

Figural Representations in Huang Gongwang's Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains: Visual and Symbolic Perspectives

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Abstract

This study delves into the figures portrayed in Huang Gongwang's Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains, exploring their artistic and symbolic significance. Employing visual analysis as the primary research method, it examines the interaction between these figures and the surrounding landscape, as well as the potential philosophical connotations conveyed by their presence. Through cultural semiotics, these figures are interpreted as symbols of literati's seclusion and transcendence ideals, reflecting Huang Gongwang's personal life experiences. The paper concludes that the figures in the painting transcend their individual identities, embodying the collective concept of literati artists and their relationship with nature, thus facilitating a deeper understanding of the cultural and philosophical dimensions embedded in this art masterpiece.

Keywords: Huang Gongwang, Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains, Visual Analysis, Cultural Semiotics, Literati Ideals, Philosophical Symbolism, Chinese Landscape Painting.

Original Research Article

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INTRODUCTION

Huang Gongwang's *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* (Figure 1) is a masterpiece that shines as one of the brightest stars in the constellation of Chinese landscape painting. Widely revered and regarded as an unsurpassable classic, this painting was created during the Yuan dynasty

(1271–1368) when the 79-year-old artist began its composition in the Fuchun Mountains of Fuyang, Zhejiang. Taking years to complete, this artwork emerged within a distinctive historical and cultural context, standing as a monumental achievement that vividly showcases Huang Gongwang's mastery at the pinnacle of his artistic career.



Figure 1. Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains

Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains, created by Huang Gongwang between 1347 and 1350, is a masterpiece of profound historical and artistic significance. The painting is set against the backdrop of the Fuchun River and is presented in a horizontal scroll format. It employs the distinctive "long hemp-fiber stroke" (chang pima cun) technique, alongside dynamic calligraphic brushwork, demonstrating the artist's exceptional mastery of ink and brush. The composition portrays a richly textured landscape, featuring peaks, slopes, trees, cottages, pavilions, fishing boats, and bridges along the riverbanks, creating a harmonious and layered depiction of nature (Lin Hongyu, 2022). The structural composition of the work is characterized by a balanced interplay of density and openness. The layers of mountains and water interlace seamlessly, capturing the vitality of the natural scenery (Chu Shenglan, 2020). The use of varying ink tones, ranging from light to dark and dry to wet, facilitates a harmonious relationship between void and substance. This not only accentuates the scenic beauty of the Fuchun River but also conveys Daoist ideals of reclusion and introspection, reflecting Huang Gongwang's profound engagement with nature and life (Huang Lan, 2022). Measuring 33 cm in height and 636.9 cm in length, the scroll presents undulating peaks, dense forests, and mirror-like waters. The expansive and distant landscape is depicted with simplicity and clarity, evoking a sense of grandeur and tranquility. The painting's refined brushwork and serene composition provide the viewer with a profound emotional experience, inviting contemplation. This work not only reflects Huang Gongwang's delicate observation of nature but also embodies his deep understanding of Daoist philosophy. As a quintessential example of Chinese landscape painting, it has had a lasting impact on the development of subsequent landscape art (Chen Chuanxi, 2016).

The inclusion of small figures within the vast landscape—commonly described as scholars, fishermen, and woodcutters—has often been oversimplified as a depiction of generic roles. However, these figures play an indispensable role in enriching the painting's narrative depth and spiritual resonance. Functioning as visual highlights akin to the "finishing touch," these minor yet vivid figures embody dynamic activities and expressions, symbolizing the literati's aspirations for reclusion and spiritual transcendence.

While abundant scholarship has been devoted to *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*, with most studies emphasizing its masterful landscape composition and refined brush techniques, the symbolic significance of these figures and their dynamic interplay within the painting has received limited scholarly attention. This critical aspect remains on the periphery of academic discourse, warranting further exploration and interpretation.

This study focuses on the symbolic roles of figures in *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*. By analyzing their placement within the composition, their correspondence with the natural environment, and the transformations they undergo within the visual narrative, this research aims to uncover the

philosophical and cultural dimensions of Huang Gongwang's work. Employing visual analysis as the primary methodology, supplemented by cultural semiotics, the study seeks to interpret how these figures reflect the broader themes of transcendence and reclusion central to Yuan dynasty literati traditions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Huang Gongwang's *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* is one of the most renowned paintings in China and has been extensively studied by scholars from various disciplines. As one of the "Four Great Masters of the Yuan Dynasty," Huang Gongwang has had a profound influence in the field of landscape painting. His magnum opus, *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*, was completed around 1350, embodying his profound thoughts on art and philosophy. This review compiles existing research findings, focusing on the artistic characteristics of the painting as well as the importance and under-explored aspects of the minor figures in the painting.

Scholars such as Yang Gang and Xu Hui (2024) have conducted in-depth analyses of the composition of this painting. They emphasized that Huang Gongwang adopted the form of a horizontal long scroll and his innovation in combining panoramic views with small scenes. The painting not only showcases the magnificent scenery of the Fuchun River but also guides viewers to experience the picture in dynamic changes through techniques such as "viewing step by step" (Fu Bo, 2023). This approach breaks the traditional linear spatial constraints, enabling viewers to feel the gradual advancement of the scenery as the scroll unfolds.

Huang Gongwang's brushwork techniques are often described as having the smooth rhythm of cursive script, reflecting his profound calligraphy skills. He flexibly alternates between dry and wet brushstrokes, combined with the iconic "long hemp - fiber texture strokes," adding rich texture and a sense of materiality to the mountains, rivers, trees, and rocks (Jiao Xiaojie, 2021). The variations in the intensity of ink further demonstrate the undulations of the mountains, creating a harmonious echo between the solid and the blank spaces (Hay, J., 1998). These techniques not only reflect the painter's craftsmanship but also embody the Taoist concepts of naturalness and the unity of man and nature.

In addition to its technical manifestations, the painting is also a reflection of Huang Gongwang's personal philosophical thinking. The serene atmosphere of the picture conveys the Taoist ideas of seclusion and introspection, enabling the landscape painting to transcend mere visual art and enter the realm of spiritual experience (Zhang Tengwen, 2016). Huang Gongwang's inscriptions further strengthen this narrative, integrating poetry, calligraphy, and painting (Lin Hongyu, 2022). This comprehensive means of expression enhances the cultural connotation of the work, allowing viewers to feel the painter's inner sustenance and philosophical thinking while appreciating the scenery.

Despite the large number of studies focusing on the

landscape composition and brushwork details of the painting, the minor figures in the painting still remain an area worthy of in - depth exploration. In *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*, there are a total of eight figures, including those crossing the bridge, fishermen, woodcutters, and viewers. Although these figures are depicted with concise brushwork, they vividly showcase the expressions and activities of the characters, demonstrating the painter's artistic ability to achieve much with little. Li Xin (2022) pointed out that these figures symbolize different stages of life and philosophical concepts, reflecting the seclusion sentiment and self - cultivation of Yuan - Dynasty literati. Wang Meng (2022) further emphasized that the minor figures play a role in guiding the viewer's gaze in the narrative of the painting, making the scroll more visually holistic and coherent.

However, there are still certain gaps in the existing research in this regard. Although the presence of the minor figures has received attention, there is a lack of systematic and in - depth exploration of the dynamic changes of these figures within the painting and their symbolic meanings. Subtle changes in the postures, activities, and positions of these figures may imply a deeper narrative logic and symbolic metaphors.

This study aims to fill this research gap. It adopts a visual analysis method to conduct a detailed interpretation of the composition and dynamics of the figures within the painting, and combines cultural semiotics analysis to explain their broader philosophical significance. By doing so, this paper hopes to uncover the internal relationship between the minor figures and the landscape environment, providing a new perspective for interpreting Huang Gongwang's artistic legacy.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs visual analysis as the primary research method, specifically focusing on the figures depicted in *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* by Huang Gongwang. Visual analysis is chosen for its effectiveness in examining how the artist utilized compositional techniques, brushwork, and spatial relationships to convey meaning, particularly through the representation of figures. The first aspect of the analysis involves identifying and categorizing the eight figures in the painting. This entails recognizing their physical characteristics—such as the roles they represent, including literati, fishermen, and woodcutters—and understanding how these figures interact with the surrounding landscape. The aim is to investigate how the positioning and actions of these figures relate to the broader environmental context and contribute to the narrative.

In addition to identification, the study will closely

analyze the dynamics and changes of the figures throughout the scroll. Attention will be given to how the image of the fisherman, for instance, evolves subtly in terms of his position and activities. These variations are interpreted as symbolic representations of the shifting roles and identities of the literati in society, illustrating the fluidity of their social functions and transitions between different existential states. The dynamic portrayal of these figures can be seen as a metaphor for the intellectual and spiritual mobility associated with the literati class.

Furthermore, the study will engage in a cultural semiotics analysis of the figures, interpreting them within the context of Yuan Dynasty literati culture. This analysis will explore the deeper symbolic meanings of the figures, particularly through the lens of cultural semiotics. The figures are seen not just as representations of specific individuals, but as embodiments of broader themes central to literati ideals, such as transcendence, seclusion, and the harmonious integration of nature and human existence. Through this approach, the study aims to uncover the layers of cultural and philosophical significance embedded in the figures, revealing how Huang Gongwang used them to reflect the spiritual and intellectual values of his time.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

An in - depth analysis of the figures in Huang Gongwang's *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* reveals a profound narrative thread closely intertwined with philosophical contemplation and personal experiences. The eight figures depicted in the painting, including scholars, fishermen, and woodcutter, carry meanings that far exceed their surface - level identity markers, profoundly embodying the ideals of seclusion, transformation, and harmonious co - existence with nature. This section will explore in detail the identification, transformation processes, and symbolic meanings of these figures from multiple dimensions, aiming to fully uncover the deeper connotations they hold within the painting.

Identification and Characteristics of the Figures

The scroll meticulously portrays eight figures distributed throughout the landscape (As shown in Figure 2). Each figure's position complements the ever - changing scenery in the painting. From right to left, different images emerge successively: a young scholar (Figure A), an elderly scholar (Figure H), a woodcutter (Figure B), a fisherman (Figure C), a scholar sitting in a pavilion (Figure D), and three other fishermen (Figure E, Figure F, & G).

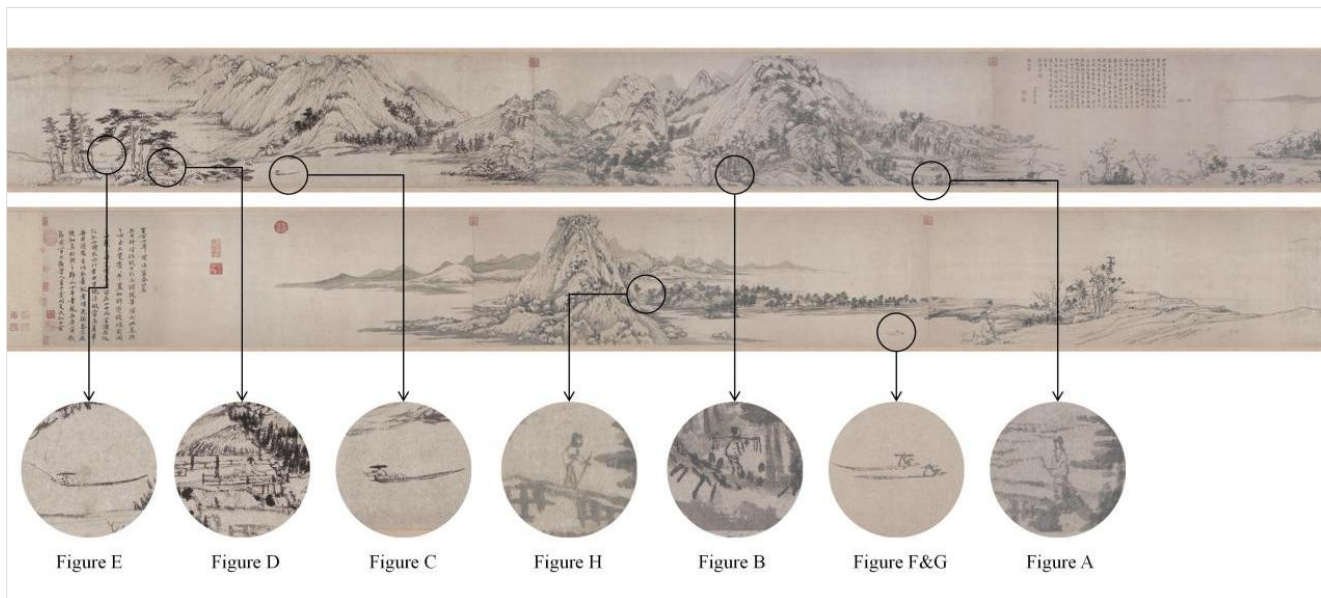


Figure 2. The Distribution of the Figures in Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains

Upon careful observation, these figures can be initially classified into three social identity categories: scholars, fishermen, and woodcutters. However, their significance is by no means limited to the simple representation of occupations. As scholar Li Xin (2022) pointed out, these figures as a whole reflect the characteristics of literati, symbolizing the literati's unrelenting exploration on the path of self-cultivation and their spiritual journey away from the hustle and bustle of the mundane world. The shared characteristics among these figures blur the boundaries of their individual identities, thus making them universal symbols of the artist's philosophical ideals.

A notable example that embodies this overlapping and integration of character identities occurs in a scene with three adjacent figures in the middle of the scroll. A scholar sitting in a pavilion (Figure D) is surrounded by two fishermen (Figure C and Figure E). This layout subtly implies a delicate interaction between the scholar's secluded life and the fishermen's labor. Their strikingly similar postures and attires strongly suggest that they may represent the state transitions of an individual at different stages of life, powerfully reinforcing the cyclical nature of identity and existence (As shown in Figure 3).



Figure 3. The identity transformation between fishermen and scholars

Furthermore, from the perspective of visual representation in the painting, Huang Gongwang depicted the figures in a highly concise manner. The figures are relatively small in proportion to the magnificent landscape background, forming a sharp contrast (As shown in Figure 4). This technique profoundly reflects the Taoist philosophical thought that "Man follows the earth; the earth follows Heaven; Heaven follows the Tao; and the Tao follows what is natural," emphasizing that humans are part of nature and should conform to the way of

nature. At the same time, the distribution of the figures' concealment and appearance also reflects Huang Gongwang's painting concept of integrating humans into the natural landscape, highlighting the aesthetic pursuit of the unity of man and nature. The figures either hide among the mountains and forests or quietly appear by the riverside, setting off against the natural scenery and jointly creating a harmonious and unified artistic conception in the painting (As shown in Figure 5)..



Figure 4. Small Figures in Sharp Contrast to Grand Landscape



Figure 5. The woodcutter hidden in the jungle

Transformation of the Figures

As the viewer's gaze slowly moves from right to left along the scroll, the figures undergo a series of subtle yet profound transformations, with the changes in the fishermen being the most striking. This series of transformations begins with a fisherman fully equipped with a fish basket, ready to

engage in labor (Figure C). As the scene progresses, the subsequent fishermen gradually discard their items (Figure E). By the time the third and fourth fisherman (Figure F&G) appears, both the fish basket and the fishing rod have disappeared. This process of gradual simplification clearly reflects the progressive shedding of worldly burdens, symbolizing a significant transformation from physical labor to spiritual enlightenment (As shown in Figure 6).

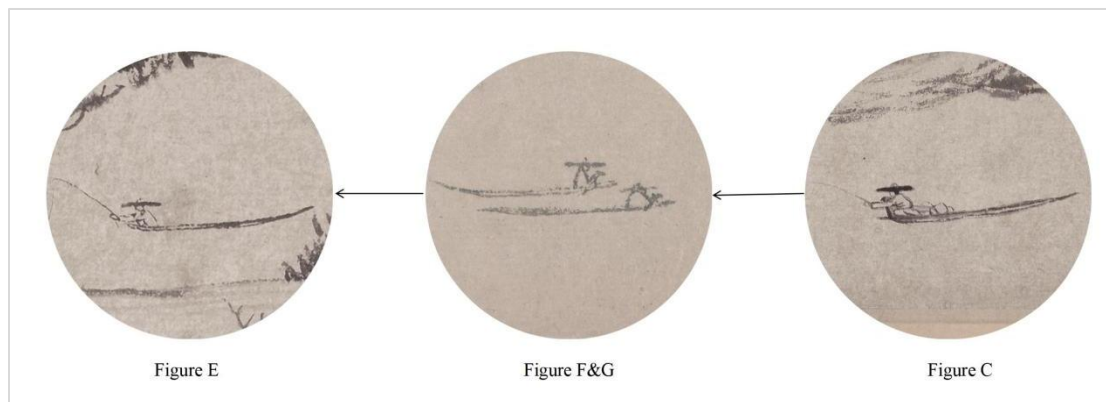


Figure 6. The fishermen gradually discarding their items

This trend of transformation is not limited to the group of fishermen. At the beginning of the scroll, a young scholar (Figure A) stands tall and full of vitality, holding a walking stick, vividly symbolizing the youthful vigor and lofty aspirations. In sharp contrast, the last figure in the scroll (Figure H) is an elderly scholar leaning on a walking stick, marking the end of the life journey. The juxtaposition of the youthful and elderly images at both ends of the scroll vividly reflects the relentless passage of time and the inevitable process of aging, subtly hinting at a life - trajectory transformation from actively pursuing ambitions to deeply reflecting on life (As shown in

Figure 7).

These dynamic changes in the form and attributes of the figures fully demonstrate that Huang Gongwang intended to convey a deeper fable about the fluidity of identity and the possibility of transformation through these figures. The evolving images of the fishermen and the aging scholar together embody the Taoist ideal of harmonious co - existence with nature. In this realm, social roles gradually blend into a unified experience of the world. The individual is no longer bound by fixed identities but achieves transcendence and integration of identity through interaction with nature.



Figure 7. The contrast between the images of the young people and the elderly people at the two ends of the scroll painting.

Symbolic Meanings of the Figures

The figures in *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* are by no means mere decorative elements; they play a crucial role in supporting the overall narrative structure of the painting. Each figure represents a different stage in the literati's pursuit of spiritual enlightenment, touching upon core themes such as seclusion, transformation, and transcendence of social roles. Through the meticulous portrayal of these figures, Huang

Gongwang deeply reflects his disappointment with the officialdom, his inner longing for seclusion in nature, and his personal journey towards ultimate spiritual liberation.

At the beginning of the scroll, the image of the energetic young scholar gazing ahead vividly embodies a strong desire and active pursuit of worldly success. As the scroll unfolds, the successive appearance of the fishermen symbolizes a gradual retreat from such worldly ambitions. They interact directly with

nature in a simpler and unburdened way, demonstrating an attitude of life that transcends the shackles of the mundane world. The scholar sitting in the pavilion, positioned between two fishermen, appropriately showcases a moment of contemplation between active engagement in the world and seclusion from it, a crucial turning point in life's choices. The elderly scholar at the end of the scroll represents a complete acceptance and profound reflection on life, a symbol of wisdom that has achieved harmony with the cyclical nature of life.

This developmental progression of the figures strongly emphasizes Huang Gongwang's firm belief in the Taoist principles of non-attachment to things and the impermanence of material wealth. The process by which the fishermen gradually discard their tools subtly metaphorizes the process of shedding life's burdens and pursuing spiritual freedom, greatly enhancing the philosophical connotation of the painting. The presence of the woodcutters among the figures further deepens this theme, as their labor of removing the superfluous to reveal the essence precisely reflects the continuous refinement in art and spirit that the literati sought.

The beginning and end of the scroll are marked by a young and an elderly scholar respectively, carefully constructing a cyclical narrative structure that perfectly echoes the profound Taoist concept of returning to the origin. The placement of the figures on the bridge further reinforces this cyclicity, vividly symbolizing a profound transformation on both the physical landscape and the inner landscape of the soul. The way the figures walk on the bridge, as if traversing different stages of life, connects the past and the future, embodying a philosophy of life that circulates and repeats in time and space.

In conclusion, the figures in *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* comprehensively summarize Huang Gongwang's artistic philosophy and life experiences. Their subtle transformations and rich symbolic meanings go far beyond the mere surface of the painting, opening a window for viewers to glimpse the spiritual journey within the literati culture of the Yuan Dynasty. Through meticulous analysis, the profound connotations of Huang Gongwang's masterpiece are further revealed, enabling us to more thoroughly appreciate the inseparable relationship between the figures and the surrounding landscape, as well as the profound cultural heritage and philosophical ideas behind the painting. This not only helps us to deeply understand the artistic value of *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*, but also provides a valuable example and inspiration for studying the meanings of figures in ancient Chinese landscape paintings.

CONCLUSION

The figures in *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* are not merely depictions of daily life, but rather symbolic embodiments of the literati's ideals of transcending the mundane world, seclusion, and spiritual enlightenment. The gradual transformation from youthful vitality to elderly contemplation parallels the inevitable trajectory of human

existence, reflecting both personal growth and philosophical development. Through visual and cultural semiotic analyses, this paper has explored how Huang Gongwang's portrayal of these figures reflects his personal life experiences as well as the broader cultural values of the Yuan Dynasty.

The evolving images of the fishermen and scholars highlight the fluidity of identity, reinforcing the Taoist beliefs in the cyclical nature of life and the harmonious co-existence of man and nature. This research enriches the academic discourse on Chinese landscape paintings by revealing how seemingly insignificant figures contribute to the overall narrative and philosophical depth of the work. By delving into the symbolic transformations embedded in *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*, this paper provides a new perspective for understanding the role of figures in conveying the complex spiritual and philosophical messages within Huang Gongwang's masterpiece.

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