

# Reclusive Dwelling Schema of Chinese Landscape Painting: Narrative Medium, Visualization, and Implication<sup>\*</sup>

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The reclusive dwelling is an important part of the traditional philosophical culture of ancient China. The Chinese spiritual imagery of seclusion is mainly represented by narrative mediums of poems, paintings, and garden works, resulting in artistic visualization with poetic implication. The article analyzed six Chinese landscape paintings of reclusive dwelling theme, in terms of narrative medium, visualization, and implication. The intention is to conclude the reclusive dwelling schema of Chinese landscape painting and study a visualizing methodology involved spiritual implication on dwelling, which could be beneficial to both contemporary art and architectural creations.

*Keywords:* reclusive dwelling schema, Chinese landscape painting, visualizing methodology, art and architecture

## Introduction

The reclusive dwelling is an important part of the traditional philosophical culture of ancient China. The ancient idea of seclusion originated from the Taoism philosophy and flourished during the Wei, Jin, and North Dynasties, developing from the early seclusion of the mountains and forests to the seclusion of the court. The art of seclusion theme also often appeared in the poems, paintings, and garden works of literati scholars. In pursuit of the true nature of life and inner peace, or due to political frustration and disillusionment, generations of scholars have chosen to live in seclusion in the mountains and forests. When they could not really live in the mountains and forests, they used poetry, calligraphy, and painting to send their imagination of seclusion. During the Song, Yuan, and Ming dynasties, there were numerous paintings with the theme of seclusion. This type of paintings usually has similar intention and composition, gradually forming a spatial schema of reclusive dwelling with landscape. The article analyzed six Chinese landscape paintings of reclusive dwelling theme, in terms of narrative medium, visualization, and implication. The intention is to conclude the reclusive dwelling schema of Chinese landscape painting and study a visualizing methodology involved spiritual implication on dwelling, which could be beneficial to both contemporary art and architectural creations.

## The Humanist Conception of Landscape

Landscape elements first appeared in China as background settings for narrative as commonly seen around the world. But later, when nature became the main subject of landscape painting, Chinese artist's intention

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was still more than to grasp the beauty of nature. The Chinese landscape painting expressed a profound belief in communion with nature, a cosmic vision of man's harmonious existence in a vast but orderly universe. "From a very early time, a mountain is imagined as an earthly paradise, the abode of the immortals, a spiritual refuge where moral values can be cultivated, an ancient utopia free of warfare and social turmoil" (Fong, 1992, p. 71). Notably, the development of landscape painting occurred during China's long intervals of political disunity, when poets and artists, disenchanted with the world of human affairs, turned away to seek a realm of spiritual enlightenment. After the political fall of the Tang Dynasty, in the early 10th century, many scholars retreated to the mountains. Living in secluded hermitages or Buddhist temples, they attended to their self-cultivation, studying, painting, and thinking about nature and the universe. From the Tang to the Yuan Dynasty, the attitude towards landscape generally shifted to a spiritual domain imbued with human emotion and self-expression.

Mountains in paintings are closely related with human's ideal places, whether as reclusion from the unsatisfied reality or as somewhere to start a spiritual self-cultivation. A man was never treated individually or as essentially different from all other created things. Such a view in China grows into an ideal of harmonious co-operation with nature and this belief has become a central philosophy for more than two thousand years in China. Landscape conveys the artist's ideal-mode of a creative artificiality. It is deeply based on the artist's own life experience and also largely affected by the philosophy of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

Paintings of scholars' gathering are commonly seen in China because these scholar-elites led a long-lost tradition called literati culture. Not merely literate in the poetry, history, and fiction, these scholars are also keen art historians and painters. Their gatherings usually occur in the wide out-of-doors instead of the interior to suggest the harmonious relationship between human and nature. Moreover, scholars are normally officials themselves. Their painting is also called literati painting (wen ren hua 文人画). In paintings, they also use natural settings as shelters to protect themselves from bad conditions—not only of the natural ones, also of the political ones. In a poetic vision, although the places depicted in these landscape paintings may not really exist, the ancient painters' long lasted mode of ideal dwelling places can still be found in the habitations of landscape paintings.

In Li Gonglin's *Dwelling in the Longmian Mountain Villa* scroll, the ecological order of man and nature is reflected in 20 sites of mountain dwelling. The mountainous landscape in this painting is a collage of fragments of landscapes with different geographic features. The mountain villa is encircled by heavy mountain ranges. Various types of caves and mountain platforms have transformed the pristine natural environment. Fields are nourished by the river to adapt to the needs of economic life and agricultural production of human beings. The elegant gatherings of the literati in the paintings take place in large and small caves, on stone platforms and beside waterfronts. The dwellings surrounded by walls and trees suggest the intention of manor houses, and the different places are connected by small bridges and stone paths that appear from time to time, creating the possibility of touring. There are many traces of artificial use and modification of nature in the picture of the manor house, but after the treatment of local conditions, they do not stand out in the overall picture. Here, the humanized nature that has been artificially created and the self-contained nature merge into an organic whole (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Li Gonglin (李公麟); *Dwelling in the Longmian Mountain Villa* 龙眠山庄图; Northern Song Dynasty; handscroll, ink, and color on silk; Palace Museum, Taipei.

### Reclusive Dwelling Schema in a Hanging Scroll of Landscape

As fierce battles raged at the Northern Song court over new reform policies, painters increasingly expressed their ambitions and emotions in landscape paintings. In the 12th century, even a whole generation of talented scholars, philosophers, and painters were exiled for political reasons. In response to political setbacks and career disillusionment, scholar-authors chose a life of seclusion and self-improvement—an escape to the mountains. However, some of them, constrained by their duties, could not actually live in the mountains, and had to exploit the image of seclusion through three excellencies—poetry, calligraphy, and painting. In the occasion of seclusion paintings, we can find numerous examples in the Song, Yuan, and Ming Dynasties. Following the same meaning, the compositions are normally similar—a spatial schema of reclusive dwelling in mountains.

For example, in the painting *Riverbank* (Figure 2), the mountain boulders are stacked diagonally across the picture plane and the mountain slope in the upper-right corner suggests a structure that continues into another space. *Riverbank* shares the theme of reclusion with another important landscape painting datable to the 10th century: *The Lofty Scholar Liang Boluan* (Figure 3). The pictorial structures follow the meaning: “One closed-in part containing the recluse’s dwelling and representing the idea of seclusion, and one part that opens outward signifying the option of venturing out, when one pleases, into the great world” (Cahill, 1999, p. 41).





Figure 2. Attributed to Dong Yuan (董源, active ca. 930s-960s); *Riverbank* 溪岸图; hanging scroll; ink and color on silk, 221 x 109 cm; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

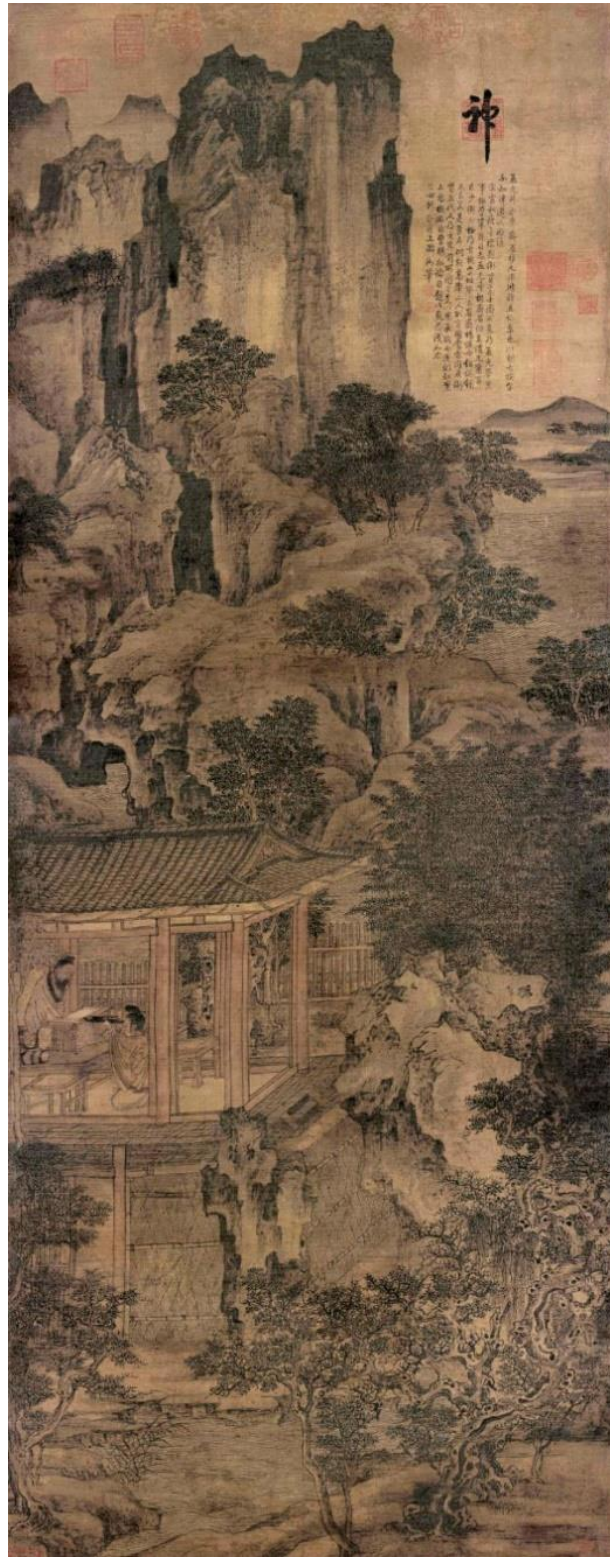


Figure 3. Wei Xian (卫贤, active ca. 960-975); *The Lofty Scholar Liang Boluan* 高士图; hanging scroll; ink and color on silk, 134.5 x 52.5 cm; Palace Museum, Beijing.

Human activities in the paintings also contribute to the complex narrative structure. Comparing to the tiny figures in a monumental landscape, the humans here appear to be relatively larger in scale. In the pavilions of both paintings, joined by their families, the scholars are leaning on writing tables doing self-cultivation. Interestingly, in the painting of Dong Yuan, the darkening sky, the bent trees, and the travelers who are seeking for shelters in thatch cloaks, are announcing the approach of a storm. The pavilion more than a shelter for a storm is also a metaphoric sanctuary from political chaos (Hearn & Fong, 1999).

In the 14th-century Yuan Dynasty, after the Mongol conquest of the Song Dynasty, many of the leading landscape painters were literati who did not serve in office because they did not want to serve the conquerors. Their political statement drove to a Renaissance of literati landscape paintings. The cultivated landscape embodied both learned references to the styles of their earlier masters, and through calligraphic brushwork, the inner spirit of the artists. Going beyond representation, scholar-artists imbued their paintings with personal feelings. Master painter of the Yuan, Wang Meng (ca. 1308-1385), re-creates the vision of reclusion with his personal graphic language. Wang Meng spent much of his life in retirement, residing at Yellow Crane Mountain on the northeast of Hangzhou, and he made reclusion one of the dominant themes of his art.

In Wang Meng's painting *Simple Retreat*, the rustic hermitages are built individually or around courtyards. Human figures are livelily inhabited in the paintings: Master gentlemen gaze out from prominent positions at the front gate; a servant offers herbs to a crane in the courtyard, and other approaches two deer; women are hidden on the backyards or behind mountains; a fisherman sits on a hanging board attached to a cottage...The simplicity of the figures and dwelling, protected by overarching mountains and trees, evoke a dreamlike vision of reclusion (Figure 4).

During the Yuan Dynasty, a large category of reclusion paintings is made for portrayals of people's retirement dwellings, or villas, with the surrounding sceneries. These paintings were painted for presentation to a person, either by the artist himself or by someone who commissioned the picture. Wang Meng depicted scholars in their retreats, creating imaginary portraits that capture not the physical likeness of a person or place but rather an interior world of shared associations and ideals.

Yuan Dynasty painter Ni Zan also depicted a same scene over and over again, giving his works different names to present to different people as portraits of their retirement dwellings. The pavilion, a fixed symbol, appears in all nine of his works, but the purpose of the painting is not to show the actual appearance of the location. Only when linked to distant mountains, rivers, and trees, the pavilion completed the intention to constitute a serene, indifferent image of seclusion. The jump from the small pavilion to the natural grandeur of heaven and earth is in fact a transcendence of Ni Zan's current life of hardship, and expresses his longing to be free from the earthly world and to realize his spiritual freedom. He repeated the composition of trees by the lakeshore as a symbol of himself and his world, creating serial images as a kind of journal in which he recorded his thoughts and impressions (Fong, 1992).

The "Peach-Blossom Spring" theme is one of the most representative reclusive dwelling example. It is based on a story told by the fourth-century poet Tao Yuanming. Tao Yuanming is presentative as hermits who stay out of office by their "homecoming". He retired from an official post to live on his farm in the country and write poems about the pleasures of the recluse's life. In the story, a fisherman loses his way and finds himself in the land of peach blossoms, a realm where time has been suspended. The villagers he meets there are descendants of those who have escaped from the ravages of the war during the years of the Qin Dynasty. Painting depicting this theme often follows a similar composition, as stated by Cahill:



the closed-in part representing the hidden valley, where people who fled from a tyrant century earlier have been living since then in peace, and the opening-out part signifying the fisherman's passage up the stream from the town where he started his journey. (Cahill, 1999, p. 43)

In both painting and literature, the narrative of the journey to explore the village hermitage is more attracting than the place description. Because the narrative has enhanced the seclusion of the place. And the beginning and the ending of the story usually take up most of the pictorial space in the Peach-Blossom Spring schema.



Figure 4. Wang Meng (王蒙); *Simple Retreat* 素庵图; Yuan Dynasty (ca. 1370); hanging scroll; ink and color on paper, 136.5 x 44.8 cm; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

### Reclusive Dwelling in Handscroll of Literati Garden

Great philosopher Heidegger wisely declared that building is a form of dwelling, and dwelling is a form of thinking. Similarly, the Chinese literati men build dwellings of seclusion in landscape paintings as well as in real gardens to imply a thinking. Both convey the wish to live in a man-made world free of social turmoil. One of the

most well-known examples is the Wang Chuan Villa made during the Tang Dynasty. It was located along the Wang River some 30 miles north of the Tang capital by Wang Wei (AD 701-761) who was a painter, calligrapher, musician, and also a famous poet. The real villa disappeared but the scroll painting of Wang Chuan Villa still recorded Wang Wei's retreat in transforming natural settings artfully into human environments. Wang Wei was also credited for the invention of scroll since we can still see space-cells linked to each other in the painting (Figure 5). The garden and the scroll convey the same experience over durational time and the garden becomes a three-dimensional walking experience through the progression of the scroll. The Wang Chuan Villa painting was endlessly copied and recopied, not only because of the charm of the real place but also for the spiritual character of the artist, who was a model of a cultivated gentleman for future generations. Wang Wei's calligraphy, poetry, painting, and garden altogether reflected the quality of the man.



Figure 5. Attributed to Weng Zhengming (文征明); *Scroll of Wang Chuan Villa* 辋川别业图卷; The Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, Eugene.

*Scroll of Wang Chuan Villa* records how Wang Wei skillfully transformed the natural environment into a humanistic place suitable for seclusion, which became the classic pattern of secluded life. The site of Wang River is surrounded by mountains, backed by mountains and facing water, and has an ideal construction pattern. There are 21 scenes in the *Scroll of Wang Chuan Villa*, the names of which are written on the top of the picture. In this painting, natural landscape takes up the most of the composition, with fewer artificial constructions, such as Huazi Gang, Wang Kou Manor, Wen Xing Pavilion, Linhu Pavilion, and Zhuli Pavilion, etc. The architectural dwelling was scattered in the layout, adapted to the local conditions. Most of them adopt the gardening technique of borrowing scenery from the natural landscape, and they are designed and built according to the needs of the people. For example, Huazi Gang uses the rolling hills as a backdrop, introducing the mountains into the garden. The buildings in this garden are three courtyards with a fence, containing spaces for planting and production as



well as for living, which expresses the ideal lifestyle of farmers' cultivation and study in seclusion. The Linhu Pavilion is located in a vast lake as a viewpoint at the same time. It borrows the view of the lake from afar, making it a counterpoint to the lake. Wang Wei's poem describes the function of the Linhu Pavilion in welcoming guests: "The light barge welcomes the guests, coming up to the lake at a leisurely pace. When the pavilion is facing the wine, the hibiscus opens on all sides". In the poem, mountains and gullies, the lake and the pavilion form a natural landscape painting. The Jukli Pavilion is the last building of the scroll, built in the depths of the bamboo forest, as a courtyard space for the owner to stay and live. The building is surrounded by a densely planted bamboo forest, and the combination of real and imaginary space expresses the tranquil and simple mood of seclusion. Wang Wei's "Rim River Collection—Bamboo Pavilion" poem wrote: "Sitting alone in the secluded grove, playing the zither and wailing. Deep forest people do not know, the bright moon to illuminate each other". The Zen in the poem is inspired by the natural landscape, and the bamboo sea and mountains as the architectural backdrop integrate the habitat into the natural environment without any trace. The Huazi Gang is surrounded by mountains and water, the Linhu Pavilion by the lake, and the Zhuli Pavillion hidden deep in the bamboo forest. Each of these monolithic buildings has its own distinctive features, and the different kinds of natural scenery together with the buildings form a multi-layered and vivid landscape.

The origin of literati gardens can be traced back to the period of Wei, Jin, North, and South Dynasties, developed in the Tang Dynasty to the Yuan Dynasty, and reached a flourishing situation in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. From the Ming Dynasty onwards, literati gardens gradually detached from economic production, transformed into a purely elegant art, so the aesthetic interest and life experience in the garden are much more important than the actual material function of the garden. Ming Dynasty literati man Wen Zhenheng pointed out in the book *Superfluous Things* that the first choice of garden planning is to dwell in the landscape. Even when one has to make a garden in the city, the goal is to achieve the spiritual domain of a realm that "let the elders forget their age, let the guests forget to return, and let the tourists forget to get tired". Reading Chinese landscape painting is the premise of understanding the connotation of garden creation, both realizing the ideal of landscape alternative.

The number of private gardens, especially in the region surrounding Suzhou in southern China, grew steadily from the 12th century onwards. However, it is impossible to see and understand a garden without having some appreciation of Chinese landscape painting. Both were alternative solutions in a microcosm of nature when complete freedom in nature was difficult to realize (Keswick, 1980). Almost all garden creators were also painters. For example, it is believed that the painters Ni Zan and Weng Zhengming were also involved in the design of the Shi Zi Lin and Zhuo Zheng Yuan gardens which still exist today as two of the most famous gardens in Suzhou Province. When garden designers contemplated real mountains, they saw them through eyes educated by a thousand years of landscape painting training. For them, being in the garden is like dwelling in the painting, with the same mental concerns.

In private gardens, even a single rock may represent a complete range of mountains with their essence concentrated. In the same microcosmic view, a landscape painting and a garden painting can be similar. But what differs is that in gardens, there is a closing wall around in most of the cases. The walls are to eventually block out the surrounding human activities so that the inside world could be turned back again to a peaceful world of

nature. Despite the walls, depictions of gardens may also include the elements of fantastic Taihu Rocks<sup>1</sup> or the artificial mountains. Actually, artists also try to blur the limitations between a garden painting and a landscape painting by deliberately playing with the relation between the natural and artificial elements. Therefore, it is sometimes hard for the viewers to distinguish between a real hill and an artificial mountain in paintings, as well as between a tree inside the garden and one outside it. Is one representing the other, or in fact both are wild, or both of them are artificial? Artists express their ideal mode of dwelling in nature through imaginary gardens since even if a garden painting describes an existing garden, they are not exactly the same.

The *East Garden Picture* depicts the beauty of the East Garden (Figure 6), the most famous garden in the ancient Jinling capital. In a piece of lush and ancient trees, you can enter the central building “Xinyuan Hall” along the walkway. In front of the hall, there are towering ancient trees and strange stones on the platform. In the hall, a few scholars are leisurely drinking and playing. Chinese gardens were in many cases the places for social and literary gatherings because the ideal was also to give enjoyment to many people. The literati gathered at one another’s homes to converse, to view works of art, to listen to music, to paint, and to compose poetry. In the pool behind the hall, there are pavilions along the poolside, with a two-story one as an excellent viewpoint. A little pavilion in the garden, despite providing a shelter, also serves as a place for contemplation. The site to locate a pavilion is always well chosen, to have a good view of the whole garden or of the far-distant mountains, so that the man inside it could perceive the fullness of the landscape “borrowed” by the pavilion, which is also the man’s way of viewing the world. The entire scroll unfolds with the walkthrough of the garden as the horizontal main axis, and the building in the center divides the picture space of the scroll into two, corresponding to the east and west parts of the East Garden. Elements such as houses, pavilions, fences, trees, rocks, bamboo forests, and water, as well as symbols of the literati and attendants, recur in Wen Zhengming’s paintings, as components making up a literati garden. In the designing of Ming Dynasty private gardens, painters and gardeners were skillful in borrowing the scenery and miniaturizing nature. Paintings and gardens are artistic mediums for literati man to reflect the microcosm philosophy of creating an infinite world in a limited space.



Figure 6. Wen Zhengming (文征明); *East Garden* 东园图; 1530; scroll; ink and color on silk, 30 x 126 cm; Palace Museum, Beijing.

## Conclusion

The reclusive dwelling schema of Chinese landscape painting is analyzed through six Chinese landscape paintings of reclusive dwelling theme, in terms of narrative medium, visualization, and implication. The format of long and narrow scroll plays a significant role in communicating philosophical ideas to viewers by facilitating

<sup>1</sup> Rocks gathered from the lake of Tai in Zhejiang Province by their particular forms were widely used in the Chinese gardens. Especially appreciated by the ancient scholars, the work of the rocks has become a kind of art.

pictorial narrative. In a hanging scroll, the schema of juxtaposing a closed-in dwelling and a venturing out landscape conveys a metaphysical thinking of seclusion. Whereas when represented in a horizontal handscroll, reclusive dwelling in a garden is usually the theme because the walkthrough experience of Chinese classical garden can be captured by its narrative longitude. The touring experience is the core of Chinese traditional gardening because only by wandering in a garden can the humanist conception of landscape be realized.

The Chinese spiritual imagery of reclusion is mainly represented by narrative mediums of poems, paintings, and garden works, resulting in artistic visualization with poetic implication.

By analyzing similar imagery brought by poem, painting, and garden, the article also revealed a visualizing methodology involved spiritual implication on poetic dwelling. This methodology is still highly qualified in our modern age when witnessing visual hegemony and spiritual deprivation in the creation of contemporary art and architecture.

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