

Article

Transforming Inner Alchemical Vision into Painting: Huang Gongwang's *Clearing after Sudden Snow*

Ziyun Liu

Institute of Philosophy, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing 100732, China; lziyun@wisc.edu

Abstract: This paper argues that the Yuan dynasty Daoist Huang Gongwang's 黄公望 (1269–1354) painting *Clearing after Sudden Snow* resonates with the principles of inner alchemy (*neidan*, 内丹), particularly the stage known as the resurgence of *yang* force. Within this painting, four prominent visual elements—the sun, the spirit room, the cliff, and the snowy mountains—come together to imbue the painting with a rich tapestry of inner alchemical connotations. They collectively portray the sequential stages of cultivation, refinement, and transformation in the context of inner alchemy. The painting not only captures the moment of transition where the snow-covered terrain is gradually transforming into a fresh and awakened state, but it also embodies a visual metaphor for the inner alchemical transformative journey. Furthermore, each individual who engages with the painting may undergo their own personal transformation through the act of contemplation and reflection.

Keywords: Quanzhen Daoism; Huang Gongwang; inner alchemy; inner landscape; landscape paintings

1. Introduction

With the development of Quanzhen 全真 Daoism and inner alchemy (*neidan* 内丹), Daoists start to visualize the interior of the human body as a microcosm reflecting the natural phenomena of the macrocosm. The goal of inner alchemy is to join the “natural ingredients” in a symbolic crucible and refine them through the metaphorical furnace located within the human body. Consequently, inner alchemical graphic representations of the body often depict the human body microcosmically with an inner landscape.¹ This visual portrayal of the inner alchemical journey served as inspiration for Daoist practitioners to translate their visionary experiences into the realm of landscape paintings. The visual iconography, metaphors, and principles of inner alchemy were skillfully incorporated into the representation of landscape, leveraging its inherent nature of encompassing both time and space. As a result, landscape painting emerged as the most effective medium for portraying the field of life or the transformative progression within the practitioner. It not only reveals the inner structure of the body but also unveiled the intricate mechanisms of inner energies.

Daoist literati Huang Gongwang 黄公望 (1269–1354) was a pioneer in weaving the inner landscape of the body into the fabric of the cosmos. By analyzing Huang Gongwang's (1269–1354) *Clearing after Sudden Snow* 快雪時晴圖, this paper argues that this painting resonates with the principles of inner alchemy, particularly the stage known as *yi yang lai fu* 一陽來復 (the resurgence of *yang* force). By delving into the symbolic elements and their connection to Daoist inner alchemy, the reinterpretation of Huang Gongwang's painting offers a fresh perspective on the artist's intentions and the underlying spiritual dimensions that permeate his creation. It serves as a testament to the transcendent potential of visual art, showcasing its capacity to become a powerful conduit for conveying religious concepts. In this way, Huang Gongwang's paintings act as a bridge, seamlessly uniting theoretical principles with tangible artistic expressions, and inviting viewers to embark on a contemplative journey.



Citation: Liu, Ziyun. 2023. Transforming Inner Alchemical Vision into Painting: Huang Gongwang's *Clearing after Sudden Snow*. *Religions* 14: 861. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14070861>

Academic Editors: Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky and Tianshu Zhu

Received: 27 December 2022

Revised: 24 June 2023

Accepted: 28 June 2023

Published: 30 June 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

2. Huang Gongwang and His Inner Alchemy Practice

Huang Gongwang, style name Ziji 子久 and sobriquets Dachi Daoren 大癡道人 (Big Fool Pursuing the Dao) and Yifeng Daoren 一峰道人 (Daoist of One Peak), is a widely acknowledged painter in his generation and beyond.² As the head of the acknowledged “Four Masters” of the Yuan period (1279–1368), he stands at a pivotal midpoint between such ancient masters as Dong Yuan 董源 (934–962) and Ju Ran 巨然 (fl. 10 CE) in the Five Dynasties period and Shen Zhou 沈周 (1427–1509), Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555–1636), and the Four Wangs of the Ming and Qing dynasties.³ Huang supplanted many earlier artists as the favored model for later landscape painters (Cahill 1976, p. 85).

Born in 1269 in Changshu 常熟 city, Jiangsu Province, Huang Gongwang (originally named Lu Jia 陸堅) entered a world marked by intense warfare and political instability.⁴ Huang Gongwang, like many scholars of the time, faced limited opportunities for official positions due to the suspension of civil examinations by the Mongol rulers. Despite eventually securing a role as a secretary in the metropolitan Censorate, he became embroiled in a slander case involving Minister Zhang Lü 張閭 (active 1306–1314) in 1315, leading to imprisonment on charges of tax irregularities. Ironically, it was the same year that Emperor Renzong 仁宗 (1285–1320) of the Yuan dynasty decided to reinstate the civil examination. Following his release from prison, he supported himself through divination in the Hangzhou and Suzhou areas. At the age of 61 in 1329, he withdrew from public life and embraced Quanzhen Daoism.

Following his withdrawal from public life, Huang Gongwang chose a life of seclusion in the mountainous regions of Fuchun 富春.⁵ He gained widespread recognition as a distinguished practitioner of inner alchemy, with his teachings being documented in the Daoist Canon. There are three inner alchemy treatises in the Daoist Canon associated with him, *Secret Instructions on Holding the One and Encasing the Three* 抱一守三訣 (DZ 576);⁶ *Straight-forward Directions on Quanzhen by Sir Paper Boat* 紙舟先生全真直指 (DZ 242); and *Alchemical Instructions of the Old Man Three Peaks, the Master Holding the One* 抱一子三峰老人丹訣 (DZ 281). It should be noted that all three treatises are attributed to the compiler Jin Yueyan 金月岩 and are titled “Successor of the Authentic Lineage of Quanzhen by Jin Yueyan, Transmitted by the Big Fool of Quanzhen, Huang Gongwang.”⁷ Therefore, these three texts are compiled by Jin Yueyan, namely Daoist Jin Zhiyang (金志揚, 1276–1336), with Huang Gongwang serving as the transmitter. The arrangement of their names in this manner also signifies Huang Gongwang’s adherence to his teacher’s teachings, and the three treatises represent their shared perspectives and beliefs.

Upon examining the contents of these three treatises, it becomes evident that the inner alchemy doctrines of Huang and Jin draw from both the Southern and Northern lineages of Quanzhen. These lineages were established by influential figures such as Zhang Boduan 張伯端 (987–1082) and Wang Chongyang 王重陽 (1112–1170). The treatises emphasize the importance of the “reversing path” in alchemical practice, particularly the concept of *jinye huandan* 金液還丹 (return of the golden liquor to the cinnabar field). The process of alchemical practice is described as intricate and involves the merging and harmonization of various elements within the body. This includes the integration of lead and mercury, metal and wood, dragon and tiger, and child and mother. The ultimate goal of this transformative process is to cultivate the golden elixir and transmute the chaotic and turbid nature of the body, which is imbued with *yin* forces, into a pure *yang* entity. By aligning themselves with the rhythms and principles of the Dao, practitioners aim to attain spiritual refinement and transcendence.

After embracing Quanzhen Daoism, Huang Gongwang created several paintings, including *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* 富春山居圖, *Clearing after Sudden Snow* 快雪時晴圖, *Nine Peaks after Snow* 九峰雪霽圖, *Stone Cliff at Heavenly Pond* 天池石壁圖, and many more. These works embody the connection between his Daoist beliefs and landscape painting. His Daoist practice reshaped his understanding of the natural world and the inner world. His new insights into the interconnectedness between humans and nature infused his paintings with spiritual resonance and inner contemplation.

3. Current Research on Huang Gongwang's Inner Alchemical Landscape Paintings

In recent decades, Shih Shou-chien and Susan Huang first suggested that Huang's paintings have significant inner alchemical connotations (Shih 2015, p. 446). Susan Huang argues that many of Huang Gongwang's landscape paintings should be reexamined from a religious perspective by linking the paintings to his personal Daoist experiences (Huang 2014, pp. 153–66). Susan Huang's insight inspired Daoist scholars, such as Lennert Gesterkamp and Xie Bo, to reexamine Huang Gongwang's work in terms of the inner landscape. In 2017, Gesterkamp gave a lecture at the Chinese Academy of Fine Arts titled "*Huang Gongwang's 'Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains' as a Daoist Inner Landscape*." In this lecture, he argued that the landscape in this painting symbolizes the various stages and processes of Daoist inner alchemy, which Huang's friend and fellow disciple undoubtedly understood.⁸ Compared to Gesterkamp's lecture, Xie Bo offers a more thorough inspection of Huang's painting in her book *The Visualization of Daoist Elysium: Huang Gongwang and His Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* (Xie 2018). Built on Susan Huang's concept of the inner landscape, Xie forwards the idea of "Visualization of Daoist Elysium." She believes that Huang's landscape paintings are essentially an exteriorization of his ideal landscape, a mixture of inner alchemical landscape with Daoist sacred iconography and cosmology. (For more on this, see Liu (2022)).

While considerable scholarly attention has been dedicated to Huang Gongwang's renowned painting *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*, his other later paintings have received comparatively less study. In this paper, I use *Clearing after Sudden Snow* as an example to show that the painting serves as a visual metaphor for the stage of "the resurgence of yang force" in inner alchemy, symbolizing the awakening of vitality.⁹ Although Susan Huang's initial observations shed light on the inner alchemical implications of *Clearing after Sudden Snow*, a comprehensive and concrete analysis is still needed to uncover its deeper significance within the framework of inner alchemy. It becomes evident that Huang's work frequently blurs the boundaries between the inner and outer realms, creating a unified space where the inner and outer dimensions are essentially intertwined and inseparable.

4. *Clearing after Sudden Snow*: The Resurgence of the Yang Force

Clearing after Sudden Snow unveils a serene and ethereal landscape bathed in translucent sunlight following a snowfall (Figure 1). Positioned in the right foreground, imposing cliffs dominate the scene, their rugged and precipitous features evoking a sense of austerity and power. Delicately rendered platforms adorn the cliff's summit, their gentle slopes providing a striking contrast to the sheer rock formations. Nestled amidst the cliffs, clusters of trees emerge, their branches reaching out, echoing one another. Painted with bold and partially wet ink, the trees exude vitality and energy. Concealed behind the foliage, several thatched cottages evoke a sense of hidden sanctity. Notably, the central lower-ground cottage exudes an aura of sacredness, housing a tripod and a cauldron—a symbolic representation of spiritual significance. No human figures are represented in the image.



Figure 1. Huang Gongwang, *Clearing after Sudden Snow*. 1340. Hand Scroll, ink, and colors on paper, 29.7 × 104.6 cm, Palace Museum, Beijing.

The backdrop of the painting unveils a red sun ascending above the snow-covered peaks, casting its gentle glow upon the almost uninhabited terrain. Rendered with soft, dilute lines and minimal shading, the mountains exhibit a distinctive and geometric form, their varying heights creating a visually captivating irregularity. The stark whiteness of the snow-covered summits stands in stark contrast to the lightly inked sky above, engrossing the viewer in the tranquil and sacred atmosphere of this otherworldly realm.

Within this painting, four prominent symbols—the sun, the spirit room, the cliff, and the snowy mountains—come together to imbue the painting with a rich tapestry of inner alchemical connotations (Figure 2). Each element relates to the visual repertoire of inner alchemy. Collectively, they encapsulate the essence of the awakening and restoration of *yang* energy within the practitioner in inner alchemy.

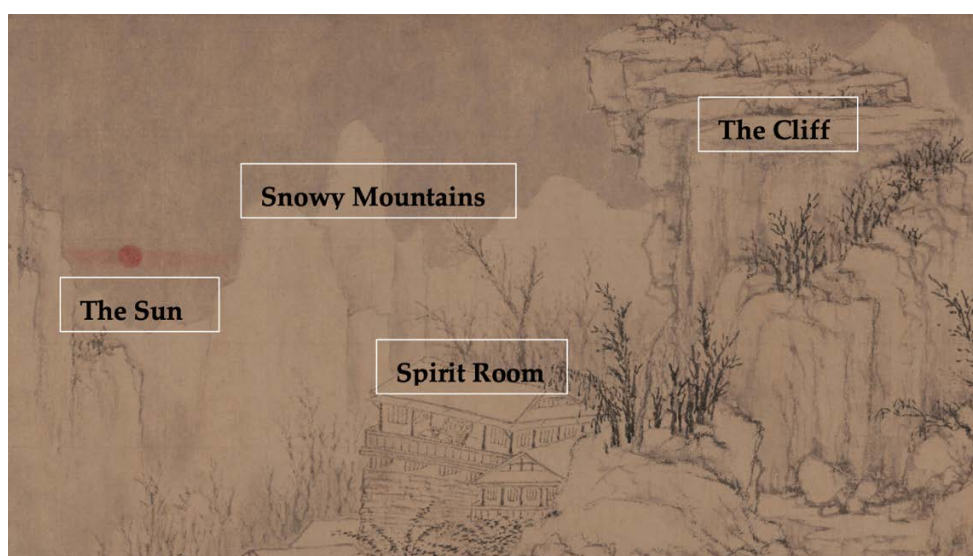


Figure 2. The inner alchemical symbols of *Clearing after Sudden Snow*.

4.1. The Sun

In the painting, a red sun rises above the mountains, and its glow catches the eyes of observers. It is noticeable that the appearance of a full bright red sun is extremely rare in Chinese landscape paintings, especially in the Yuan. However, it often appears in the inner alchemical visual repertoire, signifying the pure *yang* 陽 spirit. In Chinese religious traditions, there is a correlation between the term *dan* 丹 and the sun 陽. Originally, *dan* has the meaning of color red and cinnabar. As Daoists often refine medicines using cinnabar, *dan* became a general term for refined medicinal preparations or elixirs. In inner alchemical practice, the word represents a substance associated with the pursuit of immortality, namely the elixir. Practitioners endeavor to refine and cultivate their internal *dan* which serves as a symbolic representation of the primordial *yang* energy. The fundamental goal of Daoist cultivation is the attainment of immortality and longevity through the preservation and optimization of internal *yang* energy, accompanied by the reduction and elimination of *yin* energy in the corporeal body. By reaching a state of pure *yang* within the body, practitioners aspire to ascend to the celestial heaven, which is closely linked to the manifestation of *yang* energy. On the other hand, the sun is often regarded as a powerful symbol of *yang* energy in traditional cosmology for it embodies the quintessential source of illumination, warmth, and life-sustaining energy. Therefore, while the sun represents the external manifestation of *yang* energy, *dan* represents the internal cultivation and actualization of *yang*. Both concepts encompass the inherent quest for transcendence and the attainment of immortality.

The unusual red sun thus becomes the key for scholars to uncover another layer of meaning in this painting. As mentioned earlier, Susan Huang is ground-breaking by

comparing *Clearing after Sudden Snow* with the graphs and illustrations from *Inner Precious Text of Flying High in the Inner Landscape from the Correct Tradition of the Jade Hall* 無上三天玉堂正宗高奔內景玉書 (DZ 221) (hereby referred as *Inner Precious Text*). She claims that the painting is of significant inner alchemical connotation. The two elements from the painting—the unusual red sun and the cliff in the shape of a platform—are iconic visual language in inner alchemy (Huang 2014, pp. 153–66). While the red sun represents the spirit of pure *yang*, the platform could be either the palace of muddy pellet in the head or the practitioner himself.¹⁰ Therefore, Susan Huang speculates that the cliff facing the red sun could be compared to the illustration of a breathing exercise from the *Inner Precious Text* (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Illustration from *Inner Precious Text of Flying High in the Inner Landscape from the Correct Tradition of the Jade Hall* (DZ 221).

While I diverge from Susan Huang’s interpretation regarding the painting, I agree with her assertion that the sun in *Clearing after Sudden Snow* relates to inner alchemy. One of the key pieces of evidence that sheds light can be found in Huang Gongwang’s alchemical work *Straightforward Directions on Quanzhen by Sir Paper Boat*. In this text, Huang highlights the interplay between *yin* and *yang* and their significance in the inner alchemical transformation. *Straightforward Directions* employs two circles to represent the *yang* spirit 神陽 (or the *yang*-soul of the sun 日魂) and the *yin* form 形陰 (or the *yin*-soul of the moon 月魄) (Figure 4). These circles symbolize the two fundamental aspects of human existence, as well as the celestial bodies of the sun and the moon. The text explicitly states “The *yang*-soul 魂 is the *yang* spirit, while the *yin*-soul 魄 is the *yin* form. The physical form draws upon the numinous power of the spirit, much like the moon reflects the radiant light of the sun.” (DZ 242).¹¹ Therefore, the circle is presented as a unifying symbol connecting human existence and the cosmic order. The illustration and text strengthen the argument that the circle establishes a direct connection between the *yang* spirit and the symbolism of the sun.

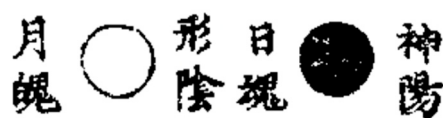


Figure 4. Illustration from *Straightforward Directions on Quanzhen by Sir Paper Boat* (DZ 242).

The red sun depicted in *Clearing after Sudden Snow* is associated with the awakening and activation of *yang* energy within the practitioner. This painting presents a captivating wintry landscape immersed in the aftermath of an abrupt snowfall. The deliberate juxtaposition between the vibrant red sun and the pristine white snow serves to illuminate the delicate interplay between the *yin* and *yang* energies. In the context of inner alchemy, the stage known as the resurgence of *yang* represents the awakening and restoration of *yang* energy within the practitioner, heralding a vital phase of spiritual growth and transformation. This stage establishes a stable and solid base and paves the way for subsequent stages of inner alchemical practice. Within Huang Gongwang’s painting, the presence of the red

sun, with its resplendent and captivating hue, becomes a powerful visual representation of this awakening.

The textual passage excerpted from Huang's treatise *Alchemical Instructions of the Old Man Three Peaks, the Master Holding the One* further reinforces the resonance between the painting and the principles of inner alchemy. The text articulates the transformative process, stating "Once the three fires are established, they gather in the lower cinnabar field, igniting the golden tripod, refining the jade cauldron, fumigating and steaming the inner passes and orifices, causing the *yin* to dissipate and the *yang* to flourish, allowing the *yang* energy of utmost trueness to circulate upside down. Through this natural cultivation, it will spontaneously refine into a magnificent and precious dragon-tiger golden elixir ultimate medicine."¹² This description vividly encapsulates the essence of Huang's painting, emphasizing the transformative nature of inner alchemy and the inherent connection between the sun, the awakening of *yang* energy, and the alchemical journey of spiritual evolution.

4.2. The Spirit Room

The cottage located on the middle-lower ground of the painting (Figure 5) serves as a metaphorical representation of the spirit room within the body where alchemical reactions and spiritual cultivation take place. One of the three treatises associated with Huang Gong-wang, *Secret Instructions on Holding the One and Encasing the Three*, offers insights into the spirit room. It describes it as "the pivot of the elixir" within the human body, emphasizing its importance in the alchemical process. The text reads "The spirit room is where the elixir comes from and the place it is cultivated. The *Classic of Tiger and Dragon* says that the spirit room is the pivot of the elixir. The human body is filled with viscera, and little space is left. Only the spirit room is empty. Its size is like a room that could hold people and an empty utensil that could keep things. Humans take the sea of marrow (brain) as the sky and the essence room as the earth. *Yin* and *yang qi* 氣 (vital life force) rise and descend in between. The spirit room is between heaven and earth, with the yellow court on the top and the origin of the barrier underneath."¹³ The scriptural text inscribed to a 13th-century Daoist body chart, *Chart of the Rise and Fall of Yin and Yang in the Human Body* (*Tixiang yin yang shengjiang tu* 體象陰陽升降圖) (Figure 6), also facilitates our understanding of the spirit room.¹⁴ It reads:

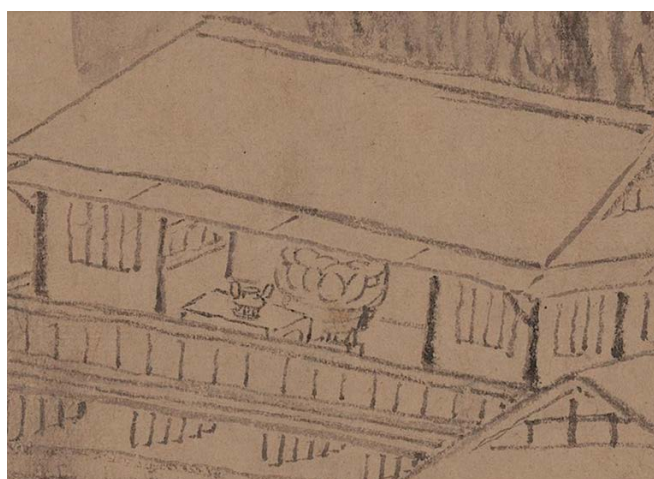


Figure 5. The cottage, Detail of *Clearing after Sudden Snow*.

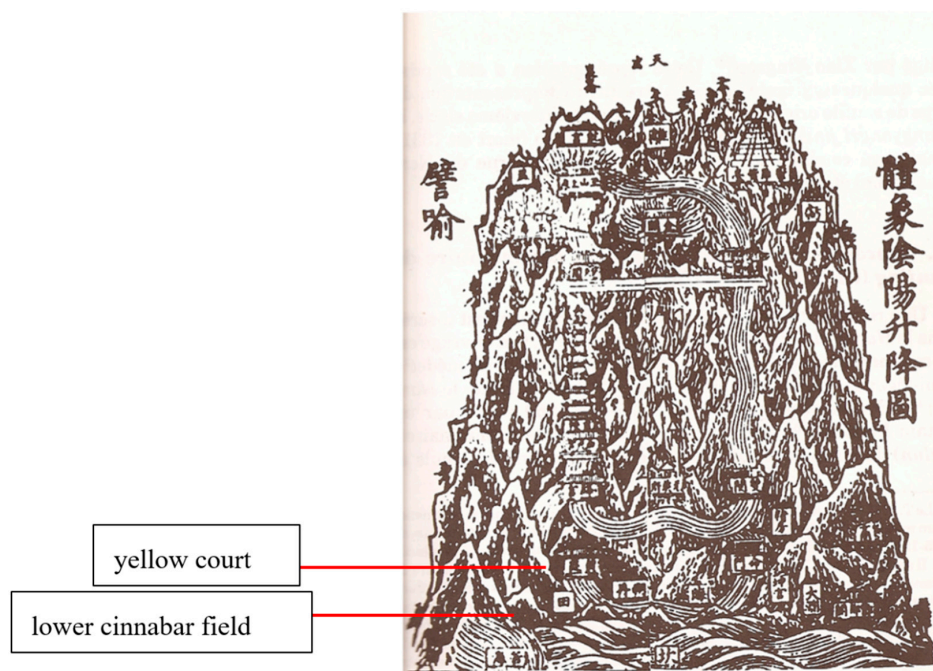


Figure 6. Chart of the Rise and Fall of Yin and Yang in the Human Body 體象陰陽升降圖 (ca. 1226) (DZ 90).

The body contains heaven and earth, the furnace, and the stove. The central palace is the cauldron. Outside of the body is a great void. The *qian* palace is the sea of marrow; the *kun* palace is the room of essence, and the spirit room is the elixir cauldron. These are called the three palaces.¹⁵

Additionally, earlier in 11th century, Zhang Boduan, the patriarch of the Southern lineage of Quanzhen Daoism, also speaks of the spirit room in his *Yuqing jinsi qinghua miwen jinbao neilian danjue* 玉清金笥青華秘文金寶內鍊丹訣 (*The Rhyme of Internal Alchemy of Green Magnificent Secret Script Golden Treasure of the Jade Green Golden Basket*) (DZ 240), denoting “The spirit room is where the original spirit resides. People are aware of the creation of the original spirit, which is revealed, yet they do not know that the room has no master. Then why is it called a room? [This is because] although there is no master, the embryo of the master is kept in the room”.¹⁶ He refers to the spirit room as the dwelling place of the original spirit, highlighting its role in the creation and cultivation of the elixir embryo.

Based on these sources, several characteristics of the spirit room emerge. Firstly, it is a small and empty space within the human body, distinct from the occupied viscera. It serves as a receptacle for the metaphorical “embryo”, representing the potential for spiritual transformation. Secondly, the spirit room is positioned between the yellow court and the origin of the barrier, symbolically bridging heaven and earth within the practitioner’s inner landscape. Most importantly, it is where the alchemical reaction takes place, the womb for the metaphorical “embryo”. Central to the inner alchemical transformation is the concept of a reversed process returning to the fundamental order of the cosmos, the Dao, through the refinement and circulation of *qi*. The practitioners are not only encouraged to view their body as a microcosm but also to transform it into an alchemical furnace. This metaphorical furnace becomes a vessel for the compounding of the pure *yang* spirit, a representation of the practitioner’s inner vitality and spiritual essence. The physical body, in this context, becomes a support for the metaphorical body, containing the necessary ingredients, the tripod, the furnace, and even the fire, which opens the gate to a transcendent “true” body. In other words, the spirit room is the virtual reaction vessel for the amalgam of *yin* and *yang* energies.

By examining *Clearing after Sudden Snow*, one can draw parallels between the depicted cottage and the concept of the spirit room. The confined space of the cottage corresponds

to the characteristics of the spirit room, an enclosed chamber within the vast expanse of the landscape. It represents a microcosmic realm where the practitioner directs their attention inward to cultivate and refine their spiritual essence.

The tripod, as a visual representation of fire, serves as a focal point for the transformative energies at work. The misty atmosphere emanating from the tripod on the altar further enhances the alchemical connotation of this painting, particularly concerning the fire phasing (Figure 7). In inner alchemy, fire phasing (*huohou* 火候) refers to the circulation of vital breath (*qi*), and the sequence in which the practice is performed (Esposito 2008, pp. 530–31). The practitioner should constantly manage the movement and the rhythm of the fire. The fire phasing is divided into different stages and the first phase is symbolized by the winter solstice and the hexagram *fu* 復 (return), in which the original *yang* force resurges and augments and the *yin* element decreases. According to Huang Gongwang's *Alchemical Instructions*, the fire of innate nature (*xing* 性), when not in motion, leads to the stability of the spirit (*shen* 神). The stability of the spirit leads to the stability of the energy (*qi* 氣). The stability of the energy leads to the stability of the essence (*jing* 精).¹⁷ Once the spirit, the energy, and the essence are established and gathered in the lower cinnabar field, they converge to burn the golden cauldron and refine the jade furnace. This process involves fumigating and steaming the inner passes and orifices within the body, which results in the dissipation of *yin* energy and the growth of *yang* energy. In *Clearing after Sudden Snow*, the mist that surrounds the tripod embodies the alchemical fire. Unlike a strong and blazing fire, this misty atmosphere suggests a gentle and subtle form of fire, reminiscent of the concept of “fumigating and steaming” described in Huang's *Alchemical Instructions*.



Figure 7. Detail of the room.

The round-shaped vessel behind the table exhibits several visual cues that suggest it represents a cauldron. First, the round body of the vessel is reminiscent of the typical shape of a cauldron. Its shape allows for the containment and circulation of alchemical ingredients and energies. Furthermore, the presence of two legs showing on the ground beneath the vessel adds to the connection between the object and the tripod. The legs of the vessel and the legs of the tripod share a similar visual appearance, suggesting a harmonious relationship and symbolic alignment between the two.¹⁸ The presence of the lotus perched atop the vessel further strengthens the association with a cauldron. The vividly depicted lotus petals gives the impression of a lotus blossoming from the cauldron (Figure 8).

In the context of inner alchemy, the combination of a cauldron and lotus serves as a visual representation of the birth of the immortal embryo. Before Huang Gongwang's time, the Tang dynasty (618–907) Daoist patriarch Lü Dongbin's poem *Dadan zhizhige* 大丹直指歌 (*Ode of the Straightforward Directions on the Great Elixir*) provides valuable insight with the line “The yellow mother designed thousands of strategies, [as a result] the golden tripod blossoms into a lotus.”¹⁹ Here, the lotus serves as a symbol of the elixir, signifying successful cultivation within the human body.



Figure 8. Detail of the lotus cauldron.

Zhang Boduan further elucidates this concept, stating that understanding the principle of inversion within the mystery is essential to plant the lotus within the fire (Zhang 2015).²⁰ Dong (2015) further annotates “Lotus cannot be planted in the fire; how can men get pregnant? The principle of cultivation is the mystery within the mystery, wonder within the wonder. By reverting *yin* and *yang* and inverting the creation and transformation, men can breed an embryo and generate the elixir. This is similar to planting the lotus in the fire and getting the seeds (Dong 2015, pp. 376–77).”²¹ The idea is that the lotus, which cannot naturally grow in fire, represents the immortal embryo generated through the reversal of *yin* and *yang* and the inversion of the natural processes. Therefore, prior to Huang Gongwang’s time, the motif of the “lotus within the fire” became a standard motif within inner alchemy,²² highlighting the transformative power of the alchemical journey.

In the context of Huang Gongwang’s painting, the lotus blossoming above the cauldron serves as a visual representation of the birth of the immortal embryo. This symbolism adds further layers of meaning to the confined space of the cottage, highlighting its role as a sacred site of spiritual evolution and alchemical transformation. Together with the tripod emanating mist, the scene could be compared to the iconography of the inner alchemical tripod and a baby (Figure 9) depicted in the contemporaneous *Illustrations of the Return of the Liquified Gold to the Cinnabar Field* 金液還丹印證圖.²³ which symbolizes the birth of the alchemical embryo. Just as the depiction in the illustrations represents the birth of the alchemical embryo, the tripod and the cauldron in Huang’s painting signify a similar concept of spiritual birth and transformation.

Therefore, through its composition and positioning, the cottage emerges as a sacred space wherein the alchemical transmutation takes place. By integrating this shared iconography, Huang Gongwang seamlessly intertwines the themes of alchemical transformation and the natural landscape, inviting viewers to contemplate the interplay between the inner and outer worlds.



Figure 9. The child and tripod in *Illustrations of the Return of the Liquified Gold to the Cinnabar Field* (DZ 151).

4.3. The Cliff and the Snowy Mountains

Further examination of the painting reveals a resemblance between the central cliff and the iconography associated with Mount Kunlun, a sacred mountain in Daoist cosmology. The Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.) *Shizhou ji* 十洲記 (*Record of the Ten Island Continents*) describes Mount Kunlun as a bowl-shaped mountain (*yanpen* 偃盆),²⁴ wider at the top and narrower at the bottom, with three corners pointing north, west, and east. This pictorial convention has become synonymous with Daoist sacred mountains. Its association with immortality and spiritual transcendence makes it a powerful symbol of ascent and existential value. In addition to its macrocosmic significance, Mount Kunlun also finds representation within the microcosm of the human body. In 1226 CE, Xiao Yingsou 蕭應叟, a ritual master of the Southern Song period (1127–1279 CE), presented Emperor Lizong 宋理宗 (1205–1264) with the aforementioned *Chart of Rise and Fall of Yin and Yang in the Human Body*. This image is also the oldest extant alchemical representation of the body in the form of a mountain. It exhibits the circulation of energies within the human body. Within this chart, the mountain peak representing the muddy pellet at the head area bears the name Kunlun. This association highlights the specific sites within the brain where energies are collected, blended, and refined (Susan Huang 2012, p. 83) and evident in other Yuan Daoist texts, such as Chen Zhixu's 陳志虛 (1290–ca. 1368) *Image of the body of Primordial Qi* (*Yuanqi tixiang tu* 元氣體象圖). The inclusion of Mount Kunlun in these microcosmic body charts emphasizes its role as a sacred space within the individual's internal landscape.

Therefore, the incorporation of Mount Kunlun in both macrocosmic and microcosmic contexts underscores its significance as a unifying symbol within Daoist inner alchemy. It can be seen as a representation of a sacred realm that transcends physical boundaries and can be experienced both externally and internally. The ascent to Mount Kunlun, whether in the physical or spiritual sense, represents the cultivation and refinement of one's being, leading to the attainment of higher states of consciousness and ultimately, the path to immortality.

In *Clearing After Sudden Snow*, the depiction of the cliff with a platform can be interpreted as a symbolic representation of Mount Kunlun. The cliff's shape, wider at the top and narrower at the bottom, aligns with the traditional iconography associated with Mount Kunlun. The presence of the platform further emphasizes its connection to the sacred mountain, as it symbolizes the elevated realm of spiritual cultivation and transcendence.

The snowy mountains in the painting serve as potent inner alchemical symbols of the back of the head, a realm associated with utmost *yin* energy. Meulenbeld's research highlights the use of "snowy mountains" as a metaphor for a transcendental realm since the twelfth century (Meulenbeld 2021, p. 80). These mountains symbolize a realm beyond the ordinary, a domain of spiritual transcendence that is inherently elusive to those bound by mundane existence. The symbolism of the snowy mountains in Huang Gongwang's painting aligns with this historical trope, emphasizing the quest for spiritual elevation and the transcendence of worldly limitations.

Furthermore, according to Chen Zhixu's elucidation, the snowy mountains symbolically embody the region at the back of the head, which is regarded as the place of the utmost *yin*.²⁵ This interpretation gains further substantiation through Meulenbeld's insightful exploration of the body chart of Lao Zi Patrice Fava discovered, which includes an illustration referencing "at the place on the back of the brain, where no sunlight shines, there is the snow of a thousand years."²⁶ (Meulenbeld 2021, p. 81). Consequently, we can infer that the snowy mountains in *Clearing after Sudden Snow* represent this specific area of the brain, embodying the pinnacle of *yin* energy within the inner alchemical framework.

Within the immersive snowy landscape of the painting, a palpable sense of coldness and utmost *yin* energy pervades. This portrayal represents the human body in its natural state, devoid of transformative cultivation. However, amidst this *yin* atmosphere, the emergence of the sun signifies the resurgence of *yang* energy. This interplay between *yin* and *yang* forces illustrates the harmonious balance and counterbalance essential to the inner alchemical process. As *yang* energy begins to manifest and counteract the prevailing

yin energy, a transformative dynamic unfolds, symbolizing the journey toward cultivating the harmonious integration of both forces.

Therefore, in *Clearing after Sudden Snow*, the cliff with a platform serves as a visual representation of the head, specifically the muddy pellet. The distant mountain in the background symbolizes the back of the head, a realm associated with utmost *yin* energy. This depiction aligns with the Daoist understanding of the head as a sacred space and the back of the head as the repository of *yin* forces.

It is important to note that Huang Gongwang's painting not only includes these elements, it also presents them in a harmonious composition. The snowy mountains and the cliff with a platform exist within a unified landscape, illustrating the interconnectedness of the inner alchemical journey and its integration into the natural world. Thus, the painting conveys the idea that the transformative process of inner alchemy is not separate from the external environment but is intricately woven into the fabric of existence.

5. Concluding Remarks

By exploring the meanings embedded in four major elements (sun, spirit room, cliff, snowy mountains) in Huang Gongwang's *Clearing After Sudden Snow*, this study argues that the painting is a visual expression of Daoist inner alchemy practices. When examined in conjunction with Huang Gongwang's inner alchemical text, the painting provides a unifying visual representation of the transformative process of *qi* and the cultivation of elixir. The unification of the visual elements in the painting reinforces the key stages of inner alchemy described in the text. The spirit room assumes a pivotal role in the initiation of the inner alchemical journey. Within this sacred space, the cultivation of medicine takes place, serving as the foundation for subsequent transformative processes. The presence of the tripod and cauldron symbolizes the refinement and transmutation of energies. The lotus within the cauldron signifies the successful cultivation of the elixir embryo. As the elixir embryo progresses, the dissipation of *yin* energy paves the way for the vibrant flourishing of *yang* energy. The presence of the sun breaking through the snowy atmosphere serves as a symbolic representation of the *yang* energy dispelling the cold and dormant *yin* energy. This transformative act brings forth warmth, vitality, and illumination, symbolizing the activation and circulation of the *yang* energy of utmost trueness. By meticulously examining these elements, we gain insights into the intricate processes and transformative potential of inner alchemy.

In conclusion, *Clearing after Sudden Snow* presents a visual narrative of the inner alchemical journey, commencing within the spirit room and culminating in the emergence of the sun. Overall, the painting embodies the transformative power of nature, the inner alchemical processes, and the potential for personal enlightenment through the act of observation and contemplation. It not only captures the moment of transition where the snow-covered terrain is gradually transforming into a fresh and awakened state, but it also presents a visual metaphor for the transformative journey of the alchemist, where the practitioner seeks to transmute their inner energies and achieve a higher state of being. Furthermore, each individual who engages with the painting may undergo their own personal transformation through the act of contemplation and reflection.

By delving into the symbolic elements and their connection to Daoist inner alchemy, the reinterpretation of Huang Gongwang's paintings offers a fresh perspective on the artist's intentions and the underlying religious themes within his works. The interplay between the natural scenery and the inner alchemical representation in the paintings reveals the interconnectedness between humans and nature, as well as the quest for transcendence and spiritual transformation. It shows that Daoist principles and practices were not confined to texts and rituals alone but were also conveyed through artistic expressions. Considering the flourishing of Quanzhen Daoism and inner alchemy during Huang's time, it is likely that he intended his painting to resonate with the Daoist literati community and a religious audience. The painting may serve as a teaching aid of his inner alchemy knowledge,

prompting viewers to transcend the surface-level interpretation and delve into deeper religious inquiries.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Representations of the inner alchemical body were rarely found prior to the Song dynasty (960–1279), but the Song period clearly marks a turning point in the graphic representation of the body as in graphic representation in general. As Catherine Despeux elaborates, from the Song era onward, visual imagery comes to play a more significant role, not only as a record of knowledge, but also as a teaching aid, a mode of transmission, a mnemonic device, a visual translation of a text, and a representation of a certain reality, see [Despeux \(2005, p. 47\)](#). Anna Hennessey attributes this change to the development of Quanzhen Daoism and inner alchemy practice; just as internalization in the form of internal alchemy was becoming a focal component of Daoism, externalization in the form of alchemical representation was also rising as a tool through which this process of internalizing the religious experience could be actualized, see [Hennessey \(2011, p. 16\)](#).
- ² In 2011, when the two pieces of his painting *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* 富春山居圖 reunited for the first time in the National Palace Museum in Taipei since their separation more than three and a half centuries ago, the exhibition attracted more than 840,000 visitors and remained as one of the most popular art shows ever since. See [Exhibition and Museum Attendance Figures 2011 2012 \(2012, p. 35\)](#).
- ³ “Four Wangs” refer to Wang Shimin 王時敏 (1592–1680), Wang Jian 王鑑 (1598–1677), Wang Hui 王翬 (1632–1717), and Wang Yuanqi 王原祁 (1642–1715).
- ⁴ According to the Yuan dynasty anthology *Ghost Notes* 錄鬼簿, the earliest recording of Huang’s biography, Huang was adopted by the Huang Family 黃氏 of Wenzhou 溫州, Zhejiang Province. See [Zhong \(1991, p. 86\)](#).
- ⁵ Fuchun is located in the current Fuyang District, Hangzhou City, Zhejiang Province. Even though Huang Gongwang had lived in seclusion for many years, he still enjoyed a high-quality social life. Huang’s acquaintances include established Daoists, high-level officials and significant literati/painters. Since the Mongol reign barred educated Chinese from civil service exams, these disenfranchised literati frequently gathered in their estates and bequeathed each other paintings, poems, and inscriptions. Huang Gongwang formed a solid tie with Ni Zan 倪瓚 (1301–1374) and Zhang Yu 張雨 (1277–1348), both Daoists and painters. For an extensive analysis on Huang’s literati circle, see [Augustin \(2012, pp. 63–76\)](#); [Halperin \(2018, pp. 572–625\)](#). Also see [Xie \(2018, pp. 179–203\)](#).
- ⁶ *Zhengtong Daozang* 正統道藏 (hereby referred to as DZ) was printed under the Zhengtong (r. 1436–1449) reign in 1445. It is one of the most authoritative collections of Daoist texts, graphs, charts, maps, talismans, and so on. This paper uses the *Daozang* text published by the three publishing houses (*sanjiaben* 三家本), see [Daozang \(1988\)](#). This paper benefits greatly from [Schipper \(2005\)](#). The work number follows the title concordance of [Schipper and Chen \(1996\)](#).
- ⁷ 嗣全真正宗金月巖編, 嗣全真大癡黃公望傳. See DZ (242, 281, 576).
- ⁸ For example, the twelve pine trees carefully arranged in the right front corner of the painting can be read as the twelve-story tower, symbolizing the human trachea.
- ⁹ To avoid misunderstanding, I am not saying that we should always couple inner alchemy with Huang’s landscape paintings, nor that every painting from Huang Gongwang has an inner alchemical connotation. It is also not my intention to demarcate a fundamental boundary between the inner and outer realm of landscape paintings, nor between the presence and absence of the body.
- ¹⁰ Within the context of inner alchemy, the human body is viewed as a microcosm reflecting the macrocosmic order. It is divided into three distinct realms known as the upper cinnabar field, the middle cinnabar field, and the lower cinnabar field, which correspond symbolically to heaven, the central, and earth, respectively. The lower cinnabar field, referred to as the *huangting* 黃庭 or yellow court, resides approximately 1.3 inches below the navel and serves as the energetic center associated with essence. The middle cinnabar field, also known as *jiangong* 絳宮 or crimson palace, occupies the central region of the chest and represents the locus of breath. Finally, the upper cinnabar field, identified as *niwan gong* 泥丸宮 or palace of muddy pellet, and alternatively termed *qiangong* 乾宮 or palace of *qian*, denotes the brain region and serves as the seat of the spirit. These three fields, with their respective functions and locations within the body, constitute integral components of the intricate inner alchemical system.
- ¹¹ 魂乃陽神, 魄乃陰形, 形借神靈, 月望日明. (DZ 242).

- 12 三火既定，并会于下丹田，聚烧金鼎，锻鍊玉炉，薰蒸关窍，使一身阴消阳长，太真阳气上下颠倒循环，自然锻鍊成一粒赫赤龙虎金丹大药也。 (DZ 281).
- 13 神室者，丹之所由，斯而修也。《龍虎經》曰：神室者，丹之樞紐。夫人之一身，臟腑室塞，無些縫罅，惟神室空虛，方寸如室之空能容人，如器之空能容物。夫人以髓海為天，精房為地，陰陽二炁升降行乎其中矣。其神室在天地之中，上有黃庭，下有關元。 (DZ 576).
- 14 For a more detailed analysis of the inner alchemical body and the body charts, see Despeux (2005, 2019), Hennessey (2011), Susan Huang (2012), and Pregadio (2021).
- 15 此身為天地爐竈，中宮為鼎，身外乃太虛。乾宮髓海，坤宮精房，神室丹鼎，名曰三宮。 (DZ 90, 8a–b).
- 16 神室者，元神所居之室，是也。人知立鄧鄂之造化，顯然彰露矣！抑不知有室而無主人，何取其為室哉！然主人雖無，而主人之胎，亦在乎一室之中矣！ (DZ 240).
- 17 性火不動者則神定，神定則氣定，氣定則精定。 (DZ 281).
- 18 For a more detailed analysis of the iconography of the tripod and furnace in alchemy, see Fan (2022).
- 19 黃婆設盡千般計，金鼎開成一朵蓮 See Quan Tang Shi (1960, pp. 9710–11). Inner alchemy believes that the saliva of the spleen could nourish the other viscera, and the spleen is thereby called the “mother”. Since the spleen is associated with the earth and the yellow color, it is thus referred to as the yellow mother.
- 20 不識玄中顛倒顛，爭知火裏好栽蓮。 (DZ 263).
- 21 火里不可栽蓮，男兒安得成孕？今修煉之道，乃玄中之玄，妙中之妙。還返陰陽，顛倒造化，而使男子結胎以成丹，此猶火中栽蓮以結子也。
- 22 The motif also appeared in later time. For one instance, in the second chapter of *Journey to the West*, the master reveals the secret of immortality to Sun Wukong, saying: “The moon contains a jade rabbit, the sun a golden crow, the tortoise and the snake are always intertwined. Always intertwined, life and nature are firm, and one can plant a golden lotus in the fire. Grasp all the five elements and turn them upside down, and when you are successful, you can become a Buddha or an immortal.” 月藏玉兔日藏烏，自有龜蛇相盤結。相盤結，性命堅，卻能火裏種金蓮。攢簇五行顛倒用，功完隨作佛和仙 (Wu 2005, p. 18). Aside from all the alchemical metaphors, the master is telling Sun to revert *yin* and *yang* to generate the elixir (the lotus).
- 23 The collection of drawings is attributed to Longmei zi 龍眉子. The preface of the illustration dates to 1218, with the colophon dating to 1222. See Baldrian-Hussein (2005, pp. 832–34).
- 24 上有三角，方廣萬裏，形似偃盆，下狹上廣，故名曰昆侖山三角 (Dongfang n.d.)
- 25 雪山乃至陰之地。
- 26 後腦陽光不照之處，卻有千年雪。 For a detailed analysis of the body chart, see Fava (2013, pp. 88–91).

References

- Augustin, Birgitta. 2012. Modern Views on Old Histories: Zhang Yu’s and Huang Gongwang’s Encounter with Qian Xuan. *Arts Asiatiques* 67: 63–76. [CrossRef]
- Baldrian-Hussein, Farzeen. 2005. Jinyi huandan yinzheng tu. In *The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang/from Antiquity to the Middle Ages*. Edited by Kristoffer Schipper. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 832–34.
- Cahill, James. 1976. *Hills Beyond a River: Chinese Paintings of the Yuan Dynasty, 1279–1368*. New York: Weatherhill.
- Daozang 道藏 (The Daoist Canon). 1988. *Sanjia ben* 三家本. Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, Shanghai: Shanghai Shuju, Tianjin: Tianjin Guji Chubanshe, vol. 36.
- Despeux, Catherine. 2005. Visual Representations of the Body in Chinese Medical and Daoist Texts from the Song to the Qing Period (Tenth to Nineteenth Century). *Asian Medicine: Tradition and Modernity* 1: 10–52. [CrossRef]
- Despeux, Catherine. 2019. *Taoism and Self Knowledge: The Chart for the Cultivation of Perfection (Xiuzhen tu)*. Translated by Jonathan Pettit. Leiden: Brill.
- Dong, Dening 董德寧. 2015. “Wuzhenpian Zhengyi” 悟真篇正義 (The Correct Meaning of Wuzhen pian). In *Wuzhen Pian Jishi* 悟真篇集釋 (Collected Commentaries of Wuzhen Pian). Edited by Boduan Zhang. Annotated by Baoguang Weng 翁葆光, Daoguang Xue 薛道光, Yuanding Xia 夏元鼎, Susi Tao 陶素耜, Dening Dong 董德寧 and Yiming Liu 劉一明. Beijing: Zhongyang Bianyi Chubanshe.
- Dongfang, Shuo 東方朔. n.d. *Shizhou ji*. 十洲記 (Record of the Ten Island Continents). Available online: <https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&file=204853&page=27&remap=gb> (accessed on 19 December 2022).
- Espósito, Monica. 2008. Huohou. In *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*. Edited by Fabrizio Pregadio. Oxford: Routledge, vol. 1.
- Exhibition and Museum Attendance Figures 2011. 2012. *The Art Newspaper*. No. 234. April, p. 35. Available online: <https://www.skny.com/attachment/en/56d5695ecfaf342a038b4568/Press/56d56991cfaf342a038b64df> (accessed on 27 June 2023).
- Fan, Zhen. 2022. The Tripods in Daoist Alchemy: Uncovering a Material Source of Immortality. *Religions* 13: 867. [CrossRef]
- Fava, Patrice. 2013. *Aux portes du ciel: La statuaire taoïste du Hunan, Art et anthropologie de la Chine*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres/ÉFEO, pp. 88–91.
- Halperin, Mark. 2018. Explaining Perfection: Quanzhen and Thirteenth-century Chinese Literati. *T’oung Pao* 104: 572–625. [CrossRef]
- Hennessey, Anna. 2011. Chinese Images of Body and Landscape: Visualization and Representation in the Religious Experience of Medieval China. Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA, USA.

- Huang, Shih-Shan Susan. 2012. *Picturing the True Form: Daoist Visual Culture in Traditional China*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Huang, Shih-Shan Susan. 2014. Xie zhenshan zhixing: Cong 'shanshuitu' 'shanshui hua' tan daojiao shanshuiguan zhi shijue xingsu 寫真山之形：從「山水圖」、「山水畫」談道教山水觀之視覺型塑 (Shaping the True Mountains: "Shanshui tu", "Shanhui hua", and Visuality in Daoist Landscape). *Gugong Xueshu Jikan* 故宮學術季刊 31: 121–204.
- Liu, Ziyun. 2022. Visualizing the Invisible Body: Redefining *Shanshui* and the Human Body in the Daoist Context. *Religions* 13: 1187. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Meulenbeld, Mark. 2021. The Interiority of Landscape: Transcendence in a Late-Ming Painting of Snowy Mountains. *Asia Major* 34: 43–91.
- Pregadio, Fabrizio. 2021. The Alchemical Body in Daoism. *Journal of Daoist Studies* 14: 99–127. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Quan Tang Shi* 全唐詩 (*The Complete Collection of Tang Period Poems*). 1960. Peng, Zhengqiu, ed. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 25 vols.
- Schipper, Kristofer, and Yaoting Chen. 1996. *Daozang Suoyin: Wu Zhong Banben Daozang Tongjian* 道藏索引:五種版本道藏通檢 (*Index to the Daoist Canon: Concordance of the Five Editions of the Daoist Canon*). Shanghai: Shanghai Shudian.
- Schipper, Kristoffer. 2005. *The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang/From Antiquity to the Middle Ages*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Shih, Shou-Chien. 2015. *Cong Fengge Dao Huayi: Fansi Zhongguo Meishu Shi* 從風格到畫意：反思中國美術史 (*From Style to Huayi: Ruminating on Chinese Art History*). Beijing: Shenghuo Dushu Xinzhi Sanlian Shudian.
- Wu, Chengen 吳承恩. 2005. *Xi You Ji* 西遊記 (*Journey to the West*). Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe.
- Xie, Bo. 2018. *Huazhi Shang de Daojing* 畫紙上的道境 (*The Visualization of Daoist Elysium*). Chengdu: Sichuan Renmin Chubanshe.
- Zhang, Boduan. 2015. *Wuzhen Pian Jishi* 悟真篇集釋 (*Collected Commentaries of Wuzhen pian*). Annotated by Baoguang Weng 翁葆光, Daoguang Xue 薛道光, Yuanding Xia 夏元鼎, Susi Tao 陶素耜, Dening Dong 董德寧 and Yiming Liu 劉一明. Beijing: Zhongyang Bianyi Chubanshe.
- Zhong, Sicheng 鍾嗣成. 1991. *Jiaoding luguibu sanzong* 校訂錄鬼簿三種 (*Three Revised Editions of Ghost Notes*). Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou Guji Chubanshe.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.