan Wang has asked me to write a foreword for her new book, *The Primacy of Softness*. Having read the complete manuscript, I find myself genuinely moved by her journey as both artist and thinker.

Years ago, I first guided her into the world of watercolor. Since then, I have watched her evolve, step by step, from a rigorous technical practitioner into an artist with a deep, hard-won understanding of what creative practice actually is.

What sets Kaixuan apart, above all, is her extraordinary perseverance — a relentless, almost stubborn commitment to the work. Among her peers this has simply come to be called the "Kaixuan spirit." She has immersed herself in watercolor, printmaking, oil painting, and traditional Chinese painting, weaving what she has learned from each into a visual language entirely her own. Her watercolors carry the lyricism of Chinese ink wash, the structural rigor of printmaking, and the rich texture of oil painting. Years of steady, consistent practice have earned her real recognition — including two qualification awards from the China Artists Association, falling just one point short of full membership.

But today, her achievement reaches far beyond technical mastery. Through her long engagement with water, light, color, and the passage of time, she has quietly forged an artistic philosophy that is entirely her own.

Watercolor practice is never simply a matter of skill. It demands constant negotiation with uncertainty, a delicate balance between control and yielding — in many ways, a lifelong discipline of self-cultivation.

The core concept of this book — what Kaixuan calls the primacy of softness — emerges directly out of this lived experience. Rather than treating creation as an act of mastery or domination, she approaches it as a practice of openness, transformation, and quiet self-unfolding. Within watercolor's fluid, unpredictable

nature, she has found a creative force that flourishes not through struggle, but through harmonious relation.

In this book, she distills what she has learned into five essential movements: Pause, Receive, Generate, Permeate, and Light. Rooted in hands-on creative practice, these ideas also open into a broader meditation on how we might engage with life itself.

As her mentor, what I value most is not her technical excellence but her inner maturation into an independent artistic thinker in her own right. For this reason, *The Primacy of Softness* is far more than a book about art. It is a genuine reflection on how a person might find their place in the world, and continue that inner maturation amid its constant change.

Chen Zhongke

May 1, 2026

Contents

PROLOGUE.....	01
 PART I: THE LIMITS OF CONFRONTATION.....	12
Chapter 1: Tension and Depletion Within Structure.....	14
Chapter 2: The Utility and Limits of Oppositional Thinking.....	22
Chapter 3: A Genealogical Investigation of Rigid Structures.....	30
Chapter 4: From Winning to Continuing.....	38
 PART II: THE FIVE MOVEMENTS OF PRIMAL VITALITY.....	49
Chapter 5: In Creation — The Emergence of the Primal Force of Softness.....	51
Chapter 6: The Internal Structure of the Primal Force of Softness.....	75
 PART III: PHILOSOPHICAL REALIZATION.....	86
Chapter 7: Power, Being, and Life — A Philosophy of the Primal Force of Softness.....	88
Chapter 8: In Dialogue, and as a Mode of Being.....	94
 Conclusion: Light Is Not Produced by Opposition — It Matures from Within.....	104
Afterword.....	110
Acknowledgements.....	111
About the Author.....	112
References.....	113
List of Works.....	114

Prologue: In Light, I Rediscovered What Strength Means

I did not decide to write this book on any particular day. More accurately, this book is not the result of a "decision." It is the inevitable outcome of something that accumulated over many years, fermented quietly, and finally reached the point where expression became necessary. It was not written in response to a single event, nor to serve any external agenda. It took shape instead through a long process of making art, living, thinking, and coming to know myself — a slow internal necessity. When that necessity reached a certain density, writing stopped being a choice and became something I simply had to do. For me, this book is not an appendix to my painting, nor a commentary on my work written from the outside. It shares the same origin as my painting: a form of thought that has matured slowly out of my long practice with watercolor, my lived experience as a woman, and the concrete texture of my life.

I

I was born in the 1970s and trained within the reality of contemporary Chinese art education. My early training was built on a rigorous, clear Western academic system: drawing, perspective, structure, volume, color relations, chiaroscuro, spatial modeling, realist skill. This formed the foundation of how I understood, constructed, and controlled images, and for a long time it shaped my basic sense

of what "art" even was. Back then, I believed art was first of all an ability — the ability to see accurately, analyze accurately, and reproduce the object accurately. There was nothing wrong with this training. It gave me an important professional grounding, and it has continued to give my work a strong sense of form.

But as I grew older, I came to see, more and more clearly, that painting well does not automatically lead to authentic expression. Technique can help complete a picture, but it does not necessarily lead to thought. Skill can make a work viable, but it doesn't always let life speak through it.

What truly began to change my understanding of art was not any particular class or theoretical text. It was life itself. As the years went on, the complicated roles women are expected to play in real life became impossible to ignore.

A woman does not live abstractly. She is defined, burdened with expectations, consumed, and misunderstood within multiple relations at once. Often these pressures aren't imposed violently — they are subtler, gentler, more woven into the everyday, and for that reason harder to even name. As my life experience accumulated, I came to understand that many problems that looked like individual emotional issues were not merely individual at all. Much of what got attributed to "personality" was, in fact, embedded in far larger structures.

Against this background, I inevitably came to feminism. It gave me an important lens — language for things I had long found hard to say, and a way of seeing the structural face beneath situations that had been naturalized, privatized, treated as merely personal. The historical significance of feminism is undeniable.[1] It is because of those who came before — who spoke out, who fought, who questioned unjust systems and beliefs — that many once-unquestioned limitations have been shaken loose, and many once-silenced experiences have entered public conversation. I have always held deep respect for this.

And yet, the more I engaged with feminist discussions, and the more I examined my own life experience against them, the more I began to feel a discomfort I

couldn't quite shake. This discomfort did not come from feminism's exposure of inequality — I agreed, and still agree, with the necessity of that exposure. What gave me pause was something else: the way that, in some contemporary feminist discourse, expression has increasingly come to be governed by a logic of opposition. As if only conflict proves strength. As if only intensity earns visibility. As if one's existence is recognized only by taking a clear stand against something.

Opposition has its historical justification. At certain stages, faced with rigid, closed structures, not to oppose is almost the same as remaining silent. But when opposition hardens from a necessary tool into the only imaginable path, it starts to reveal its own limits.

By "limits" I don't mean that opposition is useless — I mean that it may not be a final resting place. Opposition can break a certain kind of order, but it does not necessarily build a new structure for living. It can free a person from oppression, but it doesn't necessarily help that person build a richer, more stable, more vital way of being once the break has happened. More importantly, when opposition is internalized long enough, it begins to reshape how a person perceives the world at all: relations get translated into positions, experience gets compressed into winning and losing.

For a long time, I carried a kind of exhaustion. Not simply physical tiredness — something deeper, ongoing, hard to even name: a mental depletion. When everything must be filtered through the lens of opposition, when strength is reduced to a single image of overpowering, confronting, winning, then the capacities that can naturally arise within life — transformation, connection, nurturing, illumination — get squeezed into an ever-narrower space.

It was out of this persistent exhaustion that I began to ask, again and again: Must strength always take the form of opposition? If not, where does another kind of strength come from? How is it perceived — and how is it expressed?

That is the central question of this book.

II

This question did not first appear as a theory that I later applied to my work. Quite the opposite — it first emerged slowly, out of my experience of painting, especially my practice of watercolor.

Watercolor is an unusual medium. Unlike oil, you cannot cover, correct, and rebuild it layer after layer. Watercolor is inherently fluid, transparent, permeable, full of accident. The movement of water across paper, the diffusion of pigment within it, the way edges form on their own, the marks left by wet meeting dry — all of it turns the making of a work into a constantly shifting relation between judgment, waiting, responding, intervening.

I came to understand, more and more, that watercolor is not simply a "gentle" medium. If anything, it demands a higher kind of strength — one that is not oppressive or conquering, but closer to the ability to stay perceptive, to hold a rhythm, to sustain tension. You have to respect the nature of the medium without fully surrendering your own will. Real control in watercolor rarely means forcing your way through everything. It means finding order within fluidity, holding direction inside uncertainty, and drawing a more vital necessity out of chance.

For me, this was never just a technical insight. It gradually became a turning point in how I thought.

I want to be clear here about the method of this book: it is not theory applied afterward to practice. It has taken shape directly out of concrete creative experience. I have tried to let the act of creation itself become a way of thinking — not using theory to explain the images, but letting medium, body, and perception generate thought together, in the same motion. Watercolor, then, is not an "example" in this book. It is the book's method.

In the language of watercolor, I have run into "light" again and again. This is not religious revelation, nor a decorative effect borrowed from cheap lyricism. It is closer to a sense of life that slowly surfaces after layers of water and color, after the

shifting of light and dark, after transparent overlays settle into place. It does not fall from nowhere. It comes from the gradual maturing of relations within the image — the delicate balance between color and water, emptiness and solidity, density and dilution. It defeats nothing. It simply allows what was dark to slowly take shape.

It was through this long engagement with watercolor that I came to understand: there is a kind of strength different from opposition.

I call it the **Primal Force of Softness**.

One painting says what I mean better than I can explain it: *Frost Descends*.

After the frost, the grass has withered. On the surface, everything looks to have ended — cooled, decayed, still. But stay with the painting a little longer, and among the yellowed leaves you start to notice a few tiny sprouts of pale green. They have come up from deep within the earth, even after the frost.

This painting is not about decay. It is about what holds beneath decay. The earth does not stop bringing forth life because frost has fallen — it simply keeps holding life where it cannot yet be seen. The withered grass is not proof of death. It is the condition from which new life quietly emerges.

This is the most basic form of the Primal Force of Softness: not fighting the frost, but letting life appear after the frost has passed.

Only later did I come to understand: this single image already held the seed of everything I've thought since. When I later describe the cycle of Pause, Receive, Generate, Permeate, and Light, I am always describing the same thing — a vitality that does not depend on opposition, that continues even where everything seems to have ended. It comes from the internal maturing of relations within the image, from the delicate balance between color and water, emptiness and solidity, density and dilution. It defeats nothing. It allows what was dark to slowly take shape.



Figure 0-1: Frost Descends, 2023, watercolor on paper, 53×76cm

III

Resilience here is not the traditional stereotype of weakness, submission, or passivity. It is a structural description: a mode of being that stands apart from rigidity, from violence, from the either/or logic of opposition. True resilience is not limpness. It is bending without breaking. It is not without boundaries. It is the maturity that sets boundaries without hostility.

The word "she" appears in this book because my starting point is female experience — that is my unavoidable ground. This is not an essentialist claim, but a structural entry point grounded in lived experience. At the same time, the "she" I speak of is not exclusive. It is closer to a mode of life, a way of being that tends toward softness, connection, holding, and illumination. I use "she" because in the long reality of society, women have more often been assigned the tasks of caring, maintaining, repairing, and emotional labor. They have earlier and more deeply encountered those subtle experiences that do not appear as explicit power but that profoundly shape the quality of life. It is precisely these experiences that make "she" an entry point into a structure of strength. From this point on, I will refer to this mode simply as the Primal Force of Softness, or simply this mode.

As the concept of the Primal Force of Softness gradually took shape for me, I found myself re-understanding many problems that had long troubled me.

I re-understood women. I no longer saw women merely as an oppressed identity, nor did I think of awakening simply as a head-on collision with the existing world. I came to see women as a source of experience deeply connected to life itself: she knows how to maintain relations in the midst of fragmentation, how to seek transformation within unavoidable depletion. Such abilities are not always recognized as strength by mainstream discourse, but it is precisely these abilities that allow many lives to continue.

I also re-understood "love." In many existing narratives, love is either romanticized, instrumentalized, or reduced to possession, sacrifice, exchange, and proof. But in

my understanding, love is closer to a quiet, primal vitality. It should be the ability to allow life to unfold. Its essence is not destruction, but inner maturation. That is why, although my art does not avoid real pain and trauma, I have never wanted it to end in hatred. Hatred can expose problems, but it cannot nourish life.

Perhaps because I have worked so long in watercolor, I have come to believe that truly mature art does not just display technical skill or create conceptual shock. It must establish an internal consistency among form, medium, and thought. The transparency, fluidity, permeability, breath, chance, and restraint of watercolor make it naturally close to the Primal Force of Softness that I understand.

IV

Thus, this book is not a technical manual, nor is it a casual collection of feminist essays. It tries to address a more fundamental question: When we no longer understand strength only as opposition, when we no longer understand women's awakening simply as entering the same competitive logic of power, then how can a new possibility be seen?

The book is arranged in three parts.

- Part I examines the formation and limits of oppositional structures, acknowledging both their historical necessity and their limits.
- Part II moves the question from theory to creative practice, tracing how the Primal Force of Softness occurs and completes itself within specific works, and examining its internal structure.
- Part III elevates this experience into a philosophical realization — a mode of being.

The three parts are not a linear causal chain. They are closer to layering in watercolor: each layer permeates and transforms the layer beneath it, until at last the structure of light emerges from within.

V

If opposition answers the question "how to break the world," then softness answers the question "how to continue to exist."

If I want to accomplish anything with this book, it is not to create a new slogan. What I truly want to do is take what has long existed behind my paintings, within my life experience, and in the hidden but real feelings of many women, and set it down carefully and completely.

I hope this book lets readers see that strength does not have to appear only in intense forms. Sometimes, truly deep change comes from things that are never loudly proclaimed, but that simply continue to happen. Light is not powerful because it is blinding. Often, it can penetrate darkness precisely because it does not need to prove itself. It simply exists steadily.

That is the fundamental reason I wrote this book. Through my watercolor practice, my thinking, and my personal experience, I want to propose a non-oppositional understanding of strength — one that does not deny the struggles of history, erase real injuries, or hide the real pressures and injustices women encounter in the world. But it refuses to end in opposition itself. It believes that after rupture, connection is still possible. After injury, transformation is still possible. And within heavy reality, there is still a kind of light that can slowly take shape.

So, ultimately, this book wants to discuss not only "how women gain strength," but "how we can re-understand strength itself." Not only "how art expresses female experience," but "how art can offer another structure for life." Not only "how watercolor is viewed," but "how watercolor can be seriously understood as a way of thinking."

That path is not loud, nor is it easy. But it always points in the same direction: from opposition to softness, from rigidity to fluidity, from depletion to holding, from darkness to light.

Light is not produced by opposition. It matures from within. And this book traces that path, slowly, from within.

Notes to Prologue

[1] For the historical significance of second-wave feminism in making personal experience political, see Carol Hanisch, "The Personal Is Political," in *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation* (1970); and Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (Vintage, 2011; originally published 1949).

CORE CONCEPT

**THE PRIMAL FORCE OF SOFTNESS IS A NON-CONFRONTATIONAL MODE OF
BEING GROUNDED IN RESILIENCE, RELATION, AND CONTINUITY.**

IT DOES NOT OPERATE THROUGH OPPOSITION, BUT THROUGH A CYCLE OF
MOVEMENTS:

PAUSE — RECEIVE — GENERATE — PERMEATE — LIGHT

THROUGH THESE MOVEMENTS, FORM IS NOT IMPOSED, BUT EMERGES, SPREADS,
AND TRANSFORMS THE FIELD FROM WITHIN.

PART I: THE LIMITS OF CONFRONTATION



Chapter One: Tension and Depletion Within Structure

For a long time, I did not recognize opposition as such. In my early painting experience, it was not a concept but a persistent, hard-to-name tightness that drained me slowly.

It did not appear as obvious conflict. No loud arguments, no dramatic breaks. It lived in my daily dealings with materials, in the habits I no longer questioned. I had been trained to position myself within a Western academic tradition. I responded to images, but the response never felt fully my own. I made constant small adjustments to fit into forms of expression established long before I arrived.

At the time, I did not see this as a structural problem. I thought it was personal: my own sensitivity, my own fatigue, the ordinary pressure of making work. I knew how to build structure in a painting, how to handle layers, how to work with color and form. But I could not find words for this recurring, subtle discomfort. It did not come from a single failure. It was not the wound of one clear act of exclusion. It was the slow accumulation of a way of working that had been given to me as neutral — as simply "how painting is done."

Its power lay in its ordinariness. It did not provoke immediate resistance, but it steadily eroded the conditions my own expression needed in order to take shape.

I later came to call this Structural Fatigue.

It is not a concept. It is the name for a condition: depletion that accumulates through the ordinary, unexamined repetition of a way of being. It is not the exhaustion of conflict. It is the exhaustion of existing within a structure that treats its own logic as natural and offers no language for the discomfort it produces.

When I began to engage with feminist thought, these scattered, unnamed experiences began to find language. I started to see that many apparently individual problems were not truly isolated. They were not just technical difficulties or errors in creative judgment. They belonged to a broader training structure that had long shaped perception and expression.

This understanding was crucial. It brought my privatized experience into public view. It allowed the exhaustion I had silently borne alone to be re-understood within a larger context. This "being seen" was itself a form of strength.

Resistance has its historical necessity. Without it, change would not have happened. Without it, suppressed experience would not have entered public space. Without it, the established order would not have cracked. Resistance was once a path to visibility, a force that broke silence.

But when a method is repeated because it works, it can turn from a means into a kind of inertia. When resistance is no longer just a response to a specific problem but becomes an expressive posture that precedes experience, it brings new limitations. The question is not whether resistance is necessary. It is whether it can be the only path, or even a long-term, stable mode of being.

When resistance becomes inertia, the first thing that changes is how a person understands relations. The interaction between creator and material, between creator and image, between creator and others, is no longer first perceived as experience. It is quickly translated into positions and stances. Fluid emotions are compressed into opposition. Complex realities are simplified into clear boundaries.

This approach increases the speed of judgment but obscures what cannot be simply reduced. Not all relations are structured around oppression. Not all pain can

be explained by opposition alone.

When everything is understood structurally, the individual gradually loses the capacity for direct experience. One no longer first feels the texture of working with material; one first analyzes its position. One no longer seeks to understand where an emotion comes from; one quickly becomes alert to the power relations behind it. This loss of direct experience weakens a deeper capacity: integration. Integration does not mean the absence of contradiction. It means maintaining continuity even within contradiction. It means continuing to generate even while wounds exist. When integration declines, the creative self becomes fragile. It may be more alert and more sensitive, but it finds it harder to trust complexity, to enter truly relaxed relations, to connect with the world without defense.

This fragile state forms a self-reinforcing mechanism of depletion.[2] It cannot lead a person to true freedom; it only keeps her in long-term tension.

What truly matters is no longer "whether to resist" but "how to continue after resistance." If resistance is only a stage, then after that stage something else must appear. A more fundamental question must be raised: if not through resistance, where does creative strength come from?

For me, the answer emerged from watercolor practice.

Watercolor does not allow the creator to establish a final result through dominating methods. The flow of water on paper, the diffusion of color in water, the natural formation of edges between wet and dry — all of this turns painting into a relational process of continuous change. If the creator tries to dominate the image through strong control, the image becomes stiff, closed, lifeless. If she gives up judgment entirely, the image becomes loose, muddy, directionless.

Watercolor naturally rejects two extremes: domination and abandonment. The truly effective way of working can only form between them. This "between" is the key.

In this process, the creator can neither retreat to the traditional position of

controller nor disappear as a passive executor. She must remain present, but her presence is no longer expressed as control. It is expressed as a more complex capacity: perception, judgment, waiting, intervention, restraint. This capacity is not oppositional. It does not prove itself by overpowering the material. It works within relations: maintaining direction amid uncertainty, generating order within change.

It was in this practice that I discovered an extremely subtle capacity: knowing when to stop acting.

This "stopping" is not giving up. It is another form of work. It interrupts the automatic chain of reaction. It protects the relation that has already formed. It prevents the creator from imposing too much too soon. Without pause, the gap between stimulus and response never opens — and the Primal Force of Softness never begins.

I call this the first movement of the Primal Force of Softness: Pause.

I remember many such moments: the painting was almost finished, color, structure, layers all seemed right, but my hand would not stop. I kept adjusting — a little more here, a little brighter there. You knew something was "off," but you couldn't say what. The image became more and more "correct," boundaries sharper, contrast stronger, but it had less and less life. That feeling was not failure. It was a mute heaviness. You finished, but you were not released.



Figure 1-1: Enthusiasm Fishing Port, 2021, watercolor on paper, 62×102cm

Enthusiasm Fishing Port shows exactly this state. Every part of the image has been corrected, reinforced, perfected — edges sharp, details vivid. Yet this excessive "correctness" is precisely what makes the whole image lose its breath. The painting is completed, but it has no life.

This is what the logic of opposition leaves behind when it becomes a mode of control. You are no longer creating. You are fighting uncertainty.

As I repeated this process, I began to realize that artistic order does not have to come from domination. A deeper effectiveness comes from relations themselves: between water and color, between time and material, between the creator and the image. Here, strength is no longer the ability to overpower everything, but the ability to sustain relations, to bear change, and to allow structure to emerge over time. This strength does not have the sharpness of opposition, but it has enduring depth. It is resilience.

When I brought this experience back to my understanding of women's creative situations, a different path began to appear. After resistance, is there another way that can support creation's continued unfolding? If not, even after breaking free from oppression, the creator will remain in a tense state, and resistance will become a long-term way of being.

Watercolor allowed me to see that strength can come from elsewhere: from relation, not opposition; from softness, not negation; from continuity, not rupture. This strength does not need an enemy to exist. It can exist without opposition.

It is here that the Primal Force of Softness begins to take on a clear structure. It acknowledges the historical necessity of opposition but refuses to end in opposition itself. Its core is not "what to oppose" but "how to generate."

What this chapter truly accomplishes is not a critique of resistance but a confirmation of boundaries. Resistance can break silence, tear open structures, and make oppression visible — but on its own, it cannot complete the Primal Force of Softness. It cannot replace a way of working that can sustain an artistic life over

the long term. Only when this is seen clearly can another kind of strength be seriously understood.

For me, this turn was not a theoretical choice. It came from painting itself, from the long-term bodily experience of being in a tense state, and from the clear perception that this state was gradually losing its effectiveness. That is why the Primal Force of Softness is not an abstract concept. It is an experiential structure that has been repeatedly verified.

The question is no longer whether to resist. It is whether, after resistance, we have the ability to continue.

