



## Li River Painting -- the social life of things in Guangxi Province, China

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**Abstract**-Li River Painting is a kind of painting with the theme of showing the natural ecology and social humanistic factors of Li River.Li River Painting follows the development of Chinese society.Therefore, they are not only works of art, but also an alternative perspective of social life and culture.Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to elaborate "the social life of things" through the study of Li River Painting,as well as the social and cultural information behind Li River Painting, to build the relationship between Li River Painting and Li River society.In the past, scholars studied Li River Painting from the perspective of art, not from the perspective of "social life of things", ignoring the social significance of "things".This study will study Li River Painting from a new perspective, using anthropologist Arjun Appadurial 's concept of "social life of things" to analyze Li River Painting.Finally, it comes to the conclusion that Li River Painting, as a thing with social life, has experienced the social process of commercialization and de-commercialization from "map" to "cultural symbol" in its important historical turning point.In the process of its development, it embodies the unique social, historical and cultural connotation of that time.

**Keywords:** Li River Painting, The social life of thing, Li River

### I. INTRODUCTION

This study takes Li River Painting as the research object.Through the analysis of the historical frame of Li River Painting, this paper tries to show the historical process of Li River Painting from local products to cultural symbols.As a "thing" with social life, Li River Painting has experienced the social process of commercialization and de-commercialization in its historical process.For example, in ancient times, it had practical value similar to maps, recording the changes of cities.In ancient times, it was regarded as the "commodity" exchanged by the elite.In modern times, due to the development of Li River into an international tourist city, the practical value of Li River painting was weakened and began to become a cultural symbol representing China.(Douglas, Mary.2002).

Previous studies mainly studied the artistic value of Li River Painting from the aesthetic point of view.However, few researchers explore the value of Li River Painting from the perspective of anthropology.In fact, with the development of Chinese society, the value of Li River Painting is not only reflected in art, but closely connected with all aspects of social life.Therefore, through this study, we can understand the development process of human and social in Li River region.

In this study, the concept of "social life of things" is adopted.We should regard "things" as having social life as human beings. This is the point of view in Arjun appadurial's social life of things: commodities in the cultural perspective. This study is a qualitative study for Li River Painting writing social life.Through the physical space of Li River; the relationship between people, society and art as the starting point, through the research of the development of Li River Painting in different historical periods, the paper reveals the impact of Li River Painting on the society.

The purpose of this study is to study the "turning point of life" of Li River painting in the process of commercialization and de-commercialization under different social backgrounds. And the influence of Li River painting on Li River and Chinese society in different periods. This study expands the scope of conceptual research, and is also an extension of art academia. At the same time, it also provides a reference for other researchers in the research model and concept application.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Li River Painting

Throughout the research of Li River painting at China and abroad, most researchers focus on Li River painting itself, that is, to study its artistic value. The purpose of studying Li River painting with aesthetic ideas and methods is to explore the expression techniques and artistic style of Li River painting. (John Holden. 2015). However, Li River painting develops with the changes of politics, economy, culture and many other factors. Li River painting is the evidence of Li River and Chinese social development. So Li River painting is an important medium for us to understand social culture. Therefore, this study pays more attention to the relationship between Li River painting and people and society, in order to understand the value of Chinese painting. (Li Jiemin. 2010).

### 2.2 The social life of thing

The social life of things is the point of view in Arjun Appadurai's book *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in the Cultural Perspective*. This book, published in 1986, is a collection of papers from several seminars. It's a conversation between anthropologists and historians about things. Although the ten papers in the book have different emphases, the core content of the anthology is unified. It regards "thing" as a living body, a "thing" with rich experience, which must go through the process of commercialization and de-commercialization in different cultures. (Huang Yinggui 2004). We should trace the life course of things, pay attention to the path and way of commercialization and de-commercialization of things and the social and cultural motivation behind them.

This paper holds that Li River painting has a long history and is a "thing" with rich experience. In the process of its development, it has experienced the change of identity. Arjun Appadurai's academic view of social life of objects helps us to understand Li River painting more systematically and scientifically and its social background.

## III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative research method. In this research process, researcher collect information through field survey, interview and literature review. First of all, in the field survey, the Li River local field investigation, to understand the social background of Li River painting. Through some academic activities, researcher interviewed local artists, historians and critics in Li River. The interview mainly includes the development of Li River painting and the social and cultural characteristics of Li River. In addition, according to the collected local county records and other literature, the formation and development of Li River and Li River painting are summarized and analyzed. Therefore, this study is completed.

## IV. GENERAL SITUATION OF LI RIVER BASIN

### 4.1 Physical and geographical location

Li River is located in Southwest China and Northeast Guangxi. It belongs to the humid monsoon climate of

the middle subtropical zone, and has typical karst geomorphic features. (Yang Zhuhui.2013). The whole Li River Basin takes the Li River as the central axis and is distributed in a narrow strip from north to south.As a whole, Li River Basin belongs to a part of Guangxi hills, which is the transition zone from Yunnan Guizhou Plateau to southeast coast.Li River belongs to the jurisdiction of Guilin administrative region, so it is also known as the mother river of Guilin people.

The Li River is divided into three regions, which are upstream, midstream and downstream. They all have different landscape characteristics.The upstream is the water source area with sufficient precipitation.The geological feature is the Zhongshan Mountain area composed of granite and clastic rock.In the middle reaches of Guilin City, there are many cultural relics, highlighting the historical heritage of Li River.The downstream is from Guilin to Yangshuo, which is the core scenic spot of Li River Basin, with a total length of nearly 100 km.

#### **4.2 Regional cultural characteristics of Li River Basin**

The geographical location of the Li River decided that the early Li River valley was far away from the Central Plains, the birthplace of Chinese traditional culture.(Dove Michael R. 2008). In terms of natural conditions, the landscape of Li River is distributed in a ring.It forms a circular structure with teh Solitary Peak as the center and mountains surrounding Li River.This structural feature hinders the connection between Li River people and their neighbors.The Li River was isolated for a long time. Therefore, as early as 30000 years ago, the Li River Basin was mainly inhabited by the ancient Baiyue people.

After Qin Shihuang unified the Lingnan area in 214 BC,Guilin county was set up in Li River Basin.The excavation of Lingqu not only connected the Yangtze River and Pearl River, but also connected the Central Plains.A large number of immigrants have entered the Li River Basin, which has injected new strength into multiculturalism.The culture of Central Plains spread rapidly and smoothly throughout the Li River Basin.In the process of production and labor, immigrants constantly contact with the indigenous people and exchange with each other in culture, forming a diversified cultural characteristics.(Schafer Dagmar.2011).Li River has become an important waterway transportation channel.At the same time, its military status is prominent, and its main function is military defense.In the Tang and Song Dynasties, the military function began to weaken, and the landscape tourism function began to highlight.The number of officials and scholars sent by the central government to the Li River Basin increased gradually. (Xiao Kunbing. 2013). The popularity of Li River has been increasing.During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the Li River Basin was the political center of Guangxi.During the Second World War, a group of cultural celebrities came to Guilin to avoid the war.With speeches, words, songs and paintings as weapons, they encouraged and supported the Chinese people to fight against foreign enemies, making Guilin a famous cultural city in the World War II in Chinese history.After entering the 21st century, the Li River Basin has experienced a transformation period.Its has been transformed into a scenic tourist city and a famous historical and cultural city.

## **V. THE SOCIAL LIFE OF LI RIVER PAINTING**

The development of Li River promotes the development of Li River painting.The historical and cultural connotation of Li River is an indispensable part of Li River painting.Conversely, we can restore the human history of Li River through Li River paintings.Li River painting reflects the relationship between people and nature, people and society, people and people. The social life of things is a favorable perspective to explain the relationship between Li River painting and Li River society.

Li Riverscenery serves as a natural painting material.Since the ancient times, many literati, artists left many works. Up to now, Li River painting has occupied a unique position in traditional Chinese painting. Li River

painting refers to the painting featuring the Li River landscape, with Chinese painting as the main form of expression. The scope of its creators are not confined to Guilin nationality. Its development can be roughly divided into four periods. Li River painting started in Song Dynasty, flourished in Ming and Qing Dynasties, boomed in the 20th century, transformed and developed in the 21st century.

During the Song (960 to 1279), the economic development level of the Li River basin surpassed that of any other period in its history. In such a social context, according to historical records, from the Song dynasty (960-1279), (Ebrey. Patricia Buckley. 2008) painters started to shed light on the portray of landscape in Li River. This period of painting aesthetic emphasis and highlight the painting of literary and ink, advocate lyric and freehand brushwork. (Ebrey. Patricia Buckley. 2008). The earliest Li River landscape was painted by painter Miifu, who created "The Yangshuo Mountain Map", which cradled this artistic field in the early stage.

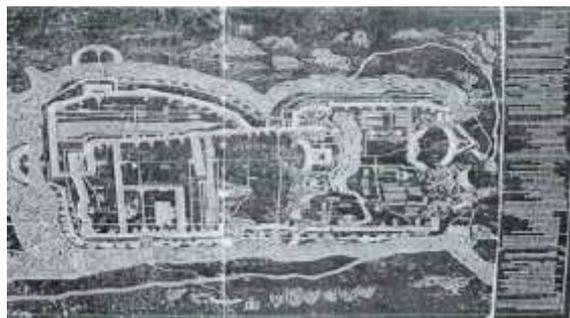


Figure1: Jinjiang Mansion Map

Source: Xie Yuxuan, 2019, photography

Moreover, "Jinjiang Mansion Map" was carved on the grand stone of the Parrot Mountain in Guilin in the Southern Song Dynasty (1272), the depiction of landform, water line had the salience of the early landscape paintings. From "The city of Jingjiang Prefecture", it can be seen that Guilin city in the Song dynasty had formed three waterways around the city, which were connected with each other and formed a situation of "wild land surrounded by thousands of peaks and one river embraced the city". It formed the general landscape pattern of Guilin in the Song dynasty and became a real landscape city. People can enjoy the integration of mountains, water and city through tour on water, which became a major feature of Guilin landscape tour in the song dynasty.

During the Ming and Qing Dynasty, it became an important cultural city in Lingnan area. (Wang Mingming. 2006). At the same time, the art of painting in the Li River Basin also developed to a new stage of prosperity. In the Qing Dynasty, there were nearly 100 painters, including Shi Tao, Luo Cunli, Luo Chen, Li Xiyuan and so on. More than 50 non-local painters, such as Meng Jinyi, Song Guangbao, Ju Chao, etc. Among them, the most famous one is Shi Tao, he is one of the four great monk painters in the early Qing Dynasty. He is a descendant of king Jingjiang of Ming dynasty. Shi Tao also has high attainments in poetry, calligraphy and seal cutting. Among these painters, most of them are still officials and professional painters. In the performance of technique, there are color of meticulous brushwork and ink freehand brushwork, /showing the characteristics of diversification.

In the Ming dynasty, Zou Diguang created an imitation of "Yangshuo Mountain Map" by Mi Fu, which presented a potential period for the landscape of the Li River. (Hay Jonathan. 2004). The period from the late Qing dynasty to the Republic of China witnessed the emergence and rise of Li River paintings. Among them, Luo Chen, a painter from Guilin in the Qing dynasty, was the representative. Most of his works revolve around the mountains and water in Guilin, and his representative works are "The famous mountain map of Guilin". It is presented in the form of "one essay and one poem", each famous mountain is presented in the form of

pictures. Also, the geological structure and surrounding environment are also noted to give the audience a general visual orientation. Next, the author outlines the specific location, etymology, celebrity inscriptions and historical allusions of the mountain, providing information to the people, while increasing the public's interest in reading. (Rawski Evelyn S. 2001). Finally, the painting close with poetry, which deepens the characteristics of famous mountains. Not all the poems and essays on the picture are written by Luo Chen, therefore, it reflects the exchange of ideas among authors. "The famous mountain map of Guilin" played an important role in promoting the landscape of Li River. It is believed that the audience of this map is not only limited to the cultural communication of the small circle of literati, but might have also played a role similar to that of today's guidebook from that time.

Moreover, during the Second World War, a large number of literati and institutions moved to Guilin. Therefore, Guilin became a famous cultural center of Anti-Japanese War, known as "Guilin cultural city" in history. The Anti-Japanese War culture in Guilin is flourishing. There are as many as 1000 progressive cultural personages in Guilin and over 200 famous ones. During the Anti-Japanese War, there were about 250 art educators and painters in Guilin. Among them, Qi Baishi and Huang Binhong had been painting in Li River Basin before the Anti-Japanese War. The painters who came to Guangxi during the Anti-Japanese War include Chen Shuren, Xu Beihong, Zhang Anzhi, Zhang Daqian, Guan Shanyue, He Xiangning, Zhao Shaoang and so on. (Qin Weijian. 2007).

Influenced by modern social changes and western thoughts, painters in this period made innovations in Chinese painting. They use some expression techniques in western paintings and combine them with Chinese paintings. In addition, they retained the tools, materials and formal language of Chinese painting, and combined traditional Chinese painting techniques with western painting techniques, and began to notice the expression of colour and shadow. The painters of this period explored new brushwork techniques and forms of expression, drawing on western observation methods to compose and find a view. In this period, their works have obvious regional characteristics and personal style.

In fact, most of them focused on sketching the nature, the spirit of the times, the beautiful landscape of Li River, bamboo forest, wooden house, cottage, terraced fields and other humanistic features are added to the works, which enriches the contents of Li River painting and shows the unique regional characteristics and folk customs of the local area. For example, the works of Li Keran and others. (Li Keran. 2005). For a short time, the themes featuring Li River landscape blossomed, which boosted its fame in the country. Also, incorporated the Li River landscape into their paintings, which further influenced the Li River landscape painting to its flourishing period.

Furthermore, in the 21st century, Chinese society stepped into a new era. A group of painters inherited the brushwork of their predecessors to continue portraying the charisma of Li River landscape, the popularity of which even gave rise to "the Li River painting school"<sup>7</sup>, Huang Gesheng, Zhang Fuxing, Zheng Junli, etc. are the Leading figures. They were not all native Li River citizens, yet they were in love with Li River. They have made a lot of excellent pieces depicting the natural scenery of Li River and the pure ethnic minorities in their paintings.

Li River painting in this period advocated "biochemical writing" and "living writing", which is to communicate "Li River painting" with the painter's personality and talent. (Nancy, Berliner. 2003). It is

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<sup>7</sup>Lijiang River painting school is one of the most active painting schools in contemporary China. The so-called Lijiang River painting school refers to a group of painters with common ideal pursuit and distinct artistic style, whose purpose is to show the style of the times, whose main object is the beautiful landscape of Guangxi, whose main body is traditional Chinese painting and whose main force is the contemporary painters of Guangxi.

advocated to show the changing rural life style and living environment, pay attention to the emotions and sorrows of farmers. It opposes the outdated sour and rotten so-called literati spirit, and advocate the fresh, sunny and rich life flavor. Ancient towns and villages perfectly embody the ideal of harmony. Through his works, the painter expresses his reverence for nature and his reflection and concern about human nature, thus profoundly embodies the humanistic care and praises the simple, kind, sincere human nature.

For example, Bai Xueshi created a number of paintings about Li River because of political opportunities. In fact, the most influential painting of Bai Xueshi was large-scale landscape painting of Li River for Diaoyutai State Guesthouse as a national representative. (Bai Xueshi. 2002).The "clouds" and "water" in traditional Chinese paintings are represented by lines or blanks. Bai Xueshi's Li River painting is innovative in reflection expression. Instead of drawing water, he used large brush to depict reflections. He enriched the performance of Chinese painting techniques and forms.

The most representative work is "The Hundred Mile of Li River" by Huang Gesheng (1985), which became the pioneering work of the Li River painting school. It symbolizes the rise of "the Li River Painting School" in the circle of contemporary Chinese painting. Huang Gesheng's "Hundred miles of Li River" is the first art work that truly studies the natural environment and cultural characteristics of the Li River.(Liu Lydia H. 2004). It is a peak of the Li River painting and the pioneering work of the Li River Painting School. (Li Yongqiang. 2015).At the same time, "Hundred miles of Li River" is also a symbol of the rise of "Li River Painting School" in contemporary Chinese painting circle. The "Hundred miles of Li River" is a cultural symbol which was granted to the president of the United States.

In addition, Li River painting appeared as early as the Song Dynasty. Li River painting has become a "commodity" traded among the people. Apart from its practical value, it also serves as a social intercourse for people to exchange ideas and convey emotions. With the continuous expansion of folk trade, Li River painting began to develop in the Ming and Qing Dynasties and boom in the 20th and 21st centuries. Li River painting has multiple identities. (Geor Simmel. 2002). On the one hand, it is a commodity. On the other hand, it is also displayed as a cultural symbol in art galleries and other places. It is a cultural card and used as a symbol of the state for political and diplomatic activities. (Mark Q Sutton & E.N Anderson. 2014). Therefore, we can view the Li River painting as a "thing". Arjun Appadurai's "social life of things" perspective provides an effective analysis path. Arjun Appadurai believes that "things" have the same social life as human beings. The life of things refers to the process in which goods undergo commercialization, de-commercialization and even recycling. By analyzing the life history of "Li River painting", we can not only understand his circulation in different periods, but also understand the cultural ecology of the Li RiverBasin.

## VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Through this study, we can find that the formation of Li River painting has its unique social and historical conditions.Li River painting, with Li River as its background, has experienced a complex process of development.At first, Li River painting only circulated among the elite, but now it has gradually formed a local cultural brand.It shows that Li River painting is the epitome of Li River society and Chinese social life.Its development process indicates that Li River has gradually entered into the pattern of Chinese culture.It never existed alone.Li River painting has been in the development and change of Li River society.

### 6.1 Significance of Research

For Li River painting, the content of this study promotes the development of Li River painting, and makes up for the blank of relevant literature.More importantly, it breaks the current research status of Li River paintings only focusing on aesthetic attributes.It demonstrates the relationship between Li River painting

and society, and deepens the research depth of Li River painting. This will help to deepen people's understanding of the value of Chinese painting.

In terms of research concept, this study expands the scope of application of social life of things, and makes a new interpretation of the specific content of the concept. On the other hand, as a research model, it is not only suitable for the research of Li River painting, but also can be used as the research of other regional art forms in the world, providing guidance and models for other research topics.

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