

Learning to Listen - An Appreciation of Zhao Yu's Paintings from the Perspective of Greta Gaard's Critical Ecofeminism

Yaxue Wang¹, Yanli Wang²

¹Anhui Business College, Wuhu 241002, China

²Anhui Business College, Wuhu 241002, China

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15101290>

Published Date: 28-March-2025

Abstract: Zhao Yu is one of the Chinese contemporary painters of the Xin'an School of Painting, which is a school of painting that is mainly inspired by the landscapes of Mount Huangshan, Baiyue, and other Huizhou mountains. His paintings are mostly characterized by natural imagery such as landscapes, which often convey the ecological meaning of harmony between man and nature. Greta Gaard is a contemporary American ecofeminist writer whose ecofeminist research focuses on the intersection of environmental justice, social justice, and species justice. Analyzing Zhao Yu's paintings with Gard's practical critical ecofeminist theory of learning to listen not only provides a novel perspective for scholars appreciating Zhao Yu's paintings, but also facilitates more scholars in China to understand Gaard's academic thinking and research scope.

Keywords: Zhao Yu; Ecofeminism; Greta Gaard; Listening; Man and Nature.

I. INTRODUCTION

Zhao Yu, a native of Wuhu, Anhui Province of China, calls himself Meijushi. After he retired from teaching, he lived in Wuhu and took pleasure in landscape painting. Zhao Yu's painting philosophy is inherited from the Xin'an School of Painting. "The Xin'an School of Painting was born in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, which included both the group of painters living in Huizhou and the Huizhou painters living abroad. Generally, the paintings of the Xin'an School were mainly inspired by Huangshan, Baiyue, and the landscapes of Huizhou."^{[1]P112} The Xin'an School of Painting mainly focuses on natural imagery such as mountains, water and trees. "Seeking spirituality from real mountains and real water, it formed a style of painting that is simple, cold, and deep."^{[2]P11} Although Zhao Yu's landscape paintings are dominated by the natural beauty of the great mountains and rivers of the motherland, the cold geometrized mountains, withered ink chapping and closed space structure of his works are essentially the natural cognition of patriarchy, behind which reflect the ecological problems of environmental degradation and the social justice of class inequality, among other issues. Greta Gaard is a contemporary American eco-feminist writer whose eco-feminist thought is not only about feminism and environmentalism, or women and nature, as the name suggests, but also discusses issues such as environmental degradation and social injustice based on the above premises. Gaard has not only established her own critical ecofeminist ethic, but also has one of the broadest cross-border ecofeminist perspectives. She argues that "ecofeminist scholars and activists need to confront the problem of a cross-cultural ecofeminist ethic."^{[3] P82} Therefore, from a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary perspective, Gaard's academic research and Zhao Yu's paintings point to the same problem of ecofeminists.

II. THEORETICAL SOURCES OF LISTENING

Academic research is inseparable from the form of dialogue speech, and ecofeminist communicators pay attention not only to who is speaking, but also to who is listening. Listening is a way of understanding and stimulating scholarship, and it arises from many cultural traditions. As explained in the book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants* written by Robin Wall Kimmerer (an American Scholar), for thousands of years,

indigenous communities in North America have listened to and learned the language of the plants, enabling them to harvest food as well as to repay this gift by nourishing the land, protecting the water and practicing gratitude. Speaking is associated with power, knowledge and domination, while listening is associated with subordination. Deborah Bird Rose, founder of the Environmental Humanities, once said, “Listening (or being said) is the position of being passive or receptive. Power relations are clearly hierarchical: the person speaking has more power than the person being spoken to.”^{[4]P102} Undoubtedly, ecofeminist methodology, on the other hand, emphasizes listening as a good scholarly attitude, listening to one’s research subjects, the oppressed, one’s activists and scholarly communities, and creating writing institutions that enable research subjects to set their own agendas, articulate their needs, and benefit from scholarly endeavors. In a broader sense, listening can be a way of practicing theory in the humanities, and this is also true for painters. Zhao Yu’s landscape paintings are undoubtedly a kind of artwork in which the practice of listening is transformed into a visual image.

III. AN APPRECIATION OF ZHAO YU’S PAINTINGS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF GAARD’S CRITICAL ECOFEMINISM

A. *In Praise of the Pines in Huangshan: Learning to Listen – Trees*



As a painter of Xin'an School of Painting, Zhao Yu's works naturally cannot be separated from the characteristics of the mother theme of Huangshan. Pine is the first of the “four greats” of Huangshan, where there are no peaks without rocks, and no rocks without pines. As the old saying goes, “The beauty of Huangshan begins with the pine.” The pines are evergreen in all seasons and have a symbolism of steadfastness and tenacity. Zhao Yu's painting mainly depicts the iconic landscape of Huangshan—Welcoming Pine. It is a 1,000-year-old iconic pine tree on Huangshan. It relies on the cliffs and rocks and is about 10 meters tall. One side of its branches is like a person's hand elegantly slanting in the pockets of its pants, which shows graceful and elegant posture.

Standing in the perspective of Gaard's eco-feminism, the stoic pine of Huangshan in Zhao Yu's paintings possesses a symbol of masculinity, with its upright, rigid form reflecting the control and subjugation of nature. Gaard believes that the oppression of nature and the oppression of women have the same origin in the exploitative logic of patriarchy, and she strongly criticizes the dual oppression of “anthropocentrism” and “male-centrism” under patriarchy. In the pursuit of economic growth and without regard for the ecological sustainability of the planet, people are cutting down forests indiscriminately. Listening to trees is one of the ways in which Gaard practices ecofeminism. Robin Wall Kimmel, an American scholar, has said, “In ancient times, our elders said that trees would talk to each other.”^{[5]P19} In fact, it took us centuries to realize that trees talk to each other, and to hear them you have to concentrate, you have to listen with all your heart. However, most children grow up without this intellectual legacy and they must learn to listen across species on their

own. Gaard describes her experience of listening to trees as a child in her book *Critical Ecofeminism*. When she first started listening to trees at her elementary school in Los Angeles, she often visited a grove of eucalyptus trees on campus. It was at the base of a small hill, and she often lay with ivy, thick peeling leaves and nuts. Even when cars were parked lower down the hill and some parents drove in circles to pick up their children, she still could feel the peace in the eucalyptus grove. In her book, she describes, “During many a recess, I would walk into the grove with soft footsteps and sit among the trees, breathing in their calming breath and minty odor.” [6]P18

Trees fall under the umbrella of plant studies, which deals with environmental justice, species justice, and is an important interdisciplinary branch of critical ecofeminism. Plant researchers have shown that specific plant behaviors indicate that plants do not want to be eaten. When attacked by insects, plants send out chemical signals to alert other plants. And of course they sometimes send out predator signals that allow predatory insects to feed on the attacker. “Plants also produce toxins that change the flavor or texture of a leaf, making it less palatable and difficult for herbivores to digest.” [7]P15 Plants emit volatile chemical signals when attacked, suggesting that plants may be affected by fear and pain. Species- and relationship-based plant research suggests that plants are also conscious, as they change their behavior, communicate with other plants, share nutrients, and feed their offspring in response to environmental information.

Gaard argues that the current practice of “not listening” in our culture includes all concepts related to nature. “When a person lives in a place, he or she is spatially, temporally, and spiritually invested, and the territory, as the place where the person meets the environment, becomes the source of his or her identity.” [8]P55 As the most important plants in the region, they certainly deserve to be “listened to”, and we should have a plant mindset and learn to listen to all plants, including trees. Once we understand this deep-rooted and enduring relationship with plants, we will be able to better manage our relationships with other species and create an eco-society, where the ecological harmony of nature that Zhao Yu expresses in this painting can live on forever.

B. *Clear Waves in the Reservoir: Learning to Listen – Water*



The painting *Clear Waves in the Reservoir* depicts the beauty of calmness and serenity. Look at this painting, in the distance, the mountains and rivers rise in layers, one over the other, occupying half of the picture, the right half of which is the reservoir that is the subject of this painting. The green reservoir is sparkling and rippling, inexplicably giving people a sense of peace and quiet beauty. The upper corner of the reservoir protrudes out of a piece of high ground, two or three houses have emerged from the lush green. A long corridor stretches out on the left side of the reservoir, with a pavilion nestled at the end. The lower edge of the reservoir is lush with flowers, and a large mass of red flowers blooms between two clusters of green grass.

Zhao Yu's painting *Clear Waves in the Reservoir* is intended to express the beauty of water as a natural resource. Water not only constitutes natural beauty, such as rivers, lakes and seas, but is also a practical natural resource. For example, reservoirs

that serve to store floods and generate electricity. Water is an important and indispensable part of the natural ecology. Water is fluid, silent, soft but can drip through stones. The circulation and communicative properties of water are symbolized by Gaard as dissolving dualism, and thus the narrative of water takes on a distinct ecological meaning. Gaard describes her experience of listening to the water in many places in her book, *The Nature of Home: Taking Root in a Place*. The first river she encountered as a child was a “sink”—the Los Angeles River, whose banks were made of concrete. She often went to observe that river, and she wrote: “The current seduced me. I wanted to get acquainted with it, to befriend it, to witness it, to listen to the trickle, to try to go down and put my hand in the water to participate in its flow.”^{[9]P11} The circulation of water has also been given positive meanings on a linguistic and cultural level, such as the fact that water can permeate everything in nature. Water can eliminate barriers and connect everything. Water transcends its own physical significance and becomes an ecological image for environmental protection and the integration of man and nature.

On the other hand, Gaard’s “critique of anthropocentrism is also typified in narratives that comment on humanity’s loss of reverence for water and its utilization as a resource.”^{[8] P50} In the book *The Nature of Home: Taking Root in a Place*, Gaard describes many examples of the destruction of water resources. For example, the Whatcom Creek, located in the city of Bellingham in the Washington State region of the United States, was plundered when a sawmill was built next to the watershed. Beyond that, the area has gradually become a dumping ground for locals, with the lower estuary struggling with waste.

In addition, the unequal distribution of water resources is a result of Gaard’s “listening” to water, “Gaard concerned not only with water, but also with the organisms that live in it and the people and cultures that depend on it for their livelihoods.”^{[10] P38} Water that used to flow freely in rivers, lakes and underground channels around the world is now being extracted, treated and diverted into tiny plastic bottles. Some people buy bottled plastic water; meanwhile, others spend hours each day carrying water to their homes or fields. People who can afford bottled water use healthy, filtered water that is generally free of infectious diseases and better for their health, while those who cannot afford or have access to bottled water are more exposed to contaminated water sources that are more likely to be harmful to their own health as well as to the raising of future generations.

Water is an indispensable element of life, and this painting by Zhao Yu inspires people to cherish, care for, and protect water. Gaard also celebrates a group of people who know how to listen to water and have a deep understanding of it. Water connects all forms of life and all forms of non-life. By listening to water and respecting it, we can fulfill our responsibility and duty to protect the environment, which is incumbent on everyone.

C. Cultivating tranquility in the mountains: Learning to Listen—Mountains



Zhao Yu's painting *Cultivating tranquility in the mountains* is a majestic work depicting mountains. The verdant mountains in the picture are overlapping, which is like the undulating waves of the sea, surging and majestic. At first glance, the mountains present a rich variety of colors, deep emerald green, warm orange and yellow, light blue and purple, like a palette of nature. The mountain peaks towered into the clouds, as if they were the guardians of the earth, majestic and solemn. Between the mountains and rivers, the clouds and mist, as if it were a fairyland. The magnificence of mountains and rivers lies not only in their majestic stature, but also in their thousands of forms. This painting is filled with the rational gaze of the mountain, both in terms of composition and geometry, and the rational gaze usually refers to a way of seeing that is centered on the male perspective and characterized by control and dominance. The image is composed using the overhead method, where the viewer is forced to enter the landscape space from a top-down perspective, representing the vertical construction of spatial power, and this domination and control of power comes to represent the oppression of the vulnerable by patriarchy.

The serenity and splendor of mountains and rivers inspire awe and humility, which has given rise to a series of increasingly sought-after extreme sports such as mountaineering. In her book, *The Nature of Home: Taking Root in a Place*, Gaard describes the social justice issues behind the sport of mountaineering in the section "Climbing". Gaard and her partner met up to climb a snowy mountain called Baker. Introducing the range of equipment used to climb snowy mountains, Gaard said: "It's called an air traffic controller, or ATC, a title that conveys all the bragging that guys do about their feats on rock and ice, their sense of power, control, and authority."^{[9]P82} Gaard argues that mountaineers from developed countries go to countries thousands of miles away. Most of the people there live in poverty because of global trade agreements; while the climbers' own countries benefit by hiring local people to guide them in the wilderness of their own countries, which highlights the social injustice that results from the oppression of the disadvantaged by elite groups. In the course of she and her partner's climbing experience, Gaard listened to the mountains and realized that they were tethered together for safety, and that an individual could not follow his own pace and put the whole team at risk. Because, above the high mountain peaks, where human values are reversed, "interdependence, not independence, is the key to survival here."^{[9]P81} Mountaineering by itself will not bring democratic stability to the world, nor will it transform the economic structures that unjustly oppress the underclass.

The "mountain" in Zhao Yu's paintings is both a natural entity and a cultural symbol, and the image of the mountain as "sublime" and "lofty" is often instrumentalized, symbolizing a kind of top-down oppression. Gaard argues that patriarchy views nature and women together as the "other" and that power control is achieved through exploitation and domination. To listen to the mountains is to listen to all oppressed groups. Gaard's ecofeminist thought seeks an ecological and social order that embraces diverse lives and eliminates oppression, centering on revealing the homology of environmental exploitation and social oppression and advocating alternative practices based on care, reciprocity, and equality. That's why Gaard believes that one should go beyond the bounds of social class, focusing on issues such as social justice, and seek the love and care of the community of human destiny.

IV. CONCLUSION

Although Zhao Yu's landscape paintings ostensibly depict natural arias of trees, water, and mountains, they are filled with geological inscriptions of patriarchy and colonial violence. Although Gaard is an ecofeminist writer, ecofeminist issues cannot be separated from ecological and social justice issues. Gaard's advocacy of learning to listen to natural entities such as trees, mountains, and water is really about listening to all oppressed species, classes, and groups. This practice is imbued with a heightened concern for ecological issues and social justice issues. Through the decoding of Gaard's eco-feminism, the chapped texture on those icy rocks in Zhao Yu's paintings exposes both the dual discipline of society on nature and women, as well as the implied potential for resistance of materiality itself, such as the landscape and trees. This cross-cultural interpretation not only enriches the landscape meaning of the Xin'an School paintings, but also provides a historical dimension of critical resources for contemporary eco-art practice. Mining the repressed, fluid, and non-dualistic ecological meanings of the Xin'an School of Painting is instructive for the improvement of today's ecological society and the development of social justice.

REFERENCES

- [1] Zhao Qian. *Synthesis of Research on "Xin'an School of Painting" in China*[J]. Journal of Hubei Academy of Fine Arts 2018(3):112-116.
- [2] Gao Fei. *An Examination of the Nomenclature of the Xin'an School of Painting*[J]. Journal of Anhui Normal University (Humanities and Social Sciences Edition), 2011,39(1):6-12.

- [3] Gaard, Greta. *Strategies for a Cross-cultural Ecofeminist Ethics: Interrogating Tradition, Preserving Nature*[J]. New Essays in Ecofeminist Literary Criticism. Ed. Glynis Carr. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2000.
- [4] Rose, Deborah Bird. *Val Plumwood's Philosophical Animism: Attentive Inter-Actions in the Sentient World*[J]. Environmental Humanities 3 (2013), 93–109.
- [5] Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*[M]. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Press, 2013.
- [6] Gaard, Greta. *Critical Ecofeminism*[M]. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017.
- [7] Pollan, Michael. *The Intelligent Plant: Scientists debate a new way of understanding flora*[J]. The New Yorker. December 23, 2013.
- [8] Wei Qingqi, Li Jialuang. *Ecofeminism* [M]. Beijing, Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2019.
- [9] Gaard Greta. *The Nature of Home: Taking Root in a Place*. University of Arizona Press; 2007.
- [10] Wang Yaxue, Zhao Qian. *On Greta Gard's Thought on Environmental Justice*[J]. Journal of Nanjing Forestry University (Humanities and Social Sciences Edition), 2020,20(02):33-41.

Funding

This research was funded by “A Study of Greta Gaard’s Critical Ecofeminist Thought” (2023AH052290) and “Study on the Ecological Philosophical Thought in the Works of ‘Xin’an School of Painting’”(2022CX547).