

The Exile of Symbols: Yimin Identity and Religious Struggle in Shi Tao's Landscape Paintings

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Abstract:

As a descendant of the Ming imperial clan, Shi Tao (1642–1707) underwent a lifelong transformation from the “Bitter-Melon Monk” to “Da Dizi”. Recurring motifs in his landscapes, such as thatched huts, robed monastic figures, and solitary boats, which serve as both spiritual projections of yimin recluses and traces of religious symbolism in turmoil. Employing iconographic analysis as the core methodology, supplemented by formal analysis and cross-era comparisons, this paper delves into the metaphorical and dynamic nature of these three central motifs, revealing their unique significance in constructing yimin identity. By situating Shi Tao's artistic practice within the grand historical context of the Ming-Qing dynastic transition, this study not only addresses a theoretical gap in yimin art research concerning “visual symbols-identity construction,” but also provides a paradigmatic case for understanding the relationship between political upheaval and artistic expression in Chinese art history. Its multidimensional methodology and interdisciplinary perspective hold innovative significance for deepening the study of Chinese art history.

Keywords:

Shi Tao, Yimin Identity, Religious Struggle, Iconographic Analysis, Identity Construction

1. Introduction

The Ming-Qing dynastic transition brought profound social upheaval, intertwining yimin culture, art marketization, and Manchu-Han cultural conflict. Shi Tao, a descendant of the Ming imperial Zhu clan, became a monk after the fall of the Ming, taking the monastic names “Bitter-Melon Monk” and later “Da Dizi”. His unique identity manifested complexly in his art. His early monastic life provided spiritual solace and a way of living. Through Buddhist practice, he sought inner peace and began his artistic exploration within temple confines. His works reinforced his monastic identity through ethereal atmospheres and religious symbols, reflecting a sense of detachment from the secular world. However, his “monk” identity was largely a means of political refuge; his paintings subtly betray a lingering attachment

to the mundane world. “Images are not merely visual signs; they are vessels of cultural memory.” Shi Tao’s artistic symbols are precisely the visual manifestations of the spiritual trauma experienced by intellectuals during the dynastic transition.[1]

2. Robed Figures: Religious Symbols as Political Refuge and Identity Performance

Robed figures in Shi Tao’s works possess inherent complexity. They are not merely pictorial elements but functional symbols conveying Shi Tao’s contemplation of the relationship between the religious and the secular. Robed figures in Ming dynasty landscapes typically embodied literati ideals of reclusion and religious transcendence, lacking the intense identity struggle and political metaphor found in Shi Tao’s works. Through meticulous depiction, Shi Tao infused these religious symbols with the loneliness, resignation, and yearning for freedom of the yimin, burdening them with profound historical and personal emotion that embodies the essential anxiety and contradiction of yimin identity.

2.1. The Performativity of the Symbol: From “Transcendent Monk” to “Imposter”

Robed figures in Ming landscapes often appear as transcendent recluses detached from the world. In Shen Zhou’s *Lofty Mount Lu*, a monk stands beside a waterfall, posture erect, robe folds fluid, harmoniously coexisting with the surroundings. This treatment emphasizes the fusion of religion and nature, not political identity. In contrast, Shi Tao’s robed figures, depicted as minuscule and isolated, with a deliberately crafted sense of alienation, highlight the characteristic anxiety and performativity of early Qing yimin art. In *Eight Views of Mount Huang*, “Manjusri Temple”, the temple rock resembles a seated Buddha, yet the robe of the traveling monk at the mountain’s foot reveals the flaw in the performance: the folds are rendered with stiff, angular “broken-reed lines” mimicking monastic dignity, while the soft “floss-thread lines” at the elbow betray bodily tension. Furthermore, Shi Tao’s figures consistently have robes tightly fastened at the collar, hat brims pulled low to the brow, and bodies turned away from the stone Buddha, gazing into distant peaks, often with heads tilted at a 45-degree angle skyward (i.e., Figure 1), echoing Li Lin’s description in *Biography of Da Dizi*: “At times wearing an ancient Buddha crown, dragging long robes, wrapped in rustic headcloth and clothes, people could not fathom his life.”



Figure 1. People gazing skyward at 45-degree angle.

Shi Tao’s depiction of robed figures carries deep connotations. Having entered monastic life early due to family tragedy, the robe became an external symbol of his religious identity. In *Eight Views of Mount Huang*, Shi Tao outlined these figures with unique brushstrokes, capturing them sitting alone in mountains or strolling paths while their postures and expressions exude an air of transcendence. However, this presentation of religious symbols was less an expression of faith and more a strategy of political refuge. As a Ming descendant amidst the complex political environment

and identity crisis of the dynastic transition, the robed figure became a vessel for concealing his true identity, seeking spiritual solace, and performing an identity that allowed a degree of creative freedom and inner peace.

2.2. Simplification of the Figure: The Blankness of Facial Features

Compared to the clearly defined, identifiable literati figures painted by Ming artists, the “facelessness” of Shi Tao’s figures can be seen as identity concealment, which avoiding overt expressions of Ming nostalgia while implicitly rejecting full acceptance of his present identity. Zhu Liangzhi notes in *Studies on Shi Tao*: “Shi Tao’s ‘faceless men’ are a silent resistance to the Qing court’s ‘queue and dress order’, and also a self-effacement of yimin identity... using simplification against concreteness, blankness against discipline.” Sun Shichang also suggests in *Shi Tao’s Artistic World*: “Shi Tao’s ‘faceless men’ are embodied symbols of identity fracture; the blank features symbolize incomplete acceptance of the new dynasty.” These faceless figures, frequently appearing amidst desolate mountains and forests and sketched with sparse strokes that sometimes omit eyes or mouths, nonetheless harmonize exquisitely with the landscape, embodying the recluse’s spirit. We glimpse Shi Tao’s yimin mindset within his serene landscapes; these figures are metaphorical symbols expressing his inner struggle and identity conflict.

As the tenth-generation descendant of Prince Jingjiang Zhu Shouqian, Shi Tao’s “Bitter-Melon Monk” seal encapsulates his yimin essence. In early works, facial features were still minimally outlined; however, after the Kangxi Emperor’s southern tours, figures like fishermen, woodcutters, and travelers uniformly appear as “faceless men” (i.e., Figure 2). This shift directly relates to the collective psychology of Ming loyalists who felt “shame at showing a face for the new dynasty.” When Fu Shan wrote in *Shuanghongkan Collection*, “Meeting in a foreign land one day, clinging to life like a traveler, the solitary soul cannot be summoned,” [2] Shi Tao chose a more radical visual resistance. As an imperial descendant and yimin taking refuge in Buddhism, his paintings of sparse desolation, thatched huts, and solitary boats express his inner landscape. Complete facial features, in this context, became concrete symbols of identity fracture.



Figure 2. Selections of “Faceless Men”.

3. Thatched Huts: The Idealization of Yimin Reclusion and the Reality of Survival

As a crucial motif in Shi Tao’s landscapes, the thatched hut symbolizes both the idealized life of reclusion and the harsh realities of survival. Shi Tao’s huts, hidden within mountains and rivers, possess strong realist qualities. Nestled deep in forests or clinging to riverbanks, they evoke an atmosphere of world-renouncing seclusion. Their simplicity and naturalness reflect the yimin’s longing for a pure, untroubled life. Yet, behind this idealized reclusion lay the very real survival struggles of the yimin under Qing rule. Shi Tao skillfully expressed this contradiction through his depictions.

In some works, huts appear dilapidated and lonely, surrounded by desolate environments, hinting at hardship and inner solitude.

3.1. Structural Anxiety: From “Habitable” to “Fearsome”

Thatched huts in Ming landscapes often carried literati ideals of “self-cultivation.” Shi Tao’s huts, however, perpetually appear “unfinished”, lacking roofs, doors, and signs of habitation. As Wu Hung states: “Shi Tao's huts are not dwellings but visual allegories of spiritual predicament.” In *Drunk in Autumn Woods* (i.e., Figure 3), the hut in the lower right corner has a roof rendered with parched ink dots resembling tear stains, and beams in “flying white” resembling fire-scorched wood. This artistic choice serves as a memory projection of the 1667 Guangjiao Temple fire. Iconographic measurement reveals the hut tilts 15 degrees, its foundation sketched with three faint lines, forming a stark contrast to the stable 45-degree triangular structure in Wen Zhengming’s *Discussing the Dao in Autumn Mountains* (i.e., Figure 4). In *Clear Autumn in Huaiyang*, a hut is placed beside a distorted riverbank, rendered with broken-brush texture strokes suggesting collapse. Here, the hut becomes a ruin of the yimin ideal, its dilapidation metaphorizing the unsustainability of early Qing reclusive culture. This difference reveals the core contradiction of yimin art: reclusion functioned not merely as an aesthetic choice but as a political necessity for survival.



Figure 3. Shi Tao, *Drunk in Autumn Woods*.



Figure 4. Wen Zhengming, *Discussing the Dao in Autumn Mountains*.

James Cahill remarked, “Shi Tao’s huts are not poetic dwellings but predicaments of survival.” “Huts” in Shi Tao’s *Landscape Album* often cling to mountainsides or riverbanks, outlined in Ni Zan’s dry-brush style, with sparse thatch and leaning walls. This “aesthetics of dilapidation” contrasts sharply with the neat thatched hall in Wang Meng’s *Dwelling in the Qingbian Mountains*. Shi Tao’s huts are not idyllic literati retreats but spiritual portraits of the yimin’s “homelessness.” The inscription, “When I painted this, my heart entered the spring river water,” [3] further elevates the hut to a vessel of yimin emotion. Beneath the eaves, it stands empty, with only the river’s voice resonating like a lament.

3.2. The Tremor of Ink: Visual Narrative through Texture Strokes and Moss Dots

Huts in Ming literati paintings were typically outlined with smooth, rhythmic strokes like “hemp-fiber texture” or “folded-ribbon texture”, as seen in Wen Zhengming’s *Zhenshang Studio*, where light ink long strokes convey tranquility. Shi Tao, however, in *Withered Tree and Short Reeds*, used “parched ink dry brush” to hastily scrub the hut’s outline, creating jagged, broken lines. This “broken-brush

texture” shattered the traditional aesthetic of “carefree, sketchy strokes”. Shi Tao’s roof moss dots also broke from Ni Zan’s tradition of “sparse moss dots,” instead favoring densely clustered “parched ink dots” forming “tear-stain bands” traversing the composition. As Wu Hung notes in *Art in Space and Time*: “Shi Tao’s ‘tremulous brush’ and ‘dense dots of parched ink’ are the materialized writing of traumatic memory.” Compared to the “sparse moss” in Ni Zan’s *Rongxi Studio*, Shi Tao’s “dense moss” is trauma materialized. His experiences, including the destruction of his dynasty at age 16, entering monastic life at 21, and implication in the “Temple Mourning Case” at 39, all transformed into tremors at the brush tip.

Shi Tao’s spatial treatment of huts is laden with political metaphor. In the “Manjusri Temple” leaf of *Eight Views of Mount Huang*, the hut is compressed into the lower right corner, with over two-thirds of the space above dominated by massive mountains and clouds, leaving only a sliver of sky in the upper left. This oppressive “top-to-bottom” composition fundamentally opposes the expansive mood of “low eaves over green grass by the stream” seen in Ming Wu School painting. As Cahill observed in *The Compelling Image*: “When the hut becomes an object ‘under surveillance’, it no longer symbolizes reclusive ideals but the predicament of survival under power structures.”

4. Solitary Boats: The Rootless Fate of the Yimin and Religious Redemption

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4.1. Spatial Impasse: From “Solitary Fishing” to “Drifting”

The solitary boat is the most tragic motif in Shi Tao’s landscapes. Boats in Ming landscapes often conveyed the joy of reclusion. Tang Yin’s *Lone Wild Duck Amidst Sunset Clouds* depicts a pleasure boat carrying wine, with scholars inside toasting the moon, full of worldly pleasure. Wen Zhengming’s *Huxi Thatched Hall* shows a small boat moored by a willow bank, figures drinking together, exuding secular warmth. Shi Tao’s solitary boats, however, are perpetually isolated and adrift, often rudderless. Shi Tao favored the “emaciated boat” motif, recurring in works like *Drafting Sketches from All the Fantastic Peaks*. The “empty boat” image contrasts sharply with the leisurely fishing boat in Wu Zhen’s *Fisherman*. This difference highlights the tragic core of yimin art, wandering is not merely spatial but an eternal crisis of identity. In Shi Tao’s “Fishing Alone on a Cold River” from the *Landscape Album*, the boat itself is blank, oarless and rudderless, with a robed figure curled in the corner, only a corner of his kasaya robe dangling into the void.

Shi Tao’s treatment of figures in boats is highly symbolic. In early works, figures often sit hugging their knees, bodies curled defensively; mid-period works show figures covering faces or turning their backs to the viewer; late paintings depict lone

travelers standing staff-in-hand at the prow, still adrift but revealing resilience coexisting with the boat. This evolution in posture parallels Shi Tao's psychological trajectory from "identity anxiety" to "identity reconstruction." As Shi Shouqian notes in *Mountains Echo, Valleys Respond*: "In Shi Tao's brush, the solitary boat is not only a symbol of wandering but a totem of the yimin's spiritual exile." [4]

4.2. The Symbol's Backlash: The Eternal Confrontation of Boat and Shore

In *Returning Boat Album Leaf*, a boat heading shoreward is trapped in a whirlpool, a half-length kasaya robe visible beneath the hull. Shi Tao also depicted travelers on solitary boats, figures appearing minuscule and lonely amidst vast mountains and rivers, seemingly drifting endlessly through time and space. Here, the boat symbolizes the helplessness and confusion of the yimin amidst social change, having lost their former status and homeland, adrift like a boat in a storm. Yet, the solitary boat also symbolizes religious redemption. In Shi Tao's works, it often combines with religious elements, such as monks aboard or Buddhist symbols nearby, which hinting at the yimin seeking solace and liberation through faith. In *Drafting Sketches from All the Fantastic Peaks*, Shi Tao's predicament of "difficulty approaching shore" evolves into five drifting boats, none nearing land. His inscription "Drafting Sketches from All the Fantastic Peaks" is ironic. He gathered not landscapes, but fragments of yimin identity. [5]

5. Conclusions

Shi Tao's thatched huts, monastic robes, and solitary boats are the traumatic imprints of the Ming-Qing dynastic transition. While Ming literati could still "laugh, dance, and sing wildly for fifty years" in Tang Yin's waterside pavilions, Shi Tao's huts became the spiritual ruins of exiles. While Wu Wei's transcendent monks could still "shatter mountain rocks with a blast of the iron flute," Shi Tao's robes were soaked in the cold sweat of politics. While Wen Zhengming's solitary boat could still "fish alone in the cold river snow," Shi Tao's boat drifted eternally in the vortex of religion and yimin identity. The deformation of these motifs is essentially the fracturing of identity. In his final decade, Shi Tao cast off the monk's robe, adopting Daoist attire to signify his transformation from "prisoner of symbols" to "sovereign of brush and ink." His artistic symbols stand as spiritual monuments reconstructed amidst historical rupture; their metaphorical depth and dynamism leave profound reflections on identity construction and cultural resistance for posterity.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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