

Research on the Aesthetic View of Natural Ecology in Song Dynasty Landscape Painting

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ABSTRACT

The Song Dynasty is a crucial period in Chinese art history, particularly in the realm of landscape painting, where a unique aesthetic perspective emerged. This paper focuses on Song Dynasty landscape painting, aiming to delve into the embedded ecological aesthetic view of nature. By employing various research methods such as literature review, art history investigation, image analysis, text analysis, case studies, and expert interviews, it unveils the meticulous depiction of natural landscapes by painters and their concern for ecological balance. The research findings indicate that Song Dynasty landscape painters, through unique composition techniques, skillful ink application, and attention to elements such as plants, animals, and water sources, manifested a profound ecological aesthetic view of nature. Through in-depth analysis of representative works, the paper reveals personalized expressions of ecological aesthetics by different painters during various periods. This research contributes valuable knowledge and insights to deepen the understanding of China's ancient painting traditions, promote the development of ecological art, and provide beneficial perspectives for contemporary society's reconsideration of the relationship between nature and ecology.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by comprehensively exploring the ecological aesthetic perspective in Song Dynasty landscape painting, which in turn fills the gaps in previous studies of traditional Chinese art.

1. Introduction

The Song Dynasty (960–1279) is widely considered an important turning point in Chinese history, which has left a profound impact on many fields such as culture and art. As [Yang and Yan \(2023\)](#) pointed out, the landscape painting art of this period reached

unprecedented achievements. Among them, the technique tended to mature, and a unique aesthetic system was formed, reflecting the profound philosophical connotation and humanistic spirit (Xing, 2022). More importantly, this concept is deeply rooted in the traditional philosophical thought of China. Sun and Xiao (2014) emphasized that the Taoist "unity of man and nature", the Confucian "the benevolent enjoy mountains and the wise enjoy water", and the Buddhist "forgetting both the self and the world" and other ideological traditions together constitute the ideological foundation of Song Dynasty landscape painting. Guo's theory of "mountains and waters are walkable, visible, navigable, and habitable" in "Linqan Gaozhi" is a concentrated embodiment of this philosophical thought in art theory (Guo et al., 2010), thus forming an art form with both aesthetic value and ideological depth. Although existing research has extensively explored the technical and stylistic innovations of Song Dynasty landscape painting, the ecological and environmental awareness contained in these works still needs to be further studied.

Researchers have explored the landscape painting of the Song Dynasty from different perspectives. For example, Zhang (2007) analyzed the technical development of brushwork and composition; Zong (2009) explored the influence of neo-Confucian philosophy on artistic expression; and Kang (2020) examined the social and political background of landscape painting creation. However, these studies mainly focus on artistic form and philosophical connotation and pay insufficient attention to the ecological and environmental awareness reflected in the works.

In fact, Song Dynasty landscape painting is not only a visual art form but also a profound understanding and aesthetic experience of the natural ecosystem by ancient Chinese people. Hou (2023) believes that painters have shown a comprehensive concern for natural ecological elements through meticulous observation and unique artistic expression. This understanding has been further verified in the research of Zhang (2021). Zhao (2023) emphasized that this concept of ecological aesthetics has special practical significance in the context of increasing awareness of contemporary environmental protection. Therefore, this study takes Song Dynasty landscape paintings as an object, with the aim of exploring how Song Dynasty painters express their understanding of the relationship between nature and ecology through exquisite landscape paintings.

2. Literature Review

The Song Dynasty occupies an important position in the history of Chinese art, especially in the field of landscape painting, where a unique and fascinating aesthetic emerged (Chen, 2008). This paper focuses on Song Dynasty landscape painting with the aim of digging deeper into its inherent concept of ecological aesthetics. Through the comprehensive use of multiple research methods, including literature review, art history research, image analysis, text analysis, case studies, and expert interviews, this article is dedicated to revealing the artist's delicate portrayal of natural landscapes and his continuous concern for ecological balance. The paper also explores the representative works in depth, showing the personalized presentation of ecological aesthetics by different artists in different periods. These studies contribute valuable knowledge and insights to a deeper understanding of traditional Chinese painting, to the promotion of eco-art, and to a reconsideration of contemporary society's perception of the relationship between nature and ecology. Since modern times, studies of ancient Chinese paintings have flourished, with Song Dynasty landscape paintings being particularly prominent. However, Chang (2007) noted that academic research has primarily focused on artistic

characteristics, painting styles, and historical contexts, while there is a relative lack of exploration of the ecological aesthetics embedded in Song Dynasty landscape painting. In the context of art history, outstanding artists such as Zhang Daqian, Mi Fu, and Guo Xi have always been the focus of discussion. For example, Zhang Daqian's *Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* is renowned for its grandeur and rich ecological elements. However, [Xue \(2014\)](#) suggests that most of the previous literary criticism has been limited to the beauty of form and technique and lacks an in-depth analysis of its ecological aesthetic perspective. In addition, scholars have studied the influence of Confucianism on the art of the Song Dynasty. Confucianism, which emphasizes the harmonious coexistence of man and nature, is a deeply rooted philosophical concept in Song society. However, previous literature reviews have remained at a superficial level, with limited knowledge of how Confucianism specifically influenced painters' expressive techniques ([Cahill, 2012](#)). [Xue \(2007\)](#) pointed out that in the literature related to the ecological aesthetics perspective, some scholars have emphasized the presentation and reproduction of artworks in the natural environment. However, these studies often lack a systematic theoretical framework and present a fragmented understanding ([Ge, 2009](#)).

The existing literature provides diverse perspectives and deep insights into the relationship between Chinese landscape painting and ecological aesthetics. Through a comprehensive analysis of relevant studies, this research aims to offer a more nuanced understanding of the development of this topic and current research trends. The metaphysical thought of the Wei and Jin dynasties emphasized returning to nature and integrating the self with the external world, inspiring landscape poetry in literature and landscape painting in visual arts ([Zhao et al., 2013](#)). This philosophical perspective significantly influenced the theoretical development and artistic practice of Chinese landscape painting. For example, [Zong \(1981\)](#) introduced theories such as *Painting Landscape Preface*, *Clear Taste Image*, and *Landscape to Shape Mei Way*, which provided artistic guidance. Similarly, Wang Wei's *Syria Painting* and Zhang Zao's principle of "learning from nature outside, learning from the heart" laid the foundation for ecological aesthetics in Chinese landscape painting. The artistic spirit of Chinese landscape painting embodies admiration, respect, and gratitude for nature while emphasizing harmony between humanity and the environment. These principles shaped the unique artistic techniques and profound aesthetic implications observed in traditional landscape painting. These principles have shaped the unique artistic techniques and profound aesthetic implications of traditional landscape painting. The aesthetic characteristics of Chinese painting are not to pursue external imitation, but to pursue the inner essence of things ([Li, 2023](#)). In other words, Chinese landscape painting should not be limited to the specific description of mountains and rivers, but should make full use of subjective expression techniques to express the painter's inner imagination of nature. The essence of landscape painting lies in its pursuit of an image that balances realism and abstraction, achieving an aesthetic that is "wonderful in both likeness and unlikeness." The essence of landscape painting in expressing the natural ecological environment is to contain subjective emotions, thereby conveying philosophical thinking about the relationship between nature and humans ([Jiao, 2025](#)). The dual functions of ecological expression and philosophical expression in Song Dynasty landscape painting are fully reflected in the detailed depiction of plants, animals, water sources, etc. ([Liu, 2017](#); [Ning, 2022](#)). Through these elements, the artist conveys his understanding of ecology and conveys a deeper level of concern.

However, existing some studies have not extensively explored the impact of ecological concepts on Chinese landscape painting, nor have they investigated the intrinsic

connection between the natural environment and artistic expression. The literature review was conducted to comprehensively understand the existing research on Song Dynasty landscape painting and ecological aesthetic views, thereby laying a solid theoretical foundation for this study. Art historical investigation was carried out to meticulously explore the developmental trends of Song Dynasty landscape painting and identify the artistic features and painterly styles during different periods. Image analysis was applied to selected artworks to conduct an in-depth examination of composition, ink application, and other aspects, with the aim of revealing the ecological elements and aesthetic views therein. Textual analysis was utilized to interpret literature related to Song Dynasty landscape painting, seeking to explore the artists' attitudes and reflections on natural ecology in their letters, poems, and other writings. Case studies were selected by choosing representative Song Dynasty landscape paintings as case studies to conduct in-depth analyses of specific works, highlighting the ecological aesthetic views and making comparisons with other works. Expert interviews were conducted with experts in art history, ecology and related fields to gather diverse perspectives and interpretations.

Overall, the existing literature, despite providing a wealth of information on Song Dynasty landscape painting, is still lacking in the exploration of its eco-aesthetic perspective. Therefore, there is an urgent need for more in-depth and systematic research in this area to comprehensively explore the eco-aesthetic perspectives of Song Dynasty landscape painting.

3. Research Methods

This study uses a multi-research method to systematically examine the ecological aesthetics in Song Dynasty landscape painting. In terms of literature research, a theoretical foundation has been established through a comprehensive review of Song Dynasty painting theories, art historical materials, and contemporary research results. The focus is on studying classic painting theories such as "Linqun Gaozhi" and "Huaji", as well as the inscriptions and postscripts of painters such as Guo Xi and Mi Fu, to deeply understand the artistic concepts and creative ideas of Song Dynasty painters.

At the level of art history research, this study systematically examines the development context of Song Dynasty landscape painting and analyzes the characteristics of the evolution of painting style from the Northern Song Dynasty to the Southern Song Dynasty. By comparing the artistic characteristics of different periods, the relationship between social and cultural background and painting style is revealed. Special attention is paid to the influence of Confucianism on landscape painting creation, and the specific embodiment of concepts such as "harmony between man and nature" in painting is explored. Image analysis is used for the analysis of specific works. Representative works such as [Figure 1](#) Guo Xi's "Early Spring" and [Figure 2](#) Fan Kuan's "Travelers Among Mountains and Streams" are selected as research objects, and detailed analysis is conducted from the aspects of composition layout, brush and ink techniques and subject selection. By examining natural elements such as mountains, rivers, plants and animals in the paintings, this study explores how painters express their ecological awareness through artistic language. To obtain more in-depth professional insights, this study also interviewed several experts and scholars in the fields of art history and ecological aesthetics. The interviews covered the artistic characteristics of Song Dynasty landscape paintings, the creative concepts, and the ecological ideas in their works, thus providing a reference for this study.

Through the comprehensive application of the above research methods, this study strives to fully reveal the ecological aesthetic concepts contained in Song Dynasty landscape paintings and provide a new research perspective for understanding traditional Chinese landscape paintings.

Figure 1: Guo Xi - Early Spring (part) from [National Palace Museum \(2024b\)](#)

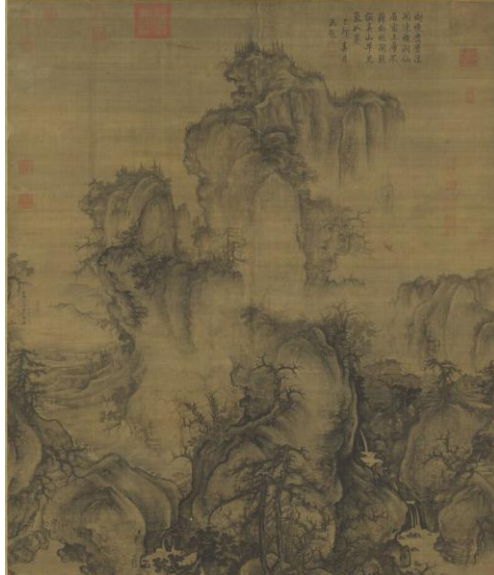


Figure 2: Fan Kuan - Travelers Among Mountains and Streams (part) from [National Palace Museum \(2024a\)](#)



4. Findings

The research results indicated that through a comprehensive analysis of relevant literature, it was found that existing research mainly concentrated on the artistic features and painterly styles of Song Dynasty landscape painting (Lang & Gee, 2023), with limited exploration of its ecological aesthetic views. In the examination of art history, the developmental trends of Song Dynasty landscape painting were systematically traced, revealing the evolving styles across different periods, which provided theoretical support for subsequent image analysis and textual analysis. In image analysis, several representative landscape paintings of the Song Dynasty were selected as research

subjects. Through in-depth analysis of composition, ink techniques, and other aspects, it was discovered that artists skillfully incorporated ecological elements through intricate depictions and unique artistic techniques. Elements such as plants, water sources, and animals were vividly expressed, reflecting the artists' profound understanding and reverence for nature. During the textual analysis stage, the letters, poems, and other works of the painters were delved into, uncovering unique emotions toward natural ecology. These texts not only provided insights into the artists' mental states during creation but also reflected their attention and contemplation on natural ecology. Through in-depth studies of representative works, differences in the aesthetic attitudes toward natural ecology among different artists in different periods. Some artworks emphasized the grandeur of landscapes, expressing awe towards nature, while others focused on detailed depictions, highlighting the tranquility and ecological balance of natural scenery. Expert interviews provided valuable insights and recommendations. Experts offered in-depth interpretations of the ecological aesthetic views in Song Dynasty landscape painting, providing diverse perspectives for our understanding of the research subject.

The key findings were as follows: Song Dynasty landscape painters manifested profound insights and emotional experiences towards natural ecology through dual expressions in images and texts. The artists paid attention to ecological balance, emphasizing the harmony and tranquility of natural landscapes (Yao, 2024). Different artists in different periods exhibited personalized and stylistic differences in expressing their ecological aesthetic views (Li, 2020). Confucianism had a certain influence on Song Dynasty landscape painters, emphasizing the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature (Chen & Chen, 2020).

The implications of natural ecological aesthetic views were that the natural ecological aesthetic views in Song Dynasty landscape painting mainly manifested in a deep understanding of natural landscapes and a focus on ecological balance (Tan, 2016). The artists expressed awe and respect for nature by depicting changes in mountains, rivers, varied plant life, and the survival of animals. Furthermore, the artistic conception aimed at conveying the tranquility and harmony of the natural world, reflecting the idea of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, influenced by Confucianism (Jiao, 2025). This aesthetic view was vividly portrayed in the Song Dynasty landscape painting, providing profound inspiration for later artistic creations.

The depiction of natural landscapes was that Song Dynasty landscape painters portrayed natural landscapes with exquisite artistic techniques, showcasing the beauty and grandeur of nature (Jiao, 2025). Common elements of their works included undulating mountains, flowing rivers, lush pine and cypress trees, as well as various elements like flowers, birds, insects, and fish. The integration of mountains and waters was achieved by artists ingeniously blending elements such as mountains, water, and clouds to create well-structured compositions (Zhou & Ma, 2025). Through variations in reality and illusion, depth and shallowness, they demonstrated the interconnectedness of mountains and rivers, allowing viewers to sense the harmony between them. The depiction of plants was often vibrant and full of life. Whether it was the towering pines, swaying bamboo shadows, or blooming flowers, they conveyed the vitality of nature. Through detailed portrayals of plant forms, artists conveyed a profound understanding of nature. The representation of water sources was that water played a crucial role in landscape painting, and artists depicted rivers, lakes, and seas with the wetness and flow of ink (Liu, 2023). Especially, the meandering and escalating of the water currents allowed viewers to feel the rushing rivers and changing scenery.

The embodiment of ecological awareness is that Song Dynasty landscape painters showed a deep understanding of natural ecology in their works (Yin, 2015; Zhao, 2019). Their ecological awareness mainly focused on elements such as plants, animals, and water sources. Through their dedicated paintings, they expressed their awe and understanding of ecological balance. This focus on plants goes beyond simple form, emphasizing the transmission of vitality and close connection with nature. It also reflects their role in the natural environment. The painting of animals is that some artists cleverly dissolve animal elements such as birds and swimming fish. These animals add vitality to the painting and express the artist's concern for the biodiversity of natural ecology. The expression of water sources also goes beyond simple landscape expression, which shows the concern for water resources (Jie et al., 2023). Most importantly, by painting the vastness and depth of rivers, lakes and ponds, artists emphasize the importance of water, which consists of the awareness of cherishing and protecting water resources.

5. Conclusion

This study systematically examines the ecological aesthetics in Song Dynasty landscape painting through a variety of research methods, exploring its artistic expression and cultural and philosophical background. The study found that Song Dynasty landscape painting is not only a visual art, but also a cultural carrier that carries profound ecological ideas. Painters incorporate the concept of "harmony between man and nature" into their works and express the harmonious coexistence of man and nature through composition, brush and ink techniques, and subject selection.

Literature research reveals the ecological ideas contained in Song Dynasty painting theories, art historical materials, and inscriptions, providing theoretical support for this study. Art history analysis sorts out the evolution of landscape painting styles from the Northern Song Dynasty to the Southern Song Dynasty, revealing the close connection between social and cultural background and painting style. Image analysis shows that representative works such as Guo Xi's "Early Spring" and Fan Kuan's "Traveling in the Landscape" show superb artistic skills visually and reflect the painter's concern for ecological balance in the depiction of natural elements. Expert interviews also provide professional insights and deepen the understanding of the connotation of ecological aesthetics in the work.

In summary, the main contributions of this study are: (1) it fills the gap in the study of ecological aesthetics of Song Dynasty landscape painting and incorporates ecological awareness into the framework of art research; (2) It deepens the embodiment of the concept of "harmony between man and nature" in landscape painting and further reveals the influence of Confucian and Taoist thoughts on Song Dynasty painters; (3) It adopts a multilevel research method, combines literature analysis, art history research, image analysis, and expert interviews, and constructs a systematic research model. Against the backdrop of growing awareness of ecological protection in contemporary times, the ecological aesthetics presented in Song Dynasty landscape paintings provide inspiration for modern art creation and environmental ethics. By drawing on ancient artists' understanding of nature, contemporary art can increase its attention to ecological issues and incorporate deeper humanistic thinking into artistic expression. This study deepens the understanding of traditional Chinese painting and provides a new perspective for the study of ecological aesthetics, laying the foundation for future art history research and ecological art practice.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Not applicable.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of Interest.

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