

The Relationship between Li River Painting and Cultural Ecology of Li River Basin in Guangxi Province, China

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ABSTRACT

Li River painting records the changes in the ecological environment in the Li River Basin. The development process of Li River painting also reflects the cultural transformation of the Li River Basin. Li River painting is like a mirror, reflecting the cultural and ecological connotation of Li River. The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between Li River Painting and cultural ecology in different historical periods. Over the years, researchers have mostly focused on the perspective of art on Li River painting and have neglected to study the Li River painting and its cultural context. In the present study, we have employed the concept of cultural ecology to develop new academic dissemination of Li River painting. Also, the relationship between Li River Painting and cultural ecology, the development of Li River Painting, and its influence on Li River people and society from the perspective of cultural ecology. Li River painting contributes ample cultural and ecological information on the Li River basin. Li River painting is the combination of Li River natural ecology and human society, it is changing with the development of ecology, culture, and human society.

Keywords:

Li River Painting, Cultural Ecology, Li River Basin

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1. Introduction

Li River painting is based on the Li River, which is the culmination of the physical space of the Li River Basin of natural and human variables (Liu Zhongling, 2004,). It not only represents the characteristics of the geographical environment but also reflects the changes in human culture and human interpretation of the geographical environment through different historical times. Li River paintings are mostly decorative patterns on daily necessities such as pottery pots, which show the cognition, worship, and beliefs of people in rivers and water at that time, during the Neolithic period, the Li River was the source of life. Li River painting began to have the task of

documenting the urban changes in the Song Dynasty as the development of transport. Li River, however, has become an international tourist destination recently, and Li River painting has become a cultural symbol reflecting the history and national image of the Li River. It has the fundamental characteristics of naturalness and community. In the relationship between man and nature in the Li River, which can be excavated through the study of Li River paintings, the cultural and ecological connotation emerged.

In the past, most researchers from the perspective of fine arts studied Li River painting, the content usually involves modeling, color, composition, aesthetic appeal, history, artistic value, respectively.

From the perspective of semiotics, this article analyses Li River's painting the importance of Li River painting has continuously increased in the long-term advancement of Li River painting, and today it is not just a work of art. There have been lots of characteristics such as culture, artistry, and nationality in Li River painting. This research, therefore, outlines a systematic study and arrangement of Li River painting from the perspective of cultural ecology. In particular, we can understand the nature of the development of Li River painting, and have a deeper understanding of Li River and Chinese minority society, clarifying the relationship between Li River painting and cultural ecology. We are applying the principle of cultural ecology in this study. Cultural ecology is a multidisciplinary field, its research method applies to the study field of cultural science the theoretical method of ecology, and the principle of system theory, and analyses the connection between the generation and development of culture and the environment (Dincauze, 2000).

Besides, this study applies the qualitative method of research to examine Li River's local distinct cultural ecology and the relationship between Li River paintings and Li River in various historical periods. This study analyses the similarities and differences of Li River painting in different periods through observation, comparison, and analysis to find the characteristics of Li River painting's creation. The relationship between Li River Painting and the distinct cultural ecology of the Li River Basin and its influence on the Li River is also worth studying.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between Li River painting and Li River cultural ecology. This research is not only

an evident discussion and analysis of the artistic aspect of Li River painting but also views Li River painting as representative of the entire cultural ecology. From the perspective of cultural ecology, this paper discusses the relationship between Li River painting, Li River people and Li River society.

2. Literature Review

2.1 LiRiver Painting

Research works related to Li River painting from 1994 until now were mainly comprehensive and evident. These studies largely focused on the painting style, followed by the history of Li River painting. These studies provide a strong academic framework for this study on Li River painting. However, the development of Li River painting has always been in a dynamic process of development. Li River painting in each era has its characteristics. Therefore, in different periods the interpretation of Li River painting must not continue at the same level. It has to be analyzed and presented to society. From the perspective of Arts, not only does art provide artistic value, but it also has social value. This research, therefore, focuses on the social and humanistic value of Li River painting to more comprehensively understand the value of Li River painting.

2.2 Cultural Ecology

Cultural ecology was proposed by American cultural anthropologist Juliar Haynes steward in 1955 His work "theory of culture" Change, which provides a new perspective and new methods for the study of human culture (Mark Q Sutton & E.N Anderson,2014). Cultural ecology can be defined as a cultural-ecological environment, it is the background for cultural-ecological groups to carry out all cultural activities. Cultural ecology consists

of three parts: natural environment, economic environment, and social environment.

Based on the studies mentioned previously. This study implies that a particular community of people can create a culture that adapts to the environment, living in a particular area for a long time. Humans, society, and the environment constitute the regional cultural ecosystem in this particular regional space. People in the Li River Basin have been living on this land since the Neolithic period. A distinctive national traditional culture has progressively evolved after colonization and invasion. In this analysis, therefore, the understanding of the cultural ecology of Li River is focused primarily on it.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopted qualitative methods of research to collect information through literature and field research. We also paid attention to the related records in local chronicles, archives, and literary works on Li River painting data collected. Because there are several original materials about local population composition, ethnic origin, cultural changes, and so on. Researchers further analyzed the local cultural circle of Li River through field investigation. Artists involved in Li River painting, local historians, and anthropologists were interviewed. The scope of the interview was to develop the painting on the Li River basin and to understand the cultural and ecological features of the Li River Basin.

4. Physical space and cultural ecology in the Li River Basin

Li River plays a major role in the development of the history of China. In more than 2200 years of

history, due to the unique geographical position and ecological environment of the Li River Basin, it has continually attracted immigrants to live in the place, creating a multi-ethnic society and a multi-cultural ecological connotation. The people of all ethnic groups in Li River have created a unique culture adapting to the ecological environment of Li River, which is also the source of the painting of Li River. Therefore, it is important to study the cultural ecology of Li River first to understand the relationship between Li River painting and cultural ecology of Li River.

The Li River is located in the southwest of China and northeast of Guangxi province. The Li River starts from Maoer Mountain, Xing'an village, and ends at Sanjiangkou, Pingle village, with a total length of 164 kilometers. The Li River Basin takes the Li River as the axis is distributed in Guilin in the form of a narrow strip from north to south. (LvHuaxian, 2007). Li River is the mother river of the Guilin people. It is one of the 13 rivers under state protection. Li River Basin is famous for its unique geographical location and typical Karst landform, which raises beautiful natural landscape, and is famous for its green mountains, beautiful waters, strange caves, and beautiful rocks. (Min Wenyi, 2005).

Moreover, the Li River Basin is divided into three regions with different landscape characteristics, such as the upstream, middle, and downstream basins. In the high-rainfall area, the upstream basin is situated, there is abundant water in the Li River, granite and clastic rocks are its geological characteristics. The middle basin consists of a region of hills and valleys in the Xing'an District, which is also an ancient area of the canal and shows the ancient hydraulic culture. The downstream basin is the Li River basin core landscape area,

nearly 100 kilometers long, from Guilin to Yangshuo, which is the peak forest plain and peak cluster valley region. From Guilin to Yangshuo, the river channel consists of sand and pebbles, and water plants grow year-round in the river. The unique hydrological climate, which provides necessities for human life, makes it the breeding place for numerous fish.

Besides, the Li River Basin was the first region where the Baiyue people lived because of the enchanting environment of the Li River Basin. Later, due to the Lingqu Canal excavation, the Yangtze River and the Pearl River were linked by the Li River. The Li River Basin regionally became the meeting point between the south and the Central Plains. (Lanlan,2004). In the 2200 years of history, the rulers continuously sent officials and scholars to the Li River Basin to reinforce the rule of the south. (Dorothy Ko,2017). Some officials and scholars introduced to the Li River Basin advanced manufacturing technology and culture. Non-governmental immigrants have also infused new power into the Li River Basin's multi-cultural nature. The immigrants continuously contacted the indigenous people of Li River in the process of social development and labor. Finally, the Li River Basin formed a social system in which the northern Han nationality and the initial local ethnic groups lived together.

The culture of the Central Plains has steadily held a dominant role in the Li River Basin over a long history. Since ancient times, the Li River Basin has been the political and cultural base of Guangxi. Li River has drawn tourists to visit and live here since the founding of the new China because of its beautiful scenery, long history, and open culture. The growth of tourism drives the development of the local economy. Li River's

history has developed into an international tourist city.

Concurrently, in history, the Li River Basin has a distinctive political and economic role, establishing a magnificent historical community for over 2200 years. The connotation of Li River culture and the cultural and ecological implication constitutes the perfect convergence of nature and the human landscape. It has thus become China's tourist city and even the world's. Therefore, the Li River Basin's distinctive natural ecosystem and the precious cultural artifacts and ecosystems left by people over the past thousand years makes Li River Basin a treasured river of civilization.

Moreover, Li River people were followed by immigrants when adjusting to the unique natural geographical environment and a relatively diverse and adaptable social and cultural environment, establishing a multi-ethnic social system. The Li River not only has local national characteristics, but it also has the cultural characteristics of the Central Plain. The Li River has a unique cultural ecology of harmonious coexistence and mutual integration of diverse cultural factors that have been created by the Li River Basin. The Li River, therefore, exudes its unique charm.

5. The relationship between Li River painting and Li cultural ecology

The development of Li River painting is motivated by the development of Li River culture and ecology. The ecological climate, lifestyle of the citizens, migration, urban development, cultural and historical factors affect the cultural ecology development of Li River. These variables have an influence on Li River painting in the process of developing and circulating Li River painting. The painting of the Li River thus depicts the cultural

and ecological connotation of the Li River. Li River Painting is the depiction in physical space of the relationship between humans, nature, and culture. Cultural and environmental knowledge is an important part of Li River painting.

5.1 Li River painting reflects the natural ecological characteristics of Li River Basin

Due to the dissolution of soluble rocks by the Li River, the landscape structure of the Li River embraces the mountains. With its special geology, climate, hydrology, and other interaction, it forms a unique landscape of green mountains, beautiful water, strange caves, and beautiful rocks. Li River Basin has typical karst landform characteristics and distinct regional ecological characteristics.

In the Northern Song Dynasty, Mi Fu was the first master in Chinese history to interact with the Li River, according to available research. It is said that Mi Fu once traveled between the mountains and rivers of Li, inspired by the beautiful scenery of the mountains and rivers of Li, and he drew many pictures of the rural scenery of the Li River. Mi Fu's contribution, however, in the history of Chinese landscape painting, is not only that he first painted Li River landscape, but also the "Mi style landscape" ink technique developed by him (Chen Chuxin, 2011).

Besides, "Mi style landscape" ink has a great influence on the history of Chinese landscape painting, guiding the next generation of painters. Some scholars speculate that his creation of the "Mi style landscape" is related to Mi Fu's perception of the ecological environment of the Li River Basin. (Shuai Ligong, 2012). The Li River Basin has an Asian monsoon climate, with sufficient annual precipitation and relatively high temperature. In addition to its unique geographical situation, the temperature difference between day

and night makes it difficult to disperse the water after evaporation. Therefore, the Li River Basin often appears fog. From the perspective of aesthetics, the natural scenery of Li River Basin often gives people beautiful, and charming forms. This is consistent with the aesthetic characteristics of Mi Fu's "Mi style landscape".

Therefore, it also proves that the ecological environment of the Li River Basin and its impact on Li painting. Li River Painting relies on the ecological environment of Li River is the innate condition for the uniqueness of Li River painting. Art comes from nature and natural factors that influence people's aesthetic ideas through their living environment.

5.2. Li River painting reflects the lifestyle of the Li River Basin

Agriculture is a common profession among people in the Li River Basin, which for a long time has been cultivating rice. Li people have painted Li River on pottery since the late Neolithic period. (Nancy, Berliner, 2003). Also, we can find that Li people had started growing rice at that time, raising fish, picking tea, domesticating Buffalo, jungle fowl, and other livestock, and formed a splendid community characterized by the architecture of Ganlan and rice farming. The people of Miao, Yao, Yi, Hani, Gelao, Lisu, Jingpo, and Wa in the Li region belong to the ethnic groups of the Mountains and live on farming. The branches of the Baiyue tribe in ancient southern China were the predecessors of the Miao, Yao, Zhuang, and Dong. With rice as the main staple, they were the founders of agricultural civilization (Dove Michael R, 2008).



Figure 1: Longji terrace, Huangjing creation

Source: XieYuxuan, 2019, photography

Furthermore, one of the cultural practices of people in the Li River Basin is fishing. For instance, the fishermen on the river, rows of birds (bamboo rafts) are found in Bai Xueshi's painting. Bai Xueshi's painting methods are ancient, focusing on fishing for cormorants. The Cormorant is a kind of giant aquatic bird, good swimmers, and divers. By diving, it feeds on fish. As early as 960 AD, records suggest that the fishermen of Li River had fished cormorants. With the emergence of modern fishing techniques, cormorant fishing has gradually disappeared. Now it's thriving because of tourism, becoming a cultural symbol of nostalgia. In modern times, as a representative of Li culture, it often appears in works of art as a representative of Li River culture. Li culture reflects the significant impact of fishing on people's lives. (Bai Xueshi, 2002).



Figure 2: Red Li River

Source: Li Keran's album, 1997, PP83

The Li River was the Embodiment of Guilin from

the Ming and Qing dynasties of the Republic of China. The transportation of materials and passengers into and out of Guilin largely relies on this golden waterway. (Liu Lydia H,2004). The wooden sailboat is the principal means of transportation on the river. In the Han and Tang dynasties, the Li River wooden sailing boat first appeared. Sailboat transportation achieved its prime time after the Opium War, bringing more aquatic products, Japanese goods, and salt, respectively. With the growth of road and rail transport, sailing decreased after the founding of New China. However, with the growth of civilization, ships in the Li River Basin were found difficult to accessed, this can be found in the paintings of the Li River. For instance, from the works of Li Keran, we can often see a row of boats sailing in the river, and we can also see bamboo rafts attached to the side of the boats. A boatman like that can be seen anywhere along the Li River in the 1970s and 1980s (Li Keran,2005).

Furthermore, the Li River, as a waterway, provides a source of economy for many individuals in the period of waterway transport (214BC-1949). The people who take boats to their homes were referred to as boat people. They have distinct surnames, languages, and customs of their own. They have created a different culture of their own. Most of them were immigrants. Some were engaged in transport, some were engaged in fishing, and some worked in department stores on ships to survive. (Feng Yan, 2012).

These groups of people, on the one hand, promoted the economic development of the Li River Basin, encouraged cultural exchanges with the outside world. These people played an important role in the growth and dissemination of Li River painting and provided a broad mass basis for Li River painting.

The paintings promoted the lives of citizens. Li River painting had practical value at that time, on the one hand, and played a function close to today's map. Besides that, expressing their feelings has become a gift for people.

The classic Li River paintings show us the landscape of the Li River and provide us with rich historical information. Li River is closely related to Li people's life. In the process of adapting to nature, people have a uniquely local way of life. At the same time, Li River painting exists in the life of the Li people. The classic Li River painting in different periods presents us the living conditions and ways of Li people in different periods. Because of the unique lifestyle of the Li people, Li River painting is unique.

5.3 Li River painting reflects the changes in ethnic population, history, and culture in the Li River Basin

Since prehistoric times, the Li River Basin has been a multi-ethnic region. During the numerous historical times, the indigenous nationalities are Zhuang, Dong, Maonan, Mulao, and Shui, while Yao, Miao, Hui, Jing, Yi, and Gelao are



immigrant nationalities. All nationalities have gone through a long historical time of creation and development. (Zhong Wendian, 2008).

Figure3: Ethnic groups in Li River

Source: XieYuxuan, 2019, photography

However, the emergence of Li River painting is closely related to the migration of ethnic groups to the Li River Basin. After Qin Shihuang unified China, he excavated the Lingqu. It constitutes the

possibility of multi-cultural existence from the region (Schafer Dagmar,2011). During this time, some scholars started to find some self-conscious aesthetic consciousness of the Li River, which sparked the development of Li River painting. Later in Tang,¹ Song², Ming³ and Qing⁴ Dynasties, the rulers sent officials and scholars to Li River Basin. Some of the social activities by scholars and rulers, artistic creation activities made Li River become famous and influential and promoted the development of Li River's art and tourism.

Concurrently, Academics and rulers' arrival made Li River painting attract people's attention. Li River painting began to develop independently and was no longer a decorative pattern on utensils. During this period, Li River painting was mainly distributed to the elite class. During World War II, because the Li River was relatively remote and far away from the war region, many painters took refuge in the Li River. Settling of people along the river basin helped in the creation of a large number of Li River paintings. These people had a considerable influence on the development of Li River painting. Li River painting has become a means for literati to praise their motherland. Li River painting began to have political significance. Moreover, after the founding of the People's Republic of China, Li River Basin was a southern city that fully recognized the culture of the Central Plains. Li River basin began to officially open up to

¹The Tang Dynasty (618-907) was a unified Central Plains Dynasty,

²The Song Dynasty (960-1279) was divided into two stages: the Northern Song Dynasty and the Southern Song Dynasty

³Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) is a dynasty founded by Han nationality in Chinese history.

⁴The Qing Dynasty (1636-1912) was the last feudal dynasty in Chinese history

the outside world, and began the internationalization of Li River painting and formed Li River painting school. Li River painting has become a cultural brand and symbol representing Li, Guangxi, and even the national image.

Ultimately, the long-term confrontation and integration between the ethnic groups in Li River and other ethnic groups reflect on the development of Li River painting. Li River painting also reflected on the migration of ethnic groups and the changes in history and culture in the Li River Basin. On the other hand, the communication between local and foreign nationalities also played an important role in the development and dissemination of Li River paintings.

5.4 Li River painting reflects the changes in cities and historical culture in the Li River Basin

Li River Basin has a long history, and in its formation and development, Li River painting has encountered a long historical phase as a contraction of the ecological culture of Li River Basin. (Hay Jonathan, 2004). Because of the geographical coordinates of the Li River basin, the changes of the Li River Basin cities can be reconstructed through the Li River pictures.

For instance, the Solitary Peak is the landmark of Li River. Due to its distinctive natural environment and geographical location, it has become the political and cultural center of Guangxi for 600 years (Ebrey. Patricia Buckley, 2008). Although Solitary Peak is still present, it is hard to spot its historical features. The history of Duxiu Peak can be reconstructed by the Li River painting. The picture of "Jingjiang King City" in the Guilin Museum proves that Solitary Peak was a royal residence in Ming Dynasty and a place for

aristocrats to live. It can be found from the "Guilin landscape map" created by Luo Chen in the Qing Dynasty, the Solitary Peak school was established by the government for talent selection.

Similarly, in the works of modern Qi Baishi, the authenticity of the farmyard is unclear, but it is evident that it is no longer a location where the general public can access, that it has a secular atmosphere and that the structure of modern society has been presented. The Li River location is inspiring at present because it combines human culture and natural landscape. (Panqi, 2003). Also, with the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy and the powerful movement of the market economy, the Modernization process of China was enhanced. In line with the state's foreign policy, the Li River Basin dynamically developed tourism, with its beautiful scenery, long history, and rich culture, Li River is worthy of being the core of the Guilin tourism circle, which took on the sacred mission of "leading tourism in Guangxi" and "Pearl of international tourism" and win the double laurels of "national historical and cultural city" and "international scenic city"

The government and cultural spheres are actively working to develop Li River painting in such a background, and the Li River painting school gradually formed a community of painters with distinctive regional characteristics and artistic pursuit. Also, to establish the painting and cultural establishments of the Li River, on the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in November 1988, the government completed and opened the Guilin Museum. It is a historical and artistic museum and a showcase of Guilin's history and culture. On the one hand, it shows the changes in Li River City and cultural ecology, as well as people's social life. On

the other hand, it displays thousands of Li River paintings from ancient times until now and reveals the development process of Li River painting. (Rawski Evelyn S, 2001).

6. Discussion and Conclusion

After the reform and opening up, Chinese traditional painting reinvented the tradition into two aspects: social process and art product. As a result, the current Chinese traditional painting and the past Chinese traditional painting in the participator, mode of communication, artistic style, creative techniques and other aspects have been very different. However, the artistic core of Chinese traditional painting did not change in this process. Chinese traditional painting can still express the status quo of Chinese society, show the spiritual

From this study, we can find that Li River painting provides artistic value, and incorporates cultural and social values. The knowledge from Li River painting helps us to understand the cultural ecology of Li River, the relationship between Li River painting and Li River cultural ecology. Moreover, the natural environment of the Li River Basin and the lifestyle of Li people were found to be the inherent conditions for the Li River painting to be distinctive.

Ultimately, the significance of the Li River painting is changing with the development of Li society. Local communities were the first to sketch the Li River painting, which became a carrier of worship. Later, foreign officials and scholars developed it, and it was presented as a gift to the upper class. Li River painting has so far grown into a cultural symbol. These factors reveal that the painting of Li River is not static,

the Li River Painting evolves with the transition in cultural ecology. The cultural ecology established in Li River's distinct living space is also the soil for the Li River painting's inheritance and advancement. Painting on the Li River is the embodiment of the cultural ecology of Li.

6.1 Significance of Research

The study of the Li River painting and its relationship is crucial to understand different perspectives. This research enhances the importance and encourages the development of Li River painting. With Li River art, this study enriches the perspective of Social Anthropology, the redefinition of Li River painting will enhance knowledge on Li River painting. Also, this deepens people's perception of the culture of Li, enabling people to pay more attention to Chinese painting's social and cultural importance. It enhances the implementation scope of cultural ecology concerning research philosophy. On the other hand, this will not only apply to paintings as a research model for the study of regional art, but it can also become a research framework for other art forms with regional characteristics.

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