

Analysis of Environmental Characteristics in Suzhou-themed Landscape Paintings

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Abstract

Suzhou's picturesque landscapes have inspired numerous renowned artists to create artworks centred around this city. For instance, Fang Junbi (1898–1986) painted "Tiger Hill Pagoda in Suzhou" in the 1940s, while Wu Guanzhong (1919–2010) created "Suzhou Gardens" in the 1970s. These works showcase Suzhou's unique scenery, reflecting the artists' perspectives influenced by the environment. This study aims to analyse landscape oil paintings themed around Suzhou through the environmental lens proposed by Hippolyte Adolphe Taine (1828–1893) in his *The Philosophy of Art* (1873), summarising the characteristics of Suzhou's environment and highlighting the significance of Suzhou-themed landscape paintings.

Keywords: Suzhou; environment; landscape painting; the philosophy of art

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1.0 Introduction

Artistic creativity is not only an expression of personal emotions and thoughts but can also profoundly reflect the characteristics of the environment in which the artist resides. Taking landscape oil paintings depicting Suzhou as an example, Suzhou has a subtropical monsoon maritime climate, characterised by mild and humid conditions, distinct seasons, and abundant rainfall. Known as the "Land of Fish and Rice" and the "Silk Capital," it is also praised as "Heaven on Earth" (*About Suzhou*, n.d.). Oil painting is an art form originating from the West that, when combined with the unique natural landscapes of Jiangnan, sparks new artistic inspiration, resulting in an artistic expression rich in regional characteristics.

For example, early 20th-century Chinese artists created a series of renowned Suzhou-themed landscape oil paintings by merging Western painting techniques with Suzhou's native scenery. These works vividly depict Suzhou's beautiful landscapes, elegant gardens, and tranquil natural environment, offering a fresh artistic perspective on this historic and culturally rich city, while advancing a deeper understanding and expression of environmental aesthetics.

The objective of this study is to explore the key role of environmental factors in artistic creation by analysing landscape oil paintings themed around Suzhou, revealing how Suzhou's unique natural environment influences the aesthetic qualities and artistic expression

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of these works. Using the environmental perspective proposed in Hippolyte Adolphe Taine's *The Philosophy of Art* (1873), this study provides an in-depth analysis of a series of oil paintings depicting Suzhou. The research shows that environmental factors have a significant impact on artistic creation, as artists reflect Suzhou's unique environmental characteristics through their works. These paintings not only showcase the natural beauty and cultural essence of Suzhou but also offer a new perspective for understanding the interaction between environment and art. This study enriches the understanding of Suzhou landscape paintings and provides theoretical support and practical reference for artistic innovation through the environmental perspective.

2.0 Literature Review

In the creations of Chinese artists, Jiangnan landscapes often serve as an important source of inspiration. At the 5th "Picturesque Jiangnan—Chinese Oil Painting Exhibition" held in Suzhou, many artists showcased the natural scenery of Jiangnan through their oil paintings. Painter Qian Zhaofeng, using the sunset scenes of Suzhou's countryside as his subject, conveyed the tranquillity and beauty of Suzhou's environment. These works not only express the artists' insights into the natural environment but also reflect the profound influence of the environment on their creative style and themes. The president of the China Oil Painting Society, Xu Jiang, stated that, the exhibition represents an innovative way of merging artistic creation with regional culture by combining oil painting with Jiangnan themes. This statement highlighted the unique potential of oil painting in expressing local characteristics and the beauty of nature (@Suzhou Ren, 213 Jian Huazuo Yao Nin Gong Shang Ruhua Xin Jiangnan! (@Suzhou Residents, 213 Paintings Invite You to Enjoy the Picturesque New Jiangnan Together!), 2023).

Regarding the relationship between art and the natural environment, contemporary scholars have proposed that the natural environment is not only a source of inspiration for artistic creation but also a key factor in shaping the style of an artist's works. As pointed out in the study "Evolution from Natural Aesthetics to Ecological Aesthetics in The Cases of Hegel, Taine And Leopold's Aesthetic Theories," nature plays an important role in aesthetic activities. Many literary works often depict natural scenes such as rivers, mountains, and landscapes, reflecting the influence of the natural environment on creators (Xu, 2015). In the field of art, the study "Research on Post-Impressionist Painting Based on Taine's 'Three-Factor' Theory" mentioned that environmental factors have also had a profound impact on artistic creation. For instance, during Van Gogh's time in Arles, in the south of France, he was inspired by the local sunlight, fields, and canal landscapes. His painting style became more emotional, with stronger colours and brushstrokes, reflecting the richness of the southern natural environment (He & Tian, 2020).

Tracing back to the 19th century, Taine, in his work *The Philosophy of Art* (1873), proposed that the overall characteristics of an artwork are determined by the artistic expression, mental state, and surrounding environment (Taine, 1873). He emphasised the inseparable relationship between art and environment, opposing the isolation of art from its social context. Taine demonstrated the multiple roles of the environment in artistic creation through various case studies, highlighting how artists coexist with their social environment (G. Morton, 2002). Therefore, Taine's perspective on the "environment" has become an important theoretical tool for analysing the environmental characteristics of artworks.

This study suggests that there is still ample research space regarding Suzhou-themed oil paintings. By incorporating the "environmental" factor from Taine's *The Philosophy of Art* (1873) into the analytical framework, a more comprehensive understanding can be gained of how these works reflect and respond to Suzhou's natural environment. It is important to emphasise that in Taine's theory, environmental factors primarily include two aspects: 1) the natural environment; and 2) the social environment (Liu, 2008). However, this paper focuses on the former, which is the natural environment, and delves into how the natural landscapes of the city influenced the artists when recreating these works. Suzhou's natural environment not only provided creative inspiration for the artists but also played a key role in shaping their artistic style and choice of themes. Through an analysis of Suzhou-themed oil paintings, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the profound impact of the natural environment on artistic creation and reveal how these works embody Suzhou's unique natural features.

3.0 Methodology

In recent academic research, combining literature review methods with theoretical analysis has become the mainstream approach for exploring artists' creative concepts and practices, demonstrating the value of diverse methodologies in art research. This study focused on an in-depth analysis of oil paintings depicting the Suzhou environment to explore the environmental characteristics within these artworks. Compared to previous studies, this study combined archival research and data collection (Ventresca & Mohr, 2017), supplemented by the environmental factor influence from Taine's *The Philosophy of Art* (1873) (Taine, 1873), with the aim of capturing the deeper meanings of the artworks and the motivations behind their creation more comprehensively.

This study analysed oil paintings that were themed around the landscapes of Suzhou. The archival research and data collection methods were employed to identify the specific locations and environmental characteristics of buildings or landscape scenes depicted in the paintings. The analysis will also consider the artistic background of the creators to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the significance and value of these works. By applying the milieu factor from Taine's, *The Philosophy of Art* (1873), this study examined the environmental features within these oil paintings from a nuanced perspective. It is worth mentioning that this study selected artworks by renowned artists, all of which are oil paintings. Oil paintings offer excellent linear treatment and clarity, providing viewers with a strong visual impact, and making them particularly well-suited for exploring environmental characteristics (Alicja Zelazko, n.d.).

4.0 Findings

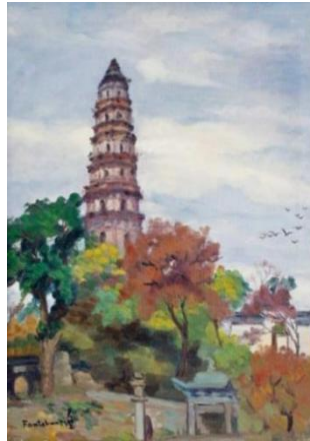


Fig. 1. Fang Junbi, Tiger Hill (pinyin: Suzhou Huqiu Ta), 1948, 74 cm × 60.5 cm, Oil on Canvas
(Source: Artron.Net (Tiger Hill (Hu Qiu), 1948))

The renowned early 20th-century artist Fang Junbi's landscape oil painting "Tiger Hill" (1948) (Fig. 1). recorded her travels in Suzhou. Due to the flat terrain of the Suzhou area, Tiger Hill has been a landmark of the city since ancient times. People have traditionally come here to visit flower markets, climb the hill, admire the moon, and enjoy the snow. Tiger Hill, known as "The First Mountain of Suzhou," is a historical landmark closely connected to the city's life (Zhang et al. 2023). The ancient pagoda in Fang Junbi's oil painting is located on Tiger Hill, commonly known as the Tiger Hill Pagoda. This pagoda stands prominently on the hilltop, making it a notable landmark.

The painting depicts an autumn scene with a clear, bright sky, where sparse white clouds drift leisurely across the pale blue expanse. The soft sunlight bathes the ancient pagoda, casting a warm glow over it. The autumn foliage displays a rich array of colours, with layers of red, yellow, orange, and green leaves surrounding the pagoda. The surrounding environment is peaceful and harmonious, with the yellowed grass and serene slopes looking particularly gentle under the autumn sun and a gentle breeze bringing a refreshing coolness. This natural setting makes "Tiger Hill" showcase a vivid and realistic depiction, which perfectly presents Suzhou's warm and elegant environmental characteristics that exude robust artistic beauty.

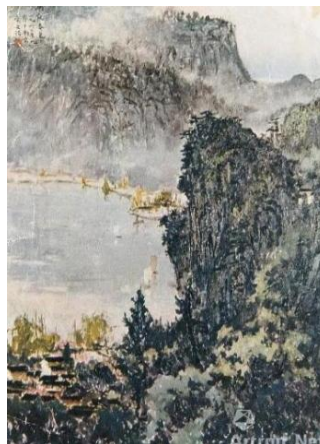


Fig. 2. Song Wenzhi, Spring Scenery of Dongting (pinyin: Dongting chunse), 1960, Size Unknown, Oil Painting
(Source: Artron.Net (Song, n.d.))

Song Wenzhi is known as a pioneer in the modernisation of Chinese painting. He devoted himself to studying Chinese painting and was skilled in creating majestic and profound landscape paintings (Song Wenzhi-The Pioneer of Chinese Modern Painting Innovation_History and Culture, 2021). Among Song Wenzhi's many landscape paintings, "Taihu Lake" is a typical artistic symbol of his work. Growing up in Jiangnan and continuing to live in this region where literati gathered, Song Wenzhi was deeply influenced by the Jiangnan sentiment. His paintings showcase Taihu Lake and Jiangnan's natural charm and delicate flavour (Guan Shan Yue Art Museum Researcher, n.d.).

The painting, "Spring Scenery of Dongting" (1960) (Fig. 2), was created by Song Wenzhi and is currently the earliest known work of his that used Jiangnan as its subject (Guan Shan Yue Art Museum Researcher, n.d.). The painting depicts Dongting of Taihu Lake in Suzhou, which is divided into eastern and western mountains. The area has a mild climate, abundant rainfall, and loose soil, making it an ideal place for tea tree cultivation with an excellent ecological environment (Suzhou Taihu Dongting Shan Biluochun Zhizuo Jiji (Suzhou Taihu Dongting Mountain Biluochun Production Techniques), n.d.). The work is depicted from a bird's-eye view of Taihu Lake,

showing the lake's clear waters surrounded by green trees, highlighting the picturesque scenery of Jiangnan. Although this is an oil painting, it is infused with the essence of Chinese painting, revealing the subtle and elegant beauty of nature. The work fully reveals the subtle beauty of Suzhou's natural style, characterised by its gentle and elegant environmental features.



Fig. 3. Wu Guanzhong, Suzhou Gardens (pinyin: Suzhou Yuanlin), 1974, Size 150 cm × 200 cm, Oil on Canvas
(Source: Artron.Net (Wu, n.d.))

The renowned early 20th-century artist Wu Guanzhong created a series of paintings with themes of Jiangnan landscapes. These works are imbued with deep emotional elements (Lü, 2020). For example, his oil painting “Suzhou Gardens” (1974) (Fig. 3). The Suzhou Gardens are symbols of the city of Suzhou. Suzhou is a historical city located on the southeastern coast of China with a history of over 2,500 years. Its ancient urban area still retains its old scale and appearance, making Suzhou one of the oldest surviving cities in China (Zhang et al., 2023). Due to its preservation of a large number of gardens from various historical periods, Suzhou is acclaimed as the “City of Chinese Gardens” and has become a representative of private gardens in China (Suzhou Local Chronicles Compilation Committee, 2014).

Wu Guanzhong's “Suzhou Gardens” depicts a corner of the Suzhou Gardens. The painting features rugged rockeries, clear pond water, white walls with grey tiles, and lush green plants along the shore, all perfectly balanced. In reality, rockeries and white walls are cold, hard materials that can easily give a sense of coldness; however, the overall composition of the painting conveys a soft and harmonious feeling. Thus, it is evident that the work imparts profound meaning to Jiangnan architecture through the artist's perspective while reflecting the gentle and elegant qualities of the Suzhou environment, as observed by the artist.



Fig. 4. Chen Yifei, Sunset Suzhou (pinyin: Suzhou de huanghun), Circa 1989, Size 50.8 cm × 76.2 cm, Oil on Canvas
(Source: Christie's (Jessica Hsu, n.d.))



Fig. 5. Chen Yifei, Springtime in Suzhou (pinyin: Suzhou Chuntian), Circa 2001, Size 50.9 cm × 76.2 cm, Oil on Canvas
(Source: Christie's (Emmanuelle Chan, n.d.))

Chen Yifei created a series of paintings themed around Suzhou, including works such as "Sunset Suzhou" (1989) (Fig. 4) and "Springtime in Suzhou" (2001) (Fig. 5). These artworks feature houses along the riverbanks and clear river waters in Suzhou, capturing the unique scenery of the Jiangnan water towns.

There is a long-standing tradition of creating artworks based on water towns in the history of Chinese painting. For example, during the Ming Dynasty, painters often used landscape painting to express their personal emotions and artistic skills. In "Sunset Suzhou," Chen Yifei infused the painting with solid emotions and atmosphere. Using a dramatic contrast of light and shadow, he skilfully balanced the colours of the river and the sky, emphasising realism and reflecting the dramatic artistry he had brought to the work (Jessica Hsu, n.d.). From an environmental perspective, the painting shows the setting sun gently casting a golden glow on the white walls of the riverside houses, as if draping them in a golden veil. The deep blue sky reflects on the shimmering river surface, resembling a flowing painting. Although the stone steps along the river are ancient and weathered, they have rich historical charm. The work beautifully showcases Suzhou's graceful and elegant scenery, captivating the viewer.

In his other work, "Springtime in Suzhou" (2001), Chen Yifei delved deeper into the depiction of riverside houses amidst lush greenery. In this painting, the artist employed soft brushstrokes and colours to capture the unique scenery of Suzhou. The river flowed quietly, reflecting the houses' white walls and black tiles along its banks, conveying a sense of tranquillity and harmony. The water town is shrouded in a hazy light, giving every element in the painting a dreamy quality. From this painting, one can feel the warm spring sunlight filtering through thin clouds, illuminating Suzhou's ancient buildings and green plants, imbuing the entire city with a warm and harmonious atmosphere. The springtime in Jiangnan, with its air filled with the fragrance of flowers and a sense of moisture, profoundly influenced the artist's creative style and techniques. These two works, viewed from the artist's perspective, endow Suzhou's water town with a unique charm and reflect the gentle and elegant qualities of Suzhou's environment.

5.0 Discussion

This study explored how environmental factors influence the aesthetic qualities and artistic expression of Suzhou landscape oil paintings, revealing the role of Suzhou's unique natural environment in artistic creation. Throughout the research process, Taine's environmental perspective in his *The Philosophy of Art* (1873) provided theoretical support. Taine stated, "The products of the human mind, like the products of nature, can only be explained through their environment" (Taine, 1873: 33), offering a key insight into understanding how the natural environment affects the style and themes of artistic works.

This study found that Suzhou provides artists with abundant creative material. Influenced by environmental factors, artists select Suzhou's natural and cultural elements as painting subjects and showcase them in their works. For example, Fang Junbi created artwork themed around Tiger Hill Pagoda. According to the local Bureau of Culture, Broadcasting, and Tourism, Tiger Hill Pagoda is a leaning tower that tilts toward the northeast. Every autumn, the golden leaves at the foot of Tiger Hill enhance the beauty of the pagoda. Fang Junbi's oil painting aptly captures this scene (*Tiger Hill Pagoda*, 2021). In addition, Suzhou Gardens utilises typical Chinese architectural techniques, blending in an elegant and subtle inner charm (Mao, 2024). This is fully reflected in Wu Guanzhong's paintings. He combined the delicate beauty of the gardens with modern painting techniques, showcasing Suzhou's unique cultural heritage. At the same time, Suzhou's environment contains many important elements. A large portion of Taihu Lake's water surface is within Suzhou's boundaries, with its shimmering waters being an important natural landscape. Suzhou's ancient villages and old streets carry a rich history and culture (*Ziran Dili He Ziyuan (Physical Geography and Resources)*, 2024). These unique regional landscapes are delicately and vividly depicted in the works of Song Wenzhi and Chen Yifei, showcasing the profound cultural heritage and distinctive charm of Suzhou.

The findings of this study also indicated that Suzhou's natural environment has had a profound impact on the sensory experience of artistic creation. Located in the lower reaches of the Yangtze River, Suzhou has a mild climate with distinct seasons. The abundant rainfall and gentle seasonal changes provide artists with a unique visual and sensory experience (Shi & Zhang, 2020). For example, Fang Junbi depicted the ancient Tiger Hill Pagoda under the autumn sun as both warm and majestic; Song Wenzhi captured the fresh and gentle atmosphere of Dongting Lake in the spring. The works of Wu Guanzhong and Chen Yifei, through their portrayals of Suzhou Gardens, further expressed the tranquillity and harmony found in the environment, giving the viewer a sense of being fully immersed in the scene. This artistic approach demonstrates that these works are not merely reproductions of natural landscapes, but rather the embodiment of the artists' emotional resonance and sensory experiences as they interact with the environment.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Through an analysis of Suzhou-themed landscape oil paintings, this study reveals the close connection between artistic creation and environmental factors. Artworks, such as "Tiger Hill" (1948), "Spring Scenery of Dongting" (1960), "Suzhou Gardens" (1974), "Sunset Suzhou" (1989), and "Springtime in Suzhou" (2001) all showcase the gentle and elegant charm of Suzhou's environment, providing viewers with a rich and pleasing visual experience. These aesthetic qualities are derived from Suzhou's mild, humid climate and distinct seasonal changes (*About Suzhou*, n.d.). Artists draw inspiration from this environment and transform its unique charm into a rich visual experience.

This study concludes that environmental factors are crucial in artistic creation, providing rich material and imbuing artworks with profound meaning and unique aesthetic value. The landscapes of Jiangnan water towns, ancient alleyways, and garden scenery in Suzhou have deeply influenced the artists' creations. Their works not only reproduce the natural scenery but also celebrate the unique environmental charm of Suzhou. These pieces are both a representation of Suzhou's natural beauty and a tribute to its distinctive

environmental allure. Through these works, artists convey Suzhou's gentle and elegant beauty to the audience, evoking an appreciation for its environmental atmosphere.

The contribution of this study lies in raising public awareness of Suzhou-themed landscape paintings, encouraging viewers not only to appreciate the visual beauty of the works but also to reflect on the environmental influences behind them. Additionally, the study enriches academic understanding of the role of environmental factors in artistic creation and lays a foundation for future research in related fields. However, the scope of works analysed in this study is relatively limited. Future research could expand by including artworks from different periods and styles, particularly those reflecting Suzhou's modern urbanisation process, to explore the complex relationship between environment and artistic creation more comprehensively.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study significantly contributes to the field by conducting an in-depth analysis of Suzhou-themed landscape oil paintings using the environmental factors outlined in Taine's *The Philosophy of Art* (1873). The research reveals how Suzhou's unique climate and cultural environment have shaped the aesthetic qualities of these artworks, thereby deepening our understanding of the role of the environment in artistic expression.

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