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The Poetics of Emptiness: The Aesthetic and Philosophical Functions of Blankness in the Paintings of Bada Shanren during the Qing Dynasty

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Abstract

This paper investigates the role of blankness (liú bái) in the representative paintings of Bada Shanren (Zhu Da), a key figure in early Qing dynasty literati art. Drawing on close visual analysis and grounded in Chinese aesthetic philosophy—particularly the concepts of xu (emptiness), wu (non-being), and yijing (poetic atmosphere)—the study explores how Bada Shanren transforms spatial voids into expressive agents of meaning. Five major works—Fish Swimming, Double Fish, Lotus and Duck, Rhododendron and Calligraphy, and Branch of Plum Blossoms—are examined to illustrate how blankness operates not as absence, but as presence: a space for emotional intensity, philosophical ambiguity, and subtle resistance. The paper argues that Bada's use of blankness reflects both his inner psychological landscape and the socio-political dislocation following the fall of the Ming dynasty. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that Bada Shanren redefined blankness as a semiotic system in its own right, elevating silence, omission, and emptiness into a radical visual language unique in Chinese art history.

Introduction

Blankness—often perceived as mere emptiness or void—holds profound aesthetic, philosophical, and psychological significance in traditional Chinese painting. In particular, the work of Bada Shanren (Zhu Da, 1626–1705) exemplifies a radical engagement with emptiness that transcends visual convention. As a descendant of the Ming imperial family who became a Chan Buddhist monk and later a reclusive painter following the dynasty's fall, Bada Shanren's art reflects the trauma, disillusionment, and introspection of his time (Cahill, 1998; Fu, 1980). His paintings, marked by stark compositions and vast blank spaces, challenge conventional spatial dynamics and infuse his work with a complex interplay of silence, ambiguity, and resistance. Scholars such as James Cahill and Jonathan Hay have noted that Bada Shanren's blankness operates not as an absence but as a charged space where meaning accumulates through what is left unsaid or unseen (Cahill, 1998; Hay, 2001). In this regard, his art engages with long-standing traditions in Chinese aesthetics, where the “unpainted” often carries as much significance as the brushstroke (Sullivan, 1984).

This paper examines how blankness functions as both a compositional strategy and an expressive language in Bada Shanren's representative paintings. Focusing on five selected works—*Fish Swimming*, *Double Fish*, *Lotus and Ducks*, *Rhododendron and Calligraphy*, and *Branch of Plum Blossoms*—the study investigates how he employs empty space to evoke silence, transcendence, and detachment, drawing from both personal experience and shared cultural vocabularies.

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Two central research questions guide this inquiry:

1. How does Bada Shanren employ blankness as a compositional and expressive device in his Qing dynasty paintings, and what philosophical or emotional meanings does it convey?
2. In what ways does the strategic use of blank space in Bada Shanren's artwork reflect his personal history, literati identity, and the broader cultural aesthetics of post-Ming China?

By situating Bada Shanren's use of blankness within the broader context of dynastic transition and literati aesthetics—particularly those influenced by Daoist and Chan Buddhist thought—this paper argues that his art transforms visual emptiness into a potent mode of communication. In doing so, Bada Shanren redefines the function of space in Chinese painting, not as a void, but as a site of subtle, layered meaning.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Scholarship on Bada Shanren and Qing Dynasty Painting

Bada Shanren (Zhu Da) occupies a central position in the study of early Qing dynasty painting, yet his work continues to provoke new interpretations due to its complexity, ambiguity, and emotional depth. Scholars such as James Cahill (1998) and Jonathan Hay (2001) have been instrumental in articulating Bada's place in Chinese art history. Cahill views Bada as a master of expressive brushwork and psychological nuance, noting how his sparse compositions reflect the dislocation and inner conflict faced by Ming loyalists in the early Qing period. In particular, Cahill observes that the silence in Bada's paintings "speaks volumes" about his cultural and spiritual detachment (Cahill, 1998, p. 132). Jonathan Hay offers a more theoretical analysis, arguing that Bada Shanren's works embody a "negative realism" in which absence, fragmentation, and negation become vehicles of expression (Hay, 2001). Rather than simply rejecting convention, Bada reworks the literati tradition through a minimalistic idiom that embraces instability and ambiguity. While both scholars acknowledge the role of spatial emptiness in Bada's art, they treat it more as a feature than a central subject of inquiry. This leaves a significant opening to explore blankness not as background but as an active compositional and philosophical force. Other scholars, such as Jerome Silbergeld (1993), have focused on Bada Shanren's eccentricity, interpreting his odd depictions of birds, fish, and rocks as veiled forms of protest and spiritual refuge. Silbergeld's work contributes to an understanding of how Bada used formal innovation to express psychological resistance and detachment, particularly in his post-Ming context. However, the analytical emphasis tends to remain on symbolism and form, leaving blankness itself underexamined.

Blankness in Chinese Aesthetics: Daoist and Chan Buddhist Perspectives

The concept of blankness (*xu* 空, *wu* 無) in Chinese painting is deeply rooted in Daoist and Chan Buddhist philosophy. In Daoism, emptiness is not nothingness, but a generative principle. As expressed in the *Dao De Jing*, "the usefulness of a vessel lies in its emptiness" (Laozi, ch. 11). This idea shaped classical Chinese aesthetics, where blank space was not considered a void but a dynamic field of potential. Painters often used white paper not just to surround the image but to evoke atmosphere, suggest mood, or activate the viewer's imagination. Chan Buddhism further reinforced the value of silence, spontaneity, and non-duality. In visual terms, this often resulted in asymmetrical compositions and expressive brushwork that privileged the unsaid over the explicit. As Victor Mair and François Jullien have shown, Chinese painters often sought to achieve what Jullien calls the "presence of absence,"

using blankness to elicit a contemplative experience (Jullien, 2009; Mair, 1996). In this context, Bada Shanren's use of blank space can be understood not as a passive backdrop but as an active aesthetic and philosophical choice—a space of resistance, transcendence, and communication. His blankness invites the viewer to pause, reflect, and engage with the invisible tensions of his world: the fall of the Ming dynasty, the spiritual crisis of identity, and the search for meaning beyond language.

Gaps and Directions in Current Scholarship

While previous studies acknowledge Bada Shanren's restraint, subtlety, and use of negative space, there remains a lack of sustained inquiry into how blankness functions as a visual strategy and cultural signifier in his work. This study builds upon the insights of Cahill, Hay, and Silbergeld, but moves further by positioning blankness not as absence, but as presence in disguise—a carrier of emotional, philosophical, and political meaning. It proposes that Bada's unique manipulation of emptiness constitutes a deliberate, multilayered response to the upheaval of his time and a redefinition of the expressive potential of space in Chinese painting.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in the disciplines of art history and Chinese aesthetics. It aims to explore how blankness—understood as both visual space and cultural concept—is employed in representative paintings by Bada Shanren (Zhu Da), a pivotal figure in early Qing dynasty art. Through close visual analysis informed by contextual, historical, and philosophical perspectives, the study seeks to uncover how blankness functions not as passive emptiness but as an expressive, often ambiguous presence within his compositions.

Research Design

The methodology is structured around the visual and contextual analysis of five paintings attributed to Bada Shanren. The study proceeds in three analytical layers:

1. **Formal Analysis** – Examination of composition, brushwork, spatial arrangement, subject-object relationships, and the positioning and proportion of blank space.
2. **Contextual Interpretation** – Consideration of the artist's personal background, the socio-political trauma of the Ming-Qing transition, and prevailing literati painting traditions.
3. **Philosophical Reading** – Application of Daoist and Chan Buddhist notions of *xu* (emptiness) and *wu* (non-being) to interpret the aesthetic, emotional, and conceptual implications of blankness in each work.

This approach allows the study to move beyond descriptive analysis and toward an interpretation of blankness as a meaningful visual strategy and a reflection of deeper cultural concerns.

Rationale for Selecting the Five Paintings

The following five paintings - *Fish Swimming*, *Double Fish*, *Lotus and Ducks*, *Rhododendron and Calligraphy*, and *Branch of Plum Blossoms* - were selected based on their historical importance, diversity of subject matter, and compositional richness in the use of blankness. Together, they represent the breadth of Bada Shanren's thematic and stylistic concerns, spanning flora, fauna, and landscape. Each work enjoys canonical status, frequently cited in major studies on Bada Shanren and housed in prestigious museum collections, thereby affirming their

scholarly significance. These paintings exemplify Bada Shanren's hallmark visual economy, where minimal brushwork and stark spatial arrangements turn blank space into an active pictorial element rather than a mere background. Moreover, the selected works are dense with metaphor and allusion, offering layered interpretations of blankness in relation to themes such as political dislocation, religious transcendence, and personal withdrawal. Finally, although precise dating of his paintings is often uncertain, these five collectively reflect early, middle, and late phases of Bada Shanren's artistic development, providing a valuable framework for examining how his approach to space evolved over time.

Theoretical and Analytical Framework

This study draws on Chinese aesthetic theory, art-historical scholarship, and interpretive philosophy to examine how blankness operates not as a void, but as an active visual and conceptual presence in the selected paintings of Bada Shanren. Rather than treating unpainted areas as compositional byproducts, the analysis interprets blankness as a deliberate and meaningful device—capable of suggesting mood, absence, tension, or transcendence. Three interconnected concepts frame this interpretive approach: *xu* (虚), *wu* (无), and *yijing* (意境). *Xu*, or emptiness, plays a pivotal role in Daoist and Chan Buddhist aesthetics, where voids are seen as generative spaces that allow meaning to emerge through implication rather than assertion. Jullien (2009) describes this "logic of the vague" as central to Chinese visuality, in which the unmarked or indeterminate space holds as much expressive weight as what is depicted. In Bada Shanren's works, *xu* often disorients the viewer's expectations of depth and placement, transforming absence into a form of contemplative presence. Closely related is *wu*, or non-being, which refers not to negation but to latent potentiality. As Sullivan (1984) notes, painters of the Chinese literati tradition frequently employed emptiness not as a gap but as a force—an invitation to psychological and spiritual engagement with the image. In this sense, *wu* is not void of content but brimming with implication.

These ideas culminate in the concept of *yijing*, the poetic atmosphere or "meaning-realm" that arises from the subtle interaction of line, brush, and space. According to Cahill (1998), literati painters of the seventeenth century, such as Bada Shanren, sought to create *yijing* through expressive restraint rather than elaborate detail. Their works conveyed emotion and thought through silence, abstraction, and ambiguity—qualities that make blankness central to the painting's affective and philosophical resonance. Furthermore, as Hay (2001) suggests in his study of Shitao, painters like Bada Shanren operated in a time of political rupture and personal exile, where visual forms often served as veiled expressions of resistance, withdrawal, and spiritual self-definition. In this context, blankness is not merely stylistic but ideologically and emotionally charged, shaped by the cultural currents of early Qing China.

Limitations

This study is qualitative in nature and focuses on a small number of selected works. It does not attempt to provide an exhaustive catalogue of Bada Shanren's oeuvre or quantify the extent of blank space through digital metrics. Instead, it privileges "depth over breadth", offering detailed interpretations rooted in visual and philosophical analysis. Further studies may consider expanding the scope through comparative methods or digital imaging to analyze spatial patterns more systematically.

Analysis of Representative Works

Building on the philosophical and aesthetic frameworks outlined in the previous section, this part of the study offers a close examination of five representative paintings by Bada Shanren. These works - *Fish Swimming*, *Double Fish*, *Lotus and Ducks*, *Rhododendron and Calligraphy*, and *Branch of Plum Blossoms* - have been selected for their diverse subject matter, canonical status, and especially their expressive use of blankness. Through detailed visual analysis grounded in the concepts of *xu* (emptiness), *wu* (non-being), and *yijing* (poetic resonance), the following sections explore how blankness functions not only as a compositional device but also as a site of cultural memory, political ambivalence, and spiritual introspection. Each painting is considered in terms of its formal structure, symbolic content, and the interplay between what is painted and what is left unsaid. In doing so, this analysis aims to reveal how Bada Shanren transformed the void into a powerful visual language that reflected both the inner world of the artist and the fractured historical moment in which he painted. One of the most striking examples of this transformation can be found in *Fish Swimming* (游鱼), where the expressive force of emptiness reaches its most distilled and politically charged form.

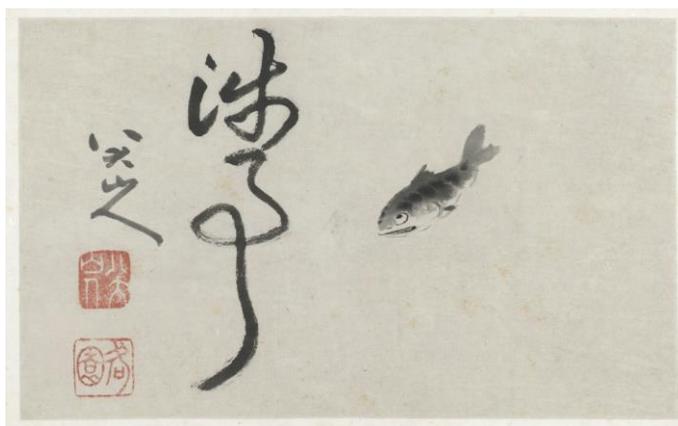


Figure 1, “Fish Swimming”

In *Fish Swimming* (Figure 1), Bada Shanren (Zhu Da) strips painting down to its most elemental form: a single fish suspended in an expanse of blank paper. Composed during the late 17th century in the aftermath of the Ming–Qing dynastic transition, this minimalist work exemplifies the radical reimagining of *liú bái* (留白) in Qing painting. No longer merely a compositional device, blankness here becomes a site of existential tension and coded dissent. The solitary fish, rendered in a few expressive strokes, floats unanchored in a void that denies illusionistic water. Instead, the emptiness evokes the dislocation of a *yimin* (遗民, remnant subject), mirroring the artist’s own withdrawal from a world overtaken by Manchu rule. The inscription 游鱼, precariously positioned, amplifies this sense of imbalance, its calligraphic instability echoing the artist’s fractured identity. The blank space in *Fish Swimming* functions not as passive background but as an active semiotic field, resonating across cultural, psychological, and political registers. As Zhao Yiheng (2001) observes, the painting exemplifies the “empty symbol” (空符号), where absence—not presence—generates meaning. The void becomes a medium of visual and philosophical communication, one that demands cultural literacy to decode. Iconically, the space suggests water through traditional Chinese convention (Bush & Shih, 2012), yet indexically it reflects the personal and collective exile of Ming loyalists (Brook, 1998). At a symbolic level, it resonates with Daoist *wu* (无) — the generative non-being that underlies all form (Cheng, 1994). This multivalent use of blankness supports Jullien’s (2009)

argument that in Chinese painting, the void does not represent; it operates. The expressivity of the single fish—particularly its unblinking eye — anchors the viewer in a disquieting gaze. It functions as a Barthesian punctum (Barthes, 1977), rupturing the stillness and injecting psychic tension. The inversion of the fish’s posture, noted by Cahill (1996), signifies more than visual experimentation; it signals existential destabilization. Material choices further deepen this resonance. Zhu Da’s use of rough, absorbent paper creates bleeding ink edges and textural irregularities that heighten instability (Clunas, 2007). The austerity of materials—combined with unadorned space and limited color—converts the painting into what Wu Hung (2005) calls “active absence”: a void that provokes reflection, rather than offering clarity.

This painting challenges Western pictorial conventions rooted in mimetic representation. Where Renaissance painting constructs perspectival coherence, *Fish Swimming* offers an ontological counterpoint—an image without ground, horizon, or spatial depth. Instead, it suggests what Wang Guowei (1962) described as *yijing* (意境), a poetic atmosphere evoked by what is unsaid and unseen. The angled placement of calligraphy, destabilizing semantic certainty, aligns with Clunas’s (1997) observation that literati inscriptions often oscillate between the literal and metaphorical. Here, this textual instability underscores the image’s broader ambiguity: is the fish swimming freely, or is it suspended in a psychic or political void? Indeed, the painting’s silence becomes strategic. Created during a time of literary persecution under the Kangxi emperor, its restraint offers what Clunas (2007) calls a “safe harbor for dissent.” Its blankness, far from neutral, becomes an aesthetic of resistance. The wide-eyed fish, recurring across Bada Shanren’s oeuvre, suggests a Zhuangzian detachment—a gaze that sees through illusion without reacting (Watson, 1968). Read through Bourdieu’s (1993) lens of symbolic capital, Bada’s choice of awkward brushwork and compositional imbalance subverts Qing court aesthetics. His deviation from formal elegance enacts what Zhao (2001) terms “linguistic alienation,” where visual language becomes estranged under political repression.

Fish Swimming is more than a meditation on nature; it is a semiotic system in silence. As Barthes (1977) might frame it, the work is “writerly”—open-ended, resisting closure, and demanding viewer engagement. Through its use of *liú bái* as structure, metaphor, and defiance, the painting fulfills Cheng’s (1994) proposition that emptiness is not void but vitality—the very soul of the painting. It affirms blankness as a potent aesthetic and political tool, transforming absence into presence, and silence into speech. Where *Fish Swimming* weaponized absence, *Double Fish* (Figure 2) stages absence as a subtle theater of encounter—its twin subjects transforming blankness into a medium of silent dialogue and suspended relationality.



Figure 2, “Double Fish”

Composed with masterful restraint, the painting features two fish adrift in an expanse of unpainted silk, accompanied by a vertical column of calligraphy that balances the composition yet does not resolve its emotional ambiguity. Whereas the solitary fish in *Fish Swimming* externalized inner alienation, *Double Fish* initiates a visual discourse through juxtaposition. It is not merely the presence of two fish that matters, but their spatial relationship: positioned near each other yet never touching, they generate a charged interval that enacts what Wu Hung (2005) refers to as an “active absence” (p. 33)—a liminal field where meaning arises not from form but from interstitial silence.

This compositional dynamic transforms *liú bái* from a zone of negation into a site of resonance. One fish appears darker, anchored and weighty; the other, paler and ethereal. The contrast evokes a yin-yang polarity, suggesting not only formal balance but metaphysical complementarity. As with Chan Buddhist koans, the meaning of their encounter is not given but must be intuited. The space between the fish—their non-meeting—is not emptiness in the Western sense of void, but what Daoist aesthetics would consider *xu* (虛): fullness concealed within apparent emptiness.

Bada Shanren thus activates the void as a semiotic bridge, one that connects rather than divides. Where *Fish Swimming* embodies a monologic cry of solitude, *Double Fish* offers a dialogic whisper, gesturing toward unspoken understanding. The transition from existential rupture to meditative equilibrium marks a subtle evolution in Bada Shanren's engagement with blankness. The calligraphy above the fish deepens this relational framework. Though composed in a detached verticality, it adds a third presence—a human voice or trace—that hovers above the silent conversation below. This tripartite structure (fish–fish–text) further complicates the notion of absence, as meaning migrates not only between visual forms but also between image and word. In this way, *Double Fish* exemplifies Zhao Yiheng's (2001) notion of the “empty symbol” (空符号), where interpretive responsibility shifts onto the viewer, who must navigate between visual cues and textual allusions to reconstruct meaning (p. 47). *Double Fish* redefines *liú bái* not as void but as a field of affective potential—one that invites the viewer to sense rather than see, to intuit rather than resolve. It illustrates Bada Shanren's growing sophistication in using negative space not only as a formal strategy but as a metaphysical principle, drawing on the Daoist adage that “great form has no shape” and the Chan idea that truth resides in what is left unsaid. In this painting, Bada does not simply portray fish in water; he conjures a world where meaning swims silently through the gaps.

Following the intimate spatial tension of *Double Fish*, *Lotus and Duck* (Figure 3) expands the expressive role of blankness into a full vertical composition, where absence does not only divide or connect, but structures a layered, asymmetrical world.



Figure 3, “*Lotus and Ducks*”

Here, Bada Shanren orchestrates void and form across multiple registers—vegetal, animal, mineral, and calligraphic—using empty space to choreograph mood, metaphor, and

philosophical ambiguity. In *Lotus and Duck*, large sections of the silk remain untouched, particularly in the middle and upper-left areas of the scroll. This unmarked space—expansive and quiet—divides the vertical plane into distinct yet interrelated zones. The duck sits at the bottom, nested on a roughly outlined rock, while the tall, swaying lotuses rise diagonally on the right, their stalks exaggerated and sinuous, their leaves dense but asymmetrically placed. The rock, duck, and lotuses never intersect directly; instead, the blankness between them becomes an active visual agent that mediates their presence and emphasizes their separateness. The duck does not “occupy” a pond in the traditional sense but is surrounded by suggestion: the water, inferred but unpainted, becomes a metaphysical field where absence becomes habitat. This spatial composition exemplifies what Wu Hung (2005) calls “negative realism” a form of depiction in which what is left out is more evocative than what is rendered (p. 41). The duck's alert posture and the starkly abstracted lotus stems invoke not narrative but stillness, as if frozen in the instant before or after motion. The blankness between the duck and the lotuses evokes not emptiness as absence but emptiness as relationship - drawing attention to what *isn't* depicted, thereby amplifying what is. As in Chan painting, this is not omission for aesthetic economy, but for ontological depth. What emerges is not a pond or garden but a psychic and spiritual terrain. The lotus, in Chinese iconography, is a charged symbol of purity arising from the mud - a Buddhist metaphor for enlightenment through suffering. In contrast, the duck, often seen as ordinary or earthbound, adds complexity to the symbolic register. Bada Shanren juxtaposes the transcendent with the mundane. However, their physical disconnect and the empty space between them suggest not binary opposition but interdependence. The viewer is invited to consider whether the duck aspires toward the lotus—or whether it remains content in its grounded solitude. In either case, the distance between them becomes contemplative: an allegorical interval of longing, detachment, or spiritual ambiguity. The vertical inscription reinforces this duality. Rather than anchoring the meaning of the painting, it introduces further indeterminacy. Positioned along the side, the calligraphy appears to communicate with the lotus rather than the duck, tipping the painting's interpretive weight subtly toward abstraction and poetic symbolism. As Jullien (2009) observes, the Chinese pictorial tradition thrives on suggestion rather than representation: “It does not make present, it evokes” (p. 92). Here, Bada Shanren evokes an interior world through spatial restraint, symbolic duality, and tonal minimalism.

Unlike *Fish Swimming*, which confronted the viewer with existential dread, or *Double Fish*, which proposed quiet relationality, *Lotus and Duck* cultivates a more reflective, even meditative poetics. Its blankness is atmospheric rather than traumatic—what Wang Guowei (1962) would have called a high level of *yijing* (意境), where meaning arises from the interdependence between presence and absence, form and formlessness, the seen and the withheld. This meditative interplay between visual minimalism and symbolic resonance continues—albeit in a more delicate and intimate register—in *Rhododendron and Calligraphy* (Figure 4), where blankness frames not philosophical tension or emotional distance, but quiet beauty and lyrical refinement.



Figure 4, “*Rhododendron and Calligraphy*”

This meditative interplay between visual minimalism and symbolic resonance continues—albeit in a more delicate and intimate register—in *Rhododendron and Calligraphy* (Figure 4), where blankness frames not philosophical tension or emotional distance, but quiet beauty and lyrical refinement. Unlike the existential voids of *Fish Swimming*, the relational suspension of *Double Fish*, or the atmospheric detachment of *Lotus and Duck*, this painting distills Bada Shanren’s aesthetics into a subtle poetic whisper—where form and space are perfectly poised.

The composition is deceptively simple: a single rhododendron sprig, rendered in muted mineral pigments and soft ink, rises gracefully against a background of untouched silk. The leaves are dark, rounded, and slightly asymmetrical, their weight offset by the delicately blushing petals that emerge from the center. To the right of the flower, Bada Shanren inscribes his signature in calligraphy and affixes red seals—gestural elements that balance the painting visually without disrupting its sense of calm. The wide margins of negative space around these sparse elements create not emptiness, but what Wu Hung (2005) calls an “active void”—a field of heightened sensitivity where every mark matters (p. 33).

The rhododendron, though not as symbolically established in Chinese painting as plum blossoms or lotuses, evokes a mood of cultivated restraint and personal refinement. In this work, it functions not just as a botanical subject but as a vehicle for introspective lyricism. Its soft bloom contrasts with the dark, deliberate brushwork of the calligraphy, emphasizing a duality that plays out quietly rather than dramatically. The minimalism of the image invites a slow, attentive viewing, echoing Jullien’s (2009) assertion that in Chinese aesthetics, suggestion is more powerful than representation: “It does not make present, it evokes” (p. 92). The evocation here is one of balance, purity, and intimate quietude—qualities achieved not despite the blankness, but through it. What is most striking is how *liú bái* functions as a frame not of absence, but of attentiveness. The rhododendron is not overwhelmed by context; it breathes in the space afforded

by emptiness. The viewer, in turn, is invited not to search for narrative meaning but to linger in the momentary and the ephemeral. This aligns closely with Wang Guowei's (1962) concept of *yijing* (意境)—the poetic mood or atmosphere generated by the interrelation of seen and unseen, form and formlessness. Here, that poetic state is achieved through radical reduction. In contrast to the layered symbolism and spatial tensions of the other representative works, *Rhododendron and Calligraphy* offers a pared-down vision in which silence becomes eloquent. The painting acts as a visual poem, where a single floral gesture and a few brushstrokes suffice to suggest an entire worldview. The use of space is no less philosophical than in Bada Shanren's more overtly allegorical works, but here it is expressed through lyrical modesty rather than resistance or paradox. The unpainted field becomes not a battlefield, nor a theater of tension, but a canvas of stillness—open to breath, thought, and beauty.

If *Rhododendron and Calligraphy* offers a contemplative vision of lyrical restraint, then *Branch of Plum Blossoms* (Figure 5) intensifies that restraint into near-erasure—pushing *liú bái* (blankness) to the edge of invisibility and transforming pictorial space into a philosophical threshold.

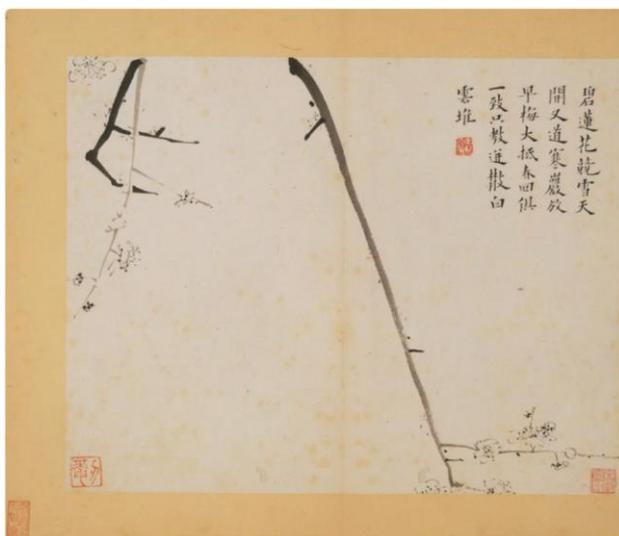


Figure 5, “Branch of Plum Blossoms”

This final work examined is not merely minimal; it approaches the metaphysical. The image withholds almost everything except a few dark strokes and faint ink outlines, testing the viewer's ability to find meaning in near-nothingness. The composition presents a single, angled plum branch descending into the pictorial field from above. The blossoms, barely visible, are rendered with a few spare touches, while two smaller twigs stretch horizontally into the surrounding void. A poem occupies the upper right quadrant, balanced by a scattering of seals below. The central and lower left portions of the painting remain completely unmarked, as if daring the viewer to discern presence in absence. This extreme economy of brushwork exemplifies what François Jullien (2009) calls “suggestive space”—a visual silence that is not lack, but latency (p. 89). The painting invites not interpretation so much as attunement. The plum blossom (*méi*) carries a rich tradition in Chinese painting and poetry as a symbol of resilience, purity, and the promise of spring amid winter. Yet in Bada Shanren's rendering, that symbolic optimism is subdued, even ghostly. The blossoms seem to vanish into the page. Rather than asserting themselves as hopeful

emblems, they appear suspended in uncertainty. The painter's hand is light, hesitant, almost self-erasing—a technique that aligns with Chan Buddhist ideals of *wu wei* (无为), or non-doing, where the highest expression arises from restraint and spontaneity. Here, the blankness enveloping the plum branch evokes not just atmospheric quiet, but epistemological silence—a refusal to declare what cannot truly be known.

As in *Fish Swimming*, the void operates as a psychological condition, yet here it no longer carries the weight of trauma. Instead, the emptiness of *Branch of Plum Blossoms* leans toward cosmic humility. The diagonal descent of the branch implies motion, but it is a slow, gravity-bound drift—like thought slipping into reverie. The minimalism of the form requires the viewer to complete the picture imaginatively, reanimating the plum blossoms through memory or projection. This is a core tenet of Wang Guowei's (1962) *yijing* (意境): that the most profound poetic worlds are formed in the unarticulated spaces between brushstrokes. Moreover, the diagonal composition—the branch slicing from upper left to lower right—creates a temporal dimension. It implies progression, aging, or withering, depending on how one interprets the unfinished quality of the form. Unlike *Rhododendron and Calligraphy*, which centered the flower in visual stillness, *Branch of Plum Blossoms* seems to trace the passage of time within the space of a single line. The weight of ink diminishes as the branch descends, its marks becoming fainter, thinner—suggesting a dissolution of form into space, or perhaps, form returning to space. The accompanying calligraphy provides a textual counterpoint, but it does not fix meaning. Instead, it participates in the same poetics of ambiguity. Its placement and tonal balance mirror the plum branch's lightness, extending the painting's aesthetic into language. Wu Hung (2005) has observed that in Bada Shanren's late works, blankness begins to operate not only as spatial device, but as ontological proposition—a way of being, or un-being, that resists conclusion (p. 122). In *Branch of Plum Blossoms*, this proposition is fully realized: blankness becomes not just compositional silence, but philosophical silence. In closing, *Branch of Plum Blossoms* represents the culmination of Bada Shanren's exploration of *liú bái* as visual philosophy. Across his oeuvre, blankness evolves from a medium of resistance (*Fish Swimming*), to a space of relationship (*Double Fish*), to a poetic field (*Lotus and Duck*), to a contemplative pause (*Rhododendron and Calligraphy*), and finally, to a metaphysical ground. In *Branch of Plum Blossoms*, Bada paints not with ink alone, but with breath, with time, and ultimately—with absence.

Conclusion

This study has examined how blankness—far from being mere visual emptiness—functions as a powerful aesthetic and philosophical language in the representative paintings of Bada Shanren. Through close analysis of five selected works—*Fish Swimming*, *Double Fish*, *Lotus and Duck*, *Rhododendron and Calligraphy*, and *Branch of Plum Blossoms*—it has become evident that blank space in Bada's art operates not as background, but as foreground: not as lack, but as presence. In each painting, *liú bái* becomes a medium through which psychological tension, political resistance, spiritual ambiguity, and poetic lyricism are expressed without the need for overt representation. The findings suggest that Bada Shanren's manipulation of emptiness draws deeply from the Daoist and Chan Buddhist traditions, where concepts such as *xu* (emptiness), *wu* (non-being), and *yijing* (poetic atmosphere) inform a worldview in which meaning emerges through suggestion, not assertion. However, what distinguishes Bada's use of blankness is the way it is continuously reimagined—from trauma and alienation in *Fish Swimming*, to relational equilibrium in *Double Fish*, symbolic duality in *Lotus and Duck*, lyrical

clarity in *Rhododendron and Calligraphy*, and metaphysical transcendence in *Branch of Plum Blossoms*. This trajectory reflects not only a stylistic evolution but a philosophical deepening of how space is understood and deployed. Moreover, Bada Shanren's blankness is historically charged. As a Ming loyalist and a reclusive monk in Qing dynasty China, his turn to silence, restraint, and omission becomes a form of cultural and political dissent. In the context of dynastic collapse and identity crisis, his paintings resist fixed meaning and invite the viewer into a participatory relationship with absence. What is not painted is as significant as what is, and what is left unsaid opens space for interpretation, contemplation, and even mourning. This study affirms that blankness in Bada Shanren's work is not a visual gap but a semiotic system in its own right—a mode of seeing, feeling, and knowing. By redefining space as a site of affective and philosophical depth, Bada challenges both the conventions of Chinese painting and broader assumptions about visibility. His art teaches us that silence can speak, emptiness can hold meaning, and what is left out may be the most eloquent of all.

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