

# The idea of building “an ecological community with a shared future” reflected in the paintings of “Xin’ an School”

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## Abstract

**[Background]**As an important cultural symbol in Anhui Province of China, the paintings of Xin’ an School contain rich ecological philosophy, especially the concept of building “an ecological community with a shared future. **[Objective]**Through analyzing the representative paintings of the Xinan School, the article tries to explore the concept of “an ecological community with a shared future” expressed by artists. **[Method]** First, the paper focuses on the development of the idea of “an ecological community with a shared future” . Secondly, the paper summarizes the previous research of Xin’ an Painting School. Then, the article analyzes the concept of “an ecological community with a shared future” reflected in the works of Xin’ an School of painting. **[Results]**For Xin’ an School painters, all things in nature have one destiny. Therefore, we should love nature, treat animals equally and advocate the harmonious coexistence of human beings, animals, plants, etc. In addition, harmonious social and ecological relations are crucial to the sustainable development of human beings. Because of this, Xin’ an School painters think of constructing a harmonious social ecological community through the cultivation of self-spiritual ecology. **[Conclusion]** The ecological concepts reflected in the paintings of the Xin’ an School have important implications. First, human beings should establish consciousness of the natural ecological community. Second, we should stop the destruction of nature at once. Third, the study is beneficial in solving the global ecological crisis. Finally, the construction of an ecologically harmonious society cannot be separated from everyone’ s efforts.

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## Keywords

Xin’ an School; Paintings; “An ecological community with a shared future” ; Ecological implications

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## 1 Introduction

As an important cultural symbol in Anhui Province, the “Xin’ an School of Painting” was born in the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties. During the reign of Emperor Kangxi in the Qing Dynasty, Zhang Geng first used the “Xin’ an School” to define a group of Anhui painters who used Huangshan, Bai Yue and Huizhou landscapes as creative inspirations. Since then, the term has been widely accepted by academics and is still in use up till now. During hundreds of years of development, the Xin’ an School of Painting has emerged many representative figures, including Huang Binhong, Wang Caibai, etc. In the paintings of the “Xin’ an School”, there are rich ecological ideas. Among these ecological ideas, the idea of “an ecological community with a shared future” is the pursuit of many Xinan painters. Based on the concept of “an ecological community with a shared future”, this paper will use representative painters of Xin’ an School as examples to analyze the ecological ideas these artists uphold in life and artistic creation, hoping to provide inspiration for the construction of a harmonious ecological society.

## 2 The formation of the concept of “an ecological community with a shared future”

As early as the 1960s, Western countries ushered in the first theoretical development of eco-criticism. In 1962, Rachel Carson published the famous “Silent Spring”. This book is critical to understanding

the negative impact of insecticides on the environment and human health, which has caused people to pay attention to the ecological environment. Subsequently, Odham proposed “Holistic Thought”, regarding the entire biosphere as an interdependent ecological community. The French philosopher Albert Schweitzer also proposed the ethical concept of “Reverence for life”, advocating the expansion of moral care to the biological aspect, which is an overall ecological view in essence. In addition, many philosophers have contributed to the development of ecological overall theory, including Heidegger, Lovelock, etc. In the post theoretical era, Haraway turned the research perspective to animals, which started the “animal steering” of ecological research. After the start of the 21st century, the international ecological research perspective largely expanded. For example, the American contemporary ecological scholar Lawrence Buell proposed the theory of “environmental criticism”, focusing on increasingly severe urban pollution and environmental issues. Combined with queer theory, animal ethics, climate justice and other discourses, Greta Gaard’s critical ecofeminism has provided a new perspective for ecocriticism research. Ecological criticism in China originated at the beginning of this century. Zeng Fangren, Wang Nuo and other scholars introduced the history and important results of European and American ecological development to Chinese scholars. By summarizing the theory of Western ecological criticism, Chinese scholars have attempted to construct an ecological criticism with Chinese characteristics. For example, Lu Shuyuan divided ecology into natural

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ecology, social ecology and spiritual ecology. After decades of sustainable development, the construction of the ecological theory system has become increasingly mature.

In recent years, international ecological problems have remained serious. Under the influence of ecocriticism, ecological problems have attracted the attention of leaders from the Chinese government. Building a community with a shared future for mankind is an important component of the report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, in which the construction of an ecological community with a shared future is an important component. Ecological issues have no national boundaries, so the construction of an ecological civilization is the responsibility of all people in the world. The building of an ecological community is of great significance for people to consciously establish the concept of ecological civilization. This is also a good way for us to solve the global ecological crisis. The concept of “an ecological community with a shared future” is based on the relationship between man and nature. Since it enriches traditional Chinese ecological concepts, it is of great historical significance for people to achieve sustainable development. Humans and all other living creatures are closely linked in a community with a common destiny. Any short-term development at the cost of ecology and the environment will eventually pay a heavy price. Therefore, we should treat the earth as a community and try our best to protect the environment and maintain the ecosystem. All in all, the idea of “an ecological community with a shared future” is a new perspective that connects ecology with the theory of

community of destiny. This study not only provides useful guidance for ecological civilization construction in China, but also provides useful inspiration for solving global ecological problems.

### **3 Literature Review of “Xin’ an School of Painting”**

As an important part of traditional Chinese culture, the academic research of the Xin’ an School of Painting is mainly concentrated among Chinese scholars. Most achievements are published in Chinese journals. According to the search of the CNKI database, Chinese scholars published a total of 650 papers on the theme of the “Xin’ an School of Painting” from 1958 to 2023. In addition to the introductory articles, the horizons of the research papers mainly include the following four aspects.

#### **3.1 Research on the characteristics of the paintings of “Xin’ an School”**

The discussion of the characteristics of paintings from “Xin’ an School” has always been a hot topic in academic circles. For example, in “The art style of Xin’ an School of Painting” (Zhao, 1996), Zhao Benyi summarized the characteristics of the Xin’ an Painting School as “noble”. Similarly, Tao Shengsu described the characteristics of the Xin’ an School of Painting with three words: simplicity, calmness and simplicity in his “A Preliminary Study on the style of Xin’ an School of Painting” (Tao, 2007).

#### **3.2 Study of representative painters at the “Xin’ an School”**

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During the development of the “Xin’ an School of Painting”, many famous artists emerged, which had a profound influence on the Chinese painting world. Many researchers have focused on certain painters in their research. For example, “On Huang Binhong’s Contribution to Xin’ an School of Painting” (Gu, 2015) has concentrated on Huang Binhong’s devotion to the development of the “Xin’ an School”. In “A Brief discussion on Wang Caibai’s role in the continuation of the spirit of Xin’ an Painting School” (Hong, 2015), Hong Bo analyzed Wang Caibai’s inheritance of the Xin’ an School of Painting. According to the statistics, the most popular artists in the research are Huang Binhong, Zha Shibiao and Hong Ren.

### **3.3 The influence of the “Xin’ an School of Painting” on Jingdezhen ceramic painting**

The Xin’ an School of Painting has played an active role in promoting the development of Jingdezhen ceramic painting. Some researchers have published academic papers from this perspective. For instance, Yu Ping analyzed the important influence of Xin’ an School on landscape porcelain painting in Jingdezhen in her article “Analysis on the influence of Xin’ an Painting School on landscape porcelain painting in Jingdezhen” (Yu, 2021). In “Xin’ an Painting School and Jingdezhen Ceramic Painting” (Wang, 2012), Wang Fang also analyzed the role of Xin’ an Painting School in promoting the development of Jingdezhen ceramic painting based on its historical background.

### **3.4 Analyzing the relationship between the “Xin’ an School of Painting” and Huizhou merchants**

The economy plays a decisive role in the development of culture, so many researchers have analyzed the internal relationship between the Xin’ an School of Painting and Huizhou merchants. For example, in “Huizhou Merchants and Xin’ an Painting School in Ming and Qing Dynasties” (Xu, 2006), Xu Liufan analyzed the relationship between Huizhou merchants and the Xin’ an Painting School based on the social political and economic conditions of the Ming and Qing Dynasties. He believed that Huizhou merchants played an active role in promoting the spread of the Huizhou culture. Coincidentally, Sun Guoliang and Yang Kai have also published a paper entitled “The Relationship between Hui Merchants and Xin’ an School of Painting and its Influence on the contemporary Chinese painting art market” (Sun & Yang, 2017). In this article, the two authors discussed the role of Huizhou merchants in the emergence, development and decline of the Xin’ an School of Painting.

Unfortunately, few researchers have focused on the ecological implications of landscape paintings in the “Xin’ an School of Painting”. From the perspective of “an ecological community with a shared future”, this article aims to cause researchers to pay attention to the connotation of ecological philosophy reflected in the creation of the “Xin’ an School of Painting” to understand more deeply the life wisdom contained in paintings.

## **4 The concept of “an ecological community with a shar**

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## **ed future” reflected in paintings of the “Xin’ an School”**

The idea of “an ecological community with a shared future” can easily be seen in paintings of the “Xin’ an School”. For Xin’ an School painters, all things in nature have one destiny. Therefore, we should love nature, treat animals equally and advocate the harmonious coexistence of human beings, animals, plants, etc. In addition, harmonious social and ecological relations are crucial to the sustainable development of human beings. Because of this, Xin’ an School painters think of constructing a harmonious social ecological community through the cultivation of self-spiritual ecology. These valuable ecological considerations provide important insights for us to solve the ecological crisis.

### **4.1 All things in nature have one destiny**

#### **4.1.1 Human beings belong to nature and should be integrated into nature**

Lao-Tzu, an early representative of ancient Chinese Taoism, proposed the idea that Taoism should pursue after nature. Chuang Tzu, another originator of Taoism, also put forward his realm of “unity of heaven and man”. Influenced by traditional Chinese Taoism, the Xin’ an School painters also pursued the ideal state of “unity of heaven and man”. However, unlike Taoism, painters of the Xin’ an School regarded human beings as part of nature. For them, human beings should integrate into nature and build a community consciousness of the symbiosis of all things. The paintings of the Xin’ an School are mainly

landscape paintings, which express the painter’s yearning to integrate into natural beauty. “Mountains and rivers, strange pines, flowers, birds, insects and fishes have given the artists unlimited creative inspiration. Surrounded by green mountains and clear waters, under the blue sky and white clouds, they felt the harmonious beauty of nature and comprehended the philosophy of life” (Zhao, 2021, p.117). Jianjiang, an early representative of Xin’ an School, had great respect for the landscape of heaven and earth. In his landscape paintings, he infiltrated the essence of nature and expressed his awe and love for nature incisively and vividly. Huang Binhong, a master of Chinese painting, traveled to many great rivers and mountains of China during his lifetime. Through landscape paintings, he integrated his soul with nature. In his painting “Landscape Screen”, landscape trees, small bridges, flowing water, noble hermit are integrated, reflecting the perfect artistic conception of the unity of heaven and man. In the painting “Fisherman’s Intention is not Fish” produced by Zhao Yu, one of the contemporary inheritors of Xin’ an School, an old man is fishing on the lake. His posture is peaceful, and the nearby trees and mountains are integrated, quiet and peaceful. The old man is intoxicated in the beautiful natural scenery so he does not care whether he can catch fish or not. What he pursues is a kind of spiritual enjoyment through blending into nature, which is quite different from that of ordinary people who pursue fame and profit. Flowers and trees are an integral part of nature. Since ancient times, plum, orchid, bamboo and chrysanthemum have been loved by the

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Chinese literati. The Xin' an painters are no exception. Flowers and trees are an indispensable part of their paintings. For example, in Zhao Yu' s painting "Three Lanes of Plum Blossoms", an old man sits next to a plum tree and plays the ancient Chinese melody "Three Lanes of Plum Blossoms" with an erhu (a traditional Chinese musical instrument). The old man does not pursue sensationalism. Instead, he takes the plum blossom and the stone as the audience, expressing the painter' s ideal of living away from the noise and integrating into nature. From the above analysis, we can conclude that man and nature should develop in harmony. In other words, man is neither above nor below nature, but belongs to nature. Only by obeying the rules of nature, adapting to the laws of nature, and integrating into nature can human beings achieve sustainable development. Any behaviors that violate the laws of nature destroy natural ecology and will be punished by nature sooner or later. Nature is fundamental to human existence. This ecological concept is highly important for the future construction of ecological civilization.

#### **4.1.2 Build a community of harmonious coexistence between human beings and animals**

Since ancient times, animals have lived together with human beings on earth. Animals and human beings have copied together, closely connected, and played a harmonious ecological praise song together. Like human beings, animals also have joys and sorrows. Therefore, we should understand their habits and maintain cooperation with them. Among the painters of the Xin' an School, many artists love animals deeply.

Butterflies, birds and cicadas often appear in Huang Binhong' s paintings. The techniques of landscape painting can be seen in his flower-and-bird paintings, which are often used to exchange each other. He also changes ink into color, or uses color and ink together, so that his flower-and-bird works have a strong personal temperament and present an innocent and childlike artistic appearance. Through the paintings, we can easily find that Huang Binhong is full of love for animals. He watched them carefully as friends and learned about their habits. That' s why the animals in his paintings look so lifelike. Zhao Yu loved to read Chuang Tzu (one of the greatest philosophers in ancient China), especially the story of Chuang Tzu' s dream of becoming a butterfly. Therefore, in his landscape paintings, he often uses butterflies as a metaphor for himself. This metaphor expresses that he treats animals from an equal perspective. The equal attitude of Xin' an School painters toward animals fully conforms to the idea of "an ecological community with a shared future". Besides, it also reflects the ecological concept of equality of all things. It is conceivable that if animals disappear from this world, then human life will become endlessly boring. Henry Baston once said, "the history of nature exceeds human history, and the degree of evolution of various animals is more perfect for human beings" (Mowat, 1998, p.18). In summary, animals provide rich nutrition and food materials to humans, accompanying humans to spend lonely years. For animals, humans should be grateful. We should cherish their lives, regard them as a fate community, and provide them with a harmonious living space. This is the inspiration we obtained from the paintings of the

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Xin' an School.

#### **4.1.3 Landscapes, flowers and trees are an integral part of the natural ecological community**

The painters of the Xin' an School believed that the landscape, flowers and trees are important components of the natural ecological community. From the painters' point of view, mountains and rivers provide shelter and a source of survival for animals, but also provide a place for humans who want to stay away from the hustle and bustle. At the same time, animals and humans also add to the dynamic atmosphere of the landscape. Many Xin' an painters use landscapes, flowers and trees to express their artistic ideas and spiritual realms. For example, in the painting "Guangling Song", Zhao Yu uses two mountains to symbolize the heroes of ancient China who are fearless of power. In the paintings of Xin' an School, trees and animals share a benign relationship between interdependence and harmonious symbiosis. On the one hand, trees provide living space and food for animals. On the other hand, animals also prolong the natural ecology. In mountainous areas, trees perform photosynthesis on earth, and animals use this process to complete energy transfer. For example, linden trees use their fragrance to attract bees to eat nectar. While providing animals with nutrients, they also complete the task of pollination and the process of inheritance. Many flowers seem to be unnoticeable. However, they symbolize the constant vitality of nature. As an indispensable component of nature, landscapes, flowers and trees trigger each other and coexist with animals and humans on the planet. To sum up, human

beings rely on nature to survive. Landscapes, flowers and trees are natural gifts to us. Therefore, we should think of nature as a coexisting ecological community.

#### **4.2 Constructing a harmonious social ecological community**

It is universally acknowledged that human existence can be divided into three levels: biological, social and spiritual. The above three levels are closely related, but they are not identical and cannot be replaced by each other. Among the three levels, social attributes are important factors that distinguish humans from animals. Therefore, harmonious social and ecological relations are crucial to the sustainable development of human beings. In addition to the natural ecological community, Xin' an School painters also pay attention to the social ecological relationships among human beings. Based on their own life experiences, they think actively about building a harmonious social ecological community. Many famous painters of the Xin' an School have suffered different kinds of misfortunes in life. Shi Tao, one of the early leaders of the Xin' an School, was a descendant of a royal family in the Ming Dynasty. After the killing of his father, he wandered around and was forced to become a monk to survive. Huang Binhong insisted on himself and formed a unique painting style. However, during his lifetime, his paintings were not recognized by others. Even his friends and family members laughed at him. To make a living, Zhao Yu left home from childhood and went to a small town to do heavy manual labor. Faced with those misfortunes in life, Xin' an school painters did not give up hope. Instead,

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they began to think actively about the construction of harmonious social ecological relations. In painting, they learned the importance of maintaining a peaceful and loving attitude. According to the Chinese ecologist Lu Shuyuan, “social ecology reflects the relationship between different human beings, while the spiritual ecology reflects the relationship between body and mind in one person” (Lu, 2000, p.147). Social ecology and spiritual ecology influence each other. In a materialistic society, avoiding competition for fame and wealth may be the key to maintaining a harmonious social ecology. To achieve this goal, the cultivation of spiritual ecology is very important. An increasing number of painters realize that life is full of contradictions. Life is difficult nine times out of ten, so people should learn to reconcile with themselves. Therefore, many Xin’ an painters chose to quit vanity fairs and focus on artistic creation. They visit the mountains and rivers, and try to blend with nature. As a result, the flesh and spirit of these painters are in harmony. A harmonious spiritual ecology enables painters to treat others with a tolerant attitude, which also promotes the construction of a harmonious social ecology.

## 5 Conclusion

The ecological concepts reflected in the paintings of the Xin’ an School have important implications. Firstly, as members of nature, human beings should establish consciousness of the natural ecological community. “It is the duty and responsibility of every human being to love nature and protect the environment” (Zhao, 2019, p.298). Therefore, we should break the wrong

concept of “human centrist thinking” and analyze the symbiotic relationships of all things in nature from an equal perspective. Notably, public participation is a necessary guarantee for achieving ecologically sustainable development. Eco-sustainable development must rely on the maximum recognition and participation of the social public. Humans live on the same planet, so ecological problems have no national boundaries. The construction of an ecological civilization is the bound responsibility and obligation of every human being. The idea of “an ecological community with a shared future” put forward by the painters of Xin’ an School is an expression of consensus on the construction of an ecological civilization, which is of great significance for people to consciously establish the concept of ecological civilization. Secondly, we should stop the destruction of nature at once. The long-term interests of society rely on the sacrifices of some of the present interests. Schweizer believes: “Goodness is to maintain life, promote it, and enable developable life to achieve its highest value. Evil is to destroy life, hurt it, and suppress its development. This is an inevitable, universal, and absolute ethical principle” (Schweizer, 1996, p.9). Xin’ an painters advocated an equal attitude toward all living things, including animals and plants. In addition, painters from Xin’ an School have developed Schweitzer’ s theory. In their opinion, natural landscapes such as mountains and rivers should also be included. The Xin’ an school painters opposed the artificial modification of the natural landscape, and they wanted to keep nature as it was. These ecological ideas are very useful for us

to build a harmonious natural ecological environment. Thirdly, understanding contemporary ecological civilization construction from the perspective of the human community with a shared future, and establishing an international ecological consensus among human beings are inevitable requirements for solving the global ecological crisis. The idea of “an ecological community with a shared future” reflected in the paintings of Xin’an School is an ecological consensus reached based on the relationships all the things in nature and the construction dimension of ecological civilization. The study points out the direction for global ecological governance and is of great historical significance for the realization of sustainable development of mankind. Humans and all other living things are closely linked in a community of common destiny. Any short-term development achieved at the cost of ecology and the environment will eventually incur a heavy price. Therefore, we should treat the earth as a living community and try our best to protect the environment and maintain the ecosystem. Finally, the construction of an ecologically harmonious society cannot be separated from everyone’s efforts. As individuals, we should cultivate ourselves, maintain the balance of spiritual ecology and treat people around us with a tolerant attitude. If we can be indifferent to fame and wealth, we can gain inner peace.

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