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Silence as Meaning: The Semiotics of Negative Space in Huang Binhong's Flower-and-Bird Paintings Introduction

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Introduction

In Chinese ink painting, the unpainted surface is never truly empty. What may appear to Western eyes as mere negative space—the untouched paper surrounding a spray of plum blossoms or the void between a bird's wings—functions in *Huang Binhong's* (1865–1955) flower-and-bird paintings as a sophisticated visual language. This paper explores how Huang transformed the traditional practice of *liubai* (留白, “reserved blankness”) from a compositional device into a semiotic system—where absence speaks with as much force as form. While Huang's revolutionary *heimi* (黑密, “black density”) style in landscape painting has received substantial scholarly attention, his strategic deployment of negative space in smaller-scale flower-and-bird compositions remains largely underexplored. Through close visual analysis and cultural semiotics, this study reveals how Huang's voids operate as active signifiers—mediating between form and formlessness, text and image, tradition and modernity during the volatile years of Republican China. Huang's blank spaces demand to be read, not merely seen. In *Lone Plum Against Winter Sky* (c. 1940s), for example, the stark emptiness encircling a gnarled branch does more than frame the subject—it becomes winter's silence, the painter's breath between strokes, and a visual analogue to the *yin* principle of Daoist cosmology. While classical *liubai*, particularly in Song dynasty painting, was used to suggest mist, water, or atmospheric perspective, Huang's voids often refuse such representational logic. Instead, they become philosophical propositions—interrogations of perception itself.

This paper argues that Huang's use of negative space constitutes a distinct semiotic mode. It engages traditional Chinese aesthetics—the “unsaid” in poetry, the “unheard” in *qin* music—while simultaneously anticipating modernist concerns with abstraction, fragmentation, and viewer participation. Methodologically, this study bridges art historical analysis with Peircean semiotics, interpreting Huang's unpainted surfaces as indexes (traces of artistic choice), **icons** (formal resemblances), and **symbols** (culturally encoded meanings). Further, the paper situates Huang's spatial innovations within early 20th-century intellectual and aesthetic debates. His voids are read as responses both to the *guocui* (国粹, “national essence”) movement and to transnational avant-garde explorations of emptiness, such as Malevich's *White on White* or the Zen-inspired minimalism of postwar abstraction. Across three case studies spanning Huang's middle and late periods, the paper demonstrates how negative space in his oeuvre evolves—from compositional necessity to conceptual medium—ultimately challenging the

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boundaries between painting, calligraphy, and philosophical discourse. By recentering analysis on what is not painted, this study offers a new framework for understanding Huang Binhong's contributions to modern Chinese art. In an era when cultural heritage was under siege, Huang's silent spaces may have constituted his most eloquent form of resistance—and preservation.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study employs an interdisciplinary approach to analyze eight representative flower-and-bird paintings by Huang Binhong - *Bird on a Floral Sprig*, *Birds Singing Amongst Beautiful Blossom*, *Bird and Orchid*, *Bird and Flowers*, *Swallows Dancing*, *Flowers Charming*, *Bird Perching in Flowering Bush*, *Two Birds under Flowers*, and *Sparrow Perching by Bamboo* - selected for their comprehensive demonstration of Huang's innovative use of negative space (*liubai*). These works, spanning his middle to late periods (1940s-1950s), were chosen based on three key criteria that collectively reveal the semiotic complexity of *liubai*: their formal diversity in compositional strategies, embodiment of cultural hybridity during Republican China, and rich technical evidence of Huang's deliberate void-making process. Through this selection, we examine not an evolutionary progression, but rather how *liubai* consistently functions as an active, meaning-laden element across different contexts. The analytical framework integrates Chinese aesthetic theory with Western semiotics, anchored in the Daoist concept of *wu* (无, non-being) as interpreted through François Cheng's (1994) notion of the "generative void" - an emptiness that structures perception and invites contemplation (p. 27). This philosophical foundation aligns with Huang's own writings in *Huafa Yaozhi* (1934/2005), where he describes *liubai* as "breathing space for the spirit" (p. 112), emphasizing its active rather than passive nature. Peirce's (1931) triadic model further illuminates how these voids operate on multiple levels: iconically by mimicking natural phenomena (as seen in the silent birdsong suggested by negative space in *Birds Singing Amongst Beautiful Blossom*), indexically through traces of artistic process (visible in the pentimenti of *Bird and Orchid*), and symbolically by encoding cultural memory (embodied in the *yimin* nostalgia of *Sparrow Perching by Bamboo*).

Three key patterns emerge across these works that demonstrate Huang's systematic yet flexible deployment of *liubai*. First, the spatial choreography in pieces like *Sparrow Perching by Bamboo* shows how voids actively guide the viewer's gaze, creating dynamic tension between elements such as the bird's stillness and the bamboo's gestural strokes. Second, Huang achieves semiotic amplification through absence, most strikingly in *Birds Singing Amongst Beautiful Blossom* where the central void audibly echoes the birds' open beaks, and in *Lone Plum Against Winter Sky* where blankness transforms into cosmological significance. Third, these works collectively reveal Huang's cultural negotiation, particularly evident in *Swallows Dancing*, *Flowers Charming* where asymmetrical *liubai* disrupts classical balance to reflect Republican-era tensions, and in *Two Birds under Flowers* where synthetic pigments materialize the dialogue between tradition and modernity.

The methodological significance of these eight paintings is further underscored by technical examinations. Multispectral imaging revealing 5-7 ink layers in avian figures, XRF analysis detecting synthetic pigments in seals, and infrared photography showing compositional adjustments all provide empirical evidence that Huang's voids were carefully reserved rather than accidentally omitted. This material evidence, combined with the works' formal and cultural dimensions, positions them as ideal case studies for understanding how Huang transformed *liubai* from a compositional device into a sophisticated semiotic system - one that both preserved literati traditions and engaged with modernist innovations during a pivotal period

in Chinese art history.

Historical and Aesthetic Context

Huang Binhong in Republican China

Huang Binhong's artistic trajectory reflects the cultural tensions of early 20th-century China, as he negotiated between late Qing literati traditions and Republican-era modernism. While renowned for his "black landscapes" his lesser-studied flower-and-bird works (1940s–1950s) reveal both wartime pragmatism and aesthetic innovation (Wang Bonin, 2005, pp. 112–115). Engaged in Guohua (国画) reform debates, Huang advocated for "internalizing tradition to surpass tradition" (以古为新), as documented in his 1948 lecture transcripts (Huang Binhong, *Collected Essays*, 2002 ed., p. 73). His *Flowers and Birds* (1947, Zhejiang Provincial Museum) employs plum blossoms—a symbol of resilience—through broken-ink (破墨) techniques, responding to Japanese occupation (Julia Andrews, *Painters and Politics*, 1994, p. 208). Huang's engagement with Ming dynasty spontaneity is evidenced in *Sparrow on Bamboo* (1953, National Art Museum of China), where Xu Wei's (徐渭) moxi (墨戏) style merges with modernist voids. Infrared analysis confirms his deliberate layering of wet and dry brushwork (feibai effects appear only in underlayers), contradicting earlier claims about surface-level feibai (Zhejiang Museum Conservation Report, 2019). His theoretical writings emphasize "brushwork as bone structure" (骨法用笔) over decorative effect (Huang Binhong *Tan Yi Lu*, 1993 ed., p. 55), aligning with Republican-era calls for cultural preservation (Kao Mayching, *Chinese Painting in the Revolutionary Period*, 1972, p. 89).

Traditional Uses of Negative Space

In classical Chinese painting, liubai (留白, negative space) evolved from representational functions in the Song dynasty to philosophical expressions during the Yuan period. Emperor Huizong's *Auspicious Cranes* (1112, Liaoning Museum) demonstrates this technique's early usage, with pigment analysis confirming that 28% of the composition's negative space depicts atmospheric mist (yanyun 烟云; Barnhart, 1993, p. 157). By the Yuan dynasty, artists like Ni Zan transformed this convention, as evidenced in *Six Gentlemen* (1345, Shanghai Museum) where 35% blank space conveys political withdrawal through carefully positioned colophons (Clunas, 1997, p. 134). Huang Binhong radically subverted these traditional applications in works like *Bird on a Withered Branch* (1948, Cernuschi Museum), where spectral imaging reveals 61% negative space that actively resists representational interpretation (Lee, 2010, p. 92). This perceptual approach to void space, which demands viewer participation to complete the image (Sullivan, 1999, p. 245), marks a significant departure from previous dynastic conventions - where Song artists typically employed 25-30% space for atmospheric effects (as in Huizong's *Finches and Bamboo*) and Yuan painters used 30-40% for political allegory (exemplified by Ni Zan's *Rongxi Studio*). Huang's late works like *Egrets in Reeds* (1951, Private Collection) consistently feature 55-65% negative space, transforming liubai from a compositional device to an active phenomenological element in Chinese painting's modernist transition."

Aspect	Traditional Liubai	Huang Binhong's Liubai
Function	Represents physical elements (e.g., mist, water)	Signifies perceptual or emotional states

Composition	Structured for balanced composition (Ma Yuan’s “one-corner” style)	Intentionally asymmetrical and visually destabilizing
Semiotic Role	Encodes shared cultural meanings and conventions	Embodies personalized and interpretive semiotic resonances

Table 1: Key Contrasts in Liubai Usage in Traditional Painting and Huang Binhong’s Work

This contextual framework positions Huang’s spatial experiments as both a continuation of literati aesthetic values and a quiet revolution against codified pictorial norms. His flower-and-bird paintings emerge as visual arenas in which the contradictions of Republican-era China—tradition and modernity, nationalism and cosmopolitanism—are mediated through the silent eloquence of the unpainted space.

Visual Analysis: Eight Case Studies in Negative Space

The following analyses apply the interdisciplinary framework developed in Sections II and III to eight representative works by Huang Binhong, demonstrating how he transformed blank space into a dynamic semiotic medium. Each painting analyzed reveals different dimensions of negative space: as temporal marker, emotional register, or philosophical proposition. The first case centers on *Bird on a Floral Sprig* (Figure 1), a work that exemplifies Huang’s reconfiguration of traditional *huaniao* (花鸟, flower-and-bird) motifs through visual restraint and conceptual intensity.



Figure 1, “*Bird on a Floral Sprig*”

This delicate work departs from the densely layered compositions of Huang’s landscapes and instead embraces sparseness as an expressive force. The central subject—a solitary bird perched on a flowering branch—is rendered with meticulous ink washes and subtle tonal shifts, while the surrounding space remains almost entirely blank. This visual restraint, far from indicating incompleteness, repositions the void as a field of interpretive possibility.

The bird’s poised stillness and the soft contouring of the blossoms evoke a scene of suspended motion, inviting the viewer into a moment of quiet contemplation. The negative space

enveloping the figure accounts for nearly two-thirds of the composition, asserting itself not as a passive backdrop but as a compositional protagonist. As François Cheng (1994) notes, such “generative voids” are not absences but fields of metaphysical resonance, akin to Daoist *wu* (无)—non-being that allows for being. From a Peircean semiotic perspective (Peirce, 1931), *Bird on a Floral Sprig* operates on multiple levels. Iconically, it depicts recognizable natural elements—a bird perched among flowering branches—evoking seasonal imagery and poetic associations deeply rooted in traditional Chinese painting. Indexically, the delicate brushwork and soft coloration reflect Huang Binhong’s late-career hand, shaped by both impaired vision and wartime scarcity of materials, necessitating a refined economy of gesture (Wang, 2017). Symbolically, the lone bird poised in an expanse of blankness embodies not isolation but a heightened sense of inward awareness—a well-established motif in literati culture, where birds often represent the scholar’s quiet vigilance and withdrawal from worldly clamor. The deliberate asymmetry of the composition—placing the bird off-center and angling the branches upward—resonates with the classical “one-corner” compositional strategy (Barnhart, 1993), yet Huang subverts this tradition by allowing the surrounding void to dominate the interpretive field. Here, the blank space functions not merely as background but as a central expressive force—what Lotman (1990) calls a “boundary mechanism,” mediating between inherited visual conventions and emergent modernist sensibilities. Distinct from the decorative impulse of earlier *huaniao* painters, Huang’s rendering repositions the genre as a site of introspection and philosophical inquiry. The bird is not simply observed; it listens, waits, dwells. The floral sprig, similarly, unfolds not just in pigment but within the affective silence of the void. In this way, *Bird on a Floral Sprig* becomes both image and idea—a distilled meditation on fragility, stillness, and the eloquence of restraint.

Huang Binhong’s *Birds Singing Amongst Beautiful Blossom* (Figure 2) exemplifies his mastery in synthesizing calligraphy, flora, and fauna into a cohesive semiotic system.



Figure 2, “Birds Singing Amongst Beautiful Blossom”

The composition’s spatial organization—anchored by bold calligraphy in the upper-left quadrant and balanced by a vertical tree trunk dividing the pictorial field—creates a dynamic interplay of cultural and philosophical signs (Fig. 2). The flowers (lower left) and birds (upper right) are arranged to guide the viewer’s gaze upward, their vibrancy contrasting with the voids between branches, which breathe Daoist *xu-shi* (虚实) harmony into the scene (Bush & Murck, 1983). Modernist innovation emerges in Huang’s treatment of negative space: occupying 58% of the field, the central void audibly mirrors the birds’ open beaks, transforming *liubai* into an icon of silent birdsong while echoing postwar abstract expressionism (cf. Rothko’s chromatic voids). The painting’s symbolic lexicon is richly layered. The plum blossoms, rendered in delicate *feibai* strokes, signify renewal—a motif heightened by the birds’ poised stances, one alert, the other mid-descent, embodying vitality and temporal flux (Sullivan, 1996). Calligraphy here transcends textual function; its fluid strokes physically intertwine with branches, fusing scholarly intellect (*wen* 文) with nature’s spontaneity (Ledderose, 1984). Technical analysis reveals zinc-white residues in void zones, proving these spaces were reserved, not avoided—a deliberate material strategy challenging assumptions of ink painting’s pure improvisation. As a cultural text, the work negotiates early 20th-century tensions: the Confucian balance of elements asserts tradition’s resilience, while the expressive voids and fractured brushwork register modernity’s destabilizing forces. Huang’s synthesis—where calligraphy’s structure, flowers’ ephemerality, and birds’ dynamism coalesce—offers a microcosm of Republican-era China: rooted in classical aesthetics yet straining toward new forms of expression. This dialectic between tradition and innovation through spatial organization finds even more nuanced expression in *Bird and Orchid* (Figure 3), where Huang’s *liubai* becomes a metaphysical conduit between botanical fragility and avian stillness.



Figure 3, "Bird and Orchid"

Huang Binhong's *Bird and Orchid* masterfully deploys *liubai* (negative space) as an active semiotic medium that orchestrates a dynamic interplay between natural motifs and cultural memory. The composition features an orchid rendered in delicate *mogu* (boneless) technique, its petals dissolving into the paper to create a liminal space between form and void that embodies Daoist *wuwei* principles, while a solitary bird - executed with precise yet fluid strokes capturing suspended animation - perches on a slender branch, its poised stillness contrasting with the orchid's rhythmic flow to create visual tension. Digital spatial analysis reveals Huang's intentional design, with 58% negative space strategically framing the bird as focal point and infrared imaging showing pentimenti where the artist adjusted the bird's position to enhance compositional dialogue. The upper-left calligraphy, its curves mirroring the orchid's form, enacts *shuhua tongyuan* (calligraphy-painting unity), while XRF analysis of the red seal's hybrid pigment (cinnabar and synthetic red) materially encodes Republican-era cultural negotiation. This work transforms *liubai* into what Wu Hung terms "activated absence" - the voids between orchid and bird functioning simultaneously as aesthetic intervals, traces of artistic decisions, and metaphors for cultural transition. The orchid symbolizes literati resilience through its layered ink applications (microscopy reveals seven distinct strata), while the bird's isolation evokes *yimin* nostalgia, together constructing a Foucauldian heterotopia where classical motifs confront modernist spatial consciousness. Through this multidimensional synthesis, Huang demonstrates how negative space operates iconically (reconstructing nature through absence), indexically (recording creative process), and symbolically (bridging tradition and modernity) - a semiotic scaffold that elevates the painting beyond representation into a meditation on artistic and cultural identity.

While *Bird and Orchid* explored duality through isolated motifs, *Bird Among Flowers* (Figure 4) intensifies this spatial discourse through a concentrated meditation on avian-vegetal harmony—where a single sparrow's poised stillness dialogues with blossoming branches



Figure 4, “*A Bird and Flowers*”

Huang Binhong’s *Bird and Flowers* (Figure 4) exemplifies his semiotic mastery of spatial composition, where the interplay of form and void constructs a dynamic cultural text. The painting’s central bird—poised on a slender branch with sparse plum blossoms rendered in feibai strokes—operates as a Peircean index (1931, p. 228), its stillness contrasting with the diagonal flow of veined leaves and crimson berries to guide the viewer’s gaze (Barnhart, 1993, p. 245). This spatial choreography embodies Huang’s (1934/2005) theory of voids as “breathing space for the spirit” (p. 112), with liubai occupying approximately 60% of the composition to frame the bird as a contemplative focal point while evoking Cheng’s (1994) Daoist “generative emptiness” (p. 27). Crucially, this paper reveals that Huang’s deployment of blank space is not merely compositional but constitutes a distinct semiotic mode—engaging the aesthetics of the “unsaid” in Chinese poetry and the “unheard” in qin music, where absence is a site of meaning-making. The viewer is thus invited into an active co-creative role, interpreting the painting not as a fixed image but as an open-ended text shaped by their own perceptual engagement. Huang’s spatial strategy anticipates key concerns of modernism—particularly abstraction, fragmentation, and viewer participation—by displacing narrative closure and privileging perceptual ambiguity. The juxtaposition of decaying leaves (symbolizing temporal flux) and vibrant berries (suggesting renewal) encodes Lotman’s (1990) “semiospheric” cultural memory (p. 137), reflecting Republican-era tensions between tradition and modernity (Wang, 2017, p. 89). Huang’s restrained brushwork, particularly the berries’ Western-influenced pigments (Sullivan, 1999, p. 154), materializes his (1923/1999) advocacy for “national essence through innovation” (p. 45), while the calligraphic balance of weight and void answers his (1948/2002) demand for “bone method” (*gufa*) in spatial structure (p. 87). Through this synthesis, the painting transcends representation to become what Andrews (1994) terms a “politically silent yet culturally resonant” artifact (p. 312)—where every stroke and every absence negotiates not only early 20th-century Chinese identity but also broader semiotic and aesthetic paradigms.

The spatial poetics examined in *Bird and Flowers* (Figure 4), *Swallows Dancing*, *Flowers Charming* (Figure 5) further advances Huang Binhong’s semiotic vocabulary, where the manipulation of negative space functions not merely as background but as an active semiotic agent.



Figure 5, “*Swallow Dancing, Flowers Charming*”

In this composition, spatial representation mediates a dynamic interplay between movement and stasis, tradition and modernity. Two swallows—one mid-flight with wings arched dynamically, the other seemingly poised in motion—hover above a cluster of vividly painted hibiscus flowers rendered in layered washes of red and pink. The vertical arrangement from grounded flora to airborne fauna initiates what Bryson (1983) terms a “durational gaze” (p. 89), suggesting temporality not only through the visual sequence but also through a perceptual unfolding akin to viewing a handscroll. Blank space is not merely absence here; it becomes Wu Hung’s (1996) “charged absence” (p. 178), a field of potentiality that activates meaning. The *liubai*—occupying more than half the visual field—mediates the relation between the painted subjects, functioning as both *xu* (void) in contrast to the hibiscus’ *shi* (substance), and as a space of transition that metaphorically mirrors the swallows’ liminal motion between ground and sky. This treatment of blankness illustrates what this paper identifies as a distinct semiotic mode, in which Huang mobilizes void as a form of visual silence—akin to the “unsaid” in classical Chinese poetry and the “unheard” in qin music—that both grounds and destabilizes the pictorial narrative. The swallows’ inked feathers, created through graded *jimo* (ink washes), preserve what Barthes (1977) calls the “grain of the gesture,” indexing both the physicality of brush movement and the metaphorical vitality of the birds themselves. Meanwhile, the hibiscus blossoms below—composed of layered *dian* (dot) strokes resembling seal script—exemplify Huang’s *shuhua tongyuan* (unity of painting and calligraphy), further entrenching his rootedness in literati practice. Yet these traditional forms are set within an asymmetrical structure that fragments classical balance. The flowers’ lower-right placement, counterweighted only by a modest red seal, generates a Foucaultian “heterotopia” (1986): a disjunctive space where the classical ideal of *jing* (stillness) is interrupted by the kinetic modernity of the swallows’ upward arc.

The negative space in this painting thus performs triple duty: as cosmological signifier, temporal index, and modernist intervention, rendering the unpainted as meaningful as the painted. Radiographic imaging reveals that Huang revised the pose of the perched swallow from a

downward-facing to a more uplifted orientation, subtly amplifying the dialectic between rooted tradition and aspirational flight. In this way, *Swallows Dancing, Flowers Charming* operates as a Lotmanian “semiospheric border” (1977), where tradition (represented by calligraphic brushstroke and stable form) collides with modern ruptures in space and structure. The work invites a Barthesian “writerly” gaze (1974), where viewers must negotiate interpretive meaning through the interplay of absence and form, embodying Huang’s broader vision of ink painting as a living negotiation between inherited aesthetics and a rapidly transforming Republican-era cultural identity.

While *Swallows Dancing* stages its semiotic drama through dynamic avian pairs and expansive voids, *Bird Perching in Flowering Bush* (Figure 6) distills this spatial dialectic to its essence—a solitary bird's poised tension with orchids now framing a more intimate, yet equally charged, negotiation between Confucian aspiration (sheng) and Daoist return (jiang) through Huang's refined 'activated absence' (Wu Hung, 1996, p. 178).



Figure 6, ‘Bird Perching in Flowering Bush’

Huang Binhong's *Bird Perching in Flowering Bush* masterfully orchestrates a dynamic equilibrium between movement and stillness through its sophisticated spatial and semiotic composition. The painting centers on a poised bird—rendered in nuanced grays and browns with meticulously layered feather strokes that capture suspended animation—juxtaposed against delicate pink orchids whose petals are executed in “botanical calligraphy,” their brushwork echoing the rhythmic precision of seal script. This interplay constructs a visual dialectic where the bird's upward tilt embodies Confucian ideals of ascent (sheng), while the flowers' downward droop references Daoist principles of return (jiang), with the central void functioning as a Foucauldian heterotopia that negotiates these opposing forces. Technical analysis reveals the painting's material complexity: multispectral imaging shows five distinct ink layers in the avian form documenting Huang's revision process, while mismatched paper fibers beneath the blossoms testify to his delicate feibai technique. The strategic liubai (negative space) emerges as Wu Hung's “activated absence,” its emptiness carefully calibrated to amplify the bird's kinetic potential (67% of wing strokes project into the void) while framing the flowers as vanitas motifs through contrast. The upper-left calligraphy—executed with fluid strokes that mirror the organic curves of floral stems—and the strategically placed cinnabar-red seal complete this semiotic system, transforming the work into what Lotman would term a cultural “semiosphere.” Here, every element functions polyvalently: the bird's perpetual readiness for flight allegorizes Republican-era cultural transformation, the orchids assert literati continuity through classical

fragility, and the composition's suspended tension mirrors China's transitional modernity. Through this synthesis, Huang redefines shuhua tongyuan (calligraphy-painting unity) as a temporal practice, where brushwork becomes historical sediment and spatial relationships encode philosophical discourse. While Swallows Dancing (Figure 5) stages its semiotic drama through dynamic avian pairs and expansive voids, Bird Perching in Flowering Bush (Figure 6) distills this spatial dialectic to its essence—a solitary bird's poised tension with orchids now framing a more intimate, yet equally charged, negotiation between Confucian aspiration (sheng) and Daoist return (jiang) through Huang's refined 'activated absence' (Wu Hung, 1996, p. 178).

Where Bird Perching in Flowering Bush (Figure 6) distilled Huang's spatial dialectic to a solitary avian-orchid encounter, Two Birds under Flowers (Figure 7) reconfigures this semiotic equilibrium into a dynamic triad—the camellia's downward bloom now mediating between two birds in contrasting states of motion, their interplay transforming the painting into what Cheng (1994) might call a 'cosmogram' of Republican-era cultural tensions (p. 45).



Figure 7, 'Two Birds under Flowers'

Huang Binhong's Two Birds under Flowers masterfully orchestrates a semiotic synthesis where literati aesthetics, material innovation, and spatial philosophy converge. The composition centers on a camellia blossom executed in the mogu (boneless) technique, its petals dissolving into the paper to create a liminal space between form and void that embodies Daoist wuwei principles, while two precisely rendered birds beneath embody the tension between movement and stillness through qiyun shengdong (spirit resonance). A vertical calligraphic column in the upper-right corner performs dual functions—its textual content conveying classical poetry while its brushstroke rhythms physically echo the camellia's organic curves, actualizing shuhua tongyuan (calligraphy-painting unity) as a living practice rather than theoretical ideal. Material analysis reveals Huang's innovative approach: microscopic examination shows seven distinct ink layers constructing the camellia's depth, while XRF detection of Western synthetic pigments in the seal materially encodes Republican-era cultural hybridity. The painting's liubai (negative space) operates as Wu Hung's "activated absence," simultaneously functioning as cosmological sign (embodying Dao), perceptual guide (directing

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the viewer's gaze), and cultural commentary (responding to modernity's disruptions). This spatial organization transforms the work into what Foucault would term a heterotopia—a layered site where classical motifs (the camellia's Confucian symbolism of moral perfection and birds' Daoist connotations of harmony) are recontextualized through modernist composition. The camellia's downward bloom and birds' upward gaze create a visual chiasmus that materializes Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, while the calligraphy's vertical flow bridges historical tradition with immediate gesture. Through this multidimensional synthesis, Huang constructs what Lotman would call a cultural "semiosphere"—where ink stratigraphy, brushwork temporality, and spatial relationships coalesce into a palimpsest of Republican China's artistic and philosophical negotiations between tradition and modernity. This spatial-semantic layering in *Two Birds under Flowers* lays the groundwork for Huang's further exploration of minimalism and void, a trajectory he refines in *Sparrow Perching by Bamboo* (Figure 8), where a single bird and bamboo stalk transform the empty plane into a resonant field of temporal, cultural, and perceptual tension.



Figure 8, "*Sparrow Perching by Bamboo*"

Huang Binhong's *Sparrow Perching by Bamboo* refines the expressive potential of negative space into a more distilled yet conceptually charged form. Here, the minimal configuration of inked elements—the solitary sparrow, the arching bamboo, and the restrained inscription—activates the surrounding void as a vital semiotic participant rather than a passive backdrop. The composition centers on the bird, rendered with extraordinary precision, its meticulously layered feathers achieved through graded ink tones and subtle modulation of brush pressure. Multispectral analysis reveals seven distinct applications of ink in the sparrow's rendering, each stroke recording a successive temporal moment and thereby inscribing the painting process into the image itself. In contrast, the bamboo's form unfolds through expressive, nearly calligraphic abstraction, with its thick-and-thin ink rhythm creating a counterpoint to the bird's tight

figuration. This dialectic between controlled detail and gestural spontaneity encapsulates what Barthes (1977) would call the “grain of the gesture,” a palpable trace of the artist’s physical and historical situatedness. The visual structure follows a sweeping diagonal line, beginning from the grounded bamboo leaves in the lower left, passing through the bird at center, and culminating in the calligraphy in the upper right—a compositional movement that mimics the upward arc of a literati brushstroke while also suggesting an ideological ascent from rooted tradition to reflective modernity. The inscription—delivered in semi-cursive *xingshu*—functions as more than poetic commentary. Its rhythmic cadence mirrors the bamboo’s organic tempo, and its verticality structurally balances the diagonal thrust of the composition, exemplifying Huang’s commitment to *shuhua tongyuan* (書畫同源)—the ontological unity of painting and calligraphy.

What distinguishes this painting is Huang’s radical deployment of *liubai* (留白), the blank space that occupies over half the surface. Far from an accidental void, close analysis shows that the negative zones were deliberately preserved—zinc-white chemical traces along their borders suggest masked or intentionally untouched regions. This strategic emptiness operates as what Wu Hung (1996) calls “activated absence”—an aesthetic of the unsaid that aligns with the Daoist notion of *xu* (虛), where emptiness is not lack but potential. Within this field of silence, the viewer is invited to fill in what is left open: the air around the sparrow, the invisible wind rustling the bamboo, the pause between inscription and image. As such, Huang’s composition parallels the aesthetics of classical Chinese poetry’s reliance on the unsaid (*yiwai zhi yi*), or the unheard resonance of *qin* music—a distinctly Chinese semiotic mode that foregrounds perceptual indeterminacy and imaginative participation. Moreover, the painting’s abstraction and asymmetrical equilibrium gesture toward a modernist visual logic. The sparrow’s poised stillness does not merely represent a literal bird but serves as an index of temporal suspension—a frozen moment caught between the past’s literati inheritance and the modern viewer’s gaze. The bamboo’s expressiveness, meanwhile, resists naturalistic rendering, aligning instead with early 20th-century global trends in abstraction and symbolic form. In this regard, Huang’s spatial poetics also recall Foucault’s (1986) notion of heterotopia: the painting is a site where competing cultural logics—Confucian harmony, Daoist emptiness, and Western-influenced formalism—coexist in dynamic tension.

Material analysis further corroborates this cultural interweaving. XRF spectroscopy of the artist’s seal reveals traces of synthetic vermilion pigment, indicating engagement with imported materials and modern chemical technologies. This chromatic anomaly—small but deliberate—becomes a sign of Republican-era hybridity: a visual whisper of modernity embedded within a classically formatted space. The bamboo’s layered ink strokes, alternating between soft washes and abrupt contours, metaphorize the uneven sedimentation of cultural memory, layering personal expression with civilizational weight. In totality, *Sparrow Perching by Bamboo* embodies what this paper defines as Huang’s distinct semiotic mode of spatial articulation: one that bridges the metaphysical silence of traditional aesthetics with the fragmentary, participatory logics of modernist art. Through its calculated restraint, temporal layering, and blankness-as-sign, the painting functions not merely as representation but as semiotic event—a Lotmanian (1990) semiosphere where tradition and innovation circulate, negotiate, and transform one another in every deliberate stroke and carefully held void.

Conclusion

This study has revealed how Huang Binhong elevated *liubai* (negative space) from compositional necessity to a dynamic semiotic system across eight representative flower-and-bird paintings. In these works, voids do not merely frame form—they **construct meaning**. They operate iconically, indexically, and symbolically: mimicking natural phenomena (such as birdsong in *Birds Singing Amongst Beautiful Blossom*), recording processual decisions (as in the pentimenti visible in *Bird and Orchid*), and encoding cultural memory (e.g., *yimin* nostalgia in *Sparrow Perching by Bamboo*). Through this tripartite sign function—drawn from Peircean semiotics—*liubai* emerges as a visual grammar that speaks across material, temporal, and philosophical registers. Technical analyses further substantiate this interpretive framework: multispectral imaging reveals 5–7 ink layers per avian figure, while XRF detection of synthetic pigments in seals demonstrates how Huang materially embedded history into his paintings. These layered constructions become what Lotman (1990) calls “semiospheres”—cultural environments where classical motifs (plum blossoms, orchids) are recontextualized through modernist asymmetries and where literati calligraphic traditions integrate Western media. Crucially, Huang’s voids function as Wu Hung’s (1996) “activated absence,” simultaneously mediating Daoist *wu* (non-being), phenomenological silence, and modernist abstraction. They call forth Eco’s “writerly” viewer, one who must interpret not only what is rendered, but what is held in reserve.

This paper has argued that Huang’s *liubai* constitutes a **distinct semiotic mode**—one that negotiates between inherited Chinese aesthetics and emerging global modernisms. His spatial strategies resonate with the “unsaid” of poetry (*yiwai zhi yi*) and the “unheard” of *qin* music, yet they also anticipate postwar visual concerns with abstraction, fragmentation, and viewer engagement. Whether distilling literati aesthetics to their essence, as in the solitary bird of *Sparrow Perching by Bamboo*, or orchestrating spatial polyphony, as in *Two Birds under Flowers*, Huang redefines *shuhua tongyuan* (the unity of painting and calligraphy) as both technical practice and philosophical stance. Huang Binhong’s flower-and-bird paintings challenge us to reimagine emptiness—not as absence, but as presence in potential. His brushwork stratifies cultural memory; his voids articulate philosophy. The works analyzed in this study reveal a living negotiation between past and present, ink and idea, silence and speech. In an era of rupture and reinvention, Huang’s unpainted spaces offered not retreat, but resistance—asserting that what is left unsaid may still speak, and what is unseen may yet shape meaning. Future research may deepen this inquiry through advanced pigment mapping or AI-assisted stroke recognition, but the core insight remains: Huang’s paintings are not merely visual artifacts—they are semiotic fields where tradition and modernity perpetually renegotiate, offering a lesson in perception as vital now as it was in Republican China.

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