

**Aesthetic Ecology in Chinese Art:
Visual, Material and Natural Culture of the West Lake (960 – 1644)**

Focusing on the historic environment of the West Lake (present-day Hangzhou, China) during the period of the Song to Ming dynasties I explore the aesthetic ecology of the visual, material and natural culture of traditional Chinese art. The West Lake (Xī Hú) is a basin of about 6,3 square kilometre of fresh water that is surrounded by mountains at three sides. Following major projects of nature engineering begun by Emperor Yang of the Sui in the 7th century C.E., the West Lake became a widely known destination for religious and cultural travel, with pilgrims and sightseers coming to visit the Buddhist and Daoist temples in its surrounding mountains, and see the scenic views described in contemporary poetry. By the time of the Song dynasty (960-1276), the period forming the first focus of this study, the West Lake had become one of the most strongly eco-engineered sites in Chinese history.

Improving the dykes that secured controlled irrigation of the fields farmed around the West Lake, the 'Bai Causeway' ordered by the late eight-century Tang government official Bai Juyi created the first of eventually three artificial divisions that structured the West Lake into five sections. While differentiated into distinct spheres of social and political life – i.e. courtly, civic, religious, touristic, and artistic – the five sections of the West Lake were understood as one integrated ecology to which human life and production was systemically inherent and aligned to the macrocosmic rotations of the seasons.

In its enquiry after the West Lake's eco-engineered aesthetics, my project places particular emphasis on two fields of artistic production: landscape painting which represented the West Lake in a number of canonized views, or by way of nature topics such as flower and season paintings, and, secondly, the design of gardens owned by painters in the wider surroundings of the West Lake, most notably Suzhou, and their mirroring of the ecological topoi of the West Lake.