

An Artistic Analysis of Guilin Karst Caves

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This article examines in detail the uniqueness and popularity of the Guilin caves. In the course of a qualitative, descriptive, and content analysis of the caves images, notes, and reviews, the main aspects of the caves' uniqueness are identified. It is found that there are different beautiful aspects of the Guilin caves. The caves give different aesthetic perceptions. The beauty of Guilin caves can be described by different artistic concepts. The significance of the Guilin cave art, the cave shapes, colours, and artistic cave concepts distinguish Guilin caves from other attractions in China.

Key words: *karst caves, Guilin, artificial lighting, art elements.*

Introduction

China ranks fourth among the most popular tourist countries (UNWTO Tourism Highlights, 2018). This high popularity is due to the rich cultural heritage and nature of the country. Cultural tourism and eco-tourism hold leading places in the tourism industry of China. China is a country with a history of more than one thousand years, therefore there are many monuments to various dynasties that ruled previously and places of pilgrimage for Buddhists and other religions with colossal sculptures and temples (Xu et al., 2018). The unique flora and fauna are even more of an attraction to tourists.

As the Chinese saying goes, "Guilin's mountain and water scenery is the best under heaven". As a well-known tourist spot, Guilin is not just famous for the beautiful mountains and rivers, but also for its various dreamlike caves. Mountains, having karst origin, form something resembling a "stone forest", which is replete with karst caves and grottoes. In the caves, one can see the whole set of karst formations: stalactites, stalagmites, stone flowers, and numerous rivers that flow between the mountains (Liang & Luo, 2019). All this creates an amazing panorama, captivating tourists. Visiting Guilin means that three things must be viewed: Guilin mountains, Li Jiang River, and the Guilin's karst caves.

As Chinese people say, "He who has never been to the Great Wall is not a true man", the same can be said for those who have not seen the world-famous stalactite karst caves in Guilin (Jinxi, 2005). Guilin caves are like beautiful masterpieces of art created by God. For millions of years, under the extraordinary workmanship of nature, the different features of the karst caves have been created. This includes the Reed Flute Cave (Lu Di Yan), the Seven Star Cave (Qixing Yan), the Crown Cave (Guan Yan), the Silver Cave (Yin Zi Yan), etc. These are very famous karst caves in Guilin, and each cave has its own uniqueness. Such masterpieces of nature attract visitors from all over the world.

The Guilin karst caves are similar to most karst caves, formed by the dissolution of limestone by groundwater (Knierim & Hays, 2019). These are called karst landform in geomorphology. Guilin is rich in mountains and rivers, and the mountain rocks are rich in calcareous components. Rainwater and groundwater have been eroding rocks for a long time, creating caves of different sizes. Due to the natural environment of the area, there are so many caves in Guilin. The degree of erosion varies, and the appearance and spatial form of different caves are not the same. In the authors' opinion, the beauty of caves is more mysterious and spectacular than that of the landscape. Therefore, the karst caves, the green mountains, rivers, and terraced fields are called the four scenic spots of Guilin and attract not only tourists, but also artists and photographers who want to capture their beauty (Qi, 2001). It seems that the karst caves have become a scenic symbol of Guilin and are an outstanding example of nature's art. Based on the popularity of Guilin, the purpose of this article is to determine the reasons for the uniqueness of Guilin caves.

Methods and Materials

The study uses qualitative and descriptive methods for working with images of Guilin caves. Images have been found using the Google search engine, Facebook, and Instagram through keywords #Guilincave, #Guilincaveart, #Guilin.

The authors have also used content analysis when working with 200 notes and reviews (about visiting the caves) on tourist websites <https://www.tripadvisor.com/> and <http://www.ctrip.com/> for the period from January 1, 2017, to October 1, 2019.

Results and Discussion

During the analysis, the authors have identified several key points that make Guilin caves unique and popular. First, the authors have noticed the significance of the appreciation of Guilin cave art. The Guilin Caves are not only a scenic tourist attraction, but also an art masterpiece of nature. Below are some tourists comments:

“These caves were the best I’ve ever seen!! The lighting inside on the stalactites and stalagmites were positioned so perfectly and made them all so colourful and interesting. Very well done indeed. Loved them.”, - Jan B from Warragul, Australia.

“It’s definitely the most beautiful limestone cave I’ve been to. Comfortable to walk through, and elderly friendly. The creative names given by the guides help deepen impressions of the shapes found in the caves as well. Great match of lighting and background sounds to create a comfortable ambience. Cave was a respite from the heat in the streets as well! Be sure to wear shoes with some grip as the floor tends to be slippery in some areas.”, - Amy l from Singapore.

These reviews prove that Guilin Karst Caves are a splendid natural artwork. The caves are of unique beauty due to their shapes, colours, and other art elements. The perception of visual information, the contemplation of natural art affects the thoughts, emotions, and mood of people. The Guilin Caves might be also considered as a three-dimensional natural artwork. Each stone and each column in the caves of Guilin are all carved by nature, with its own form of beauty. The caves' environment is evidence of what nature is capable of. The forms and charms of the caves created by nature can be applied to the creation of artworks such as painting, photography, sculpture, etc. The works of art can be enriched aesthetically, and thus, the aesthetic effect of the art might be enhanced as well.

Second, Guilin caves have thousands of different shapes and forms. Indeed, just like in the creation of artworks, shape is an essential element. The reason why the Guilin caves are both beautiful and fascinating is because of the numerous different landscapes. It is well known that different forms give different aesthetic effects. A talented artist can skilfully utilize such visual aesthetics and represent the landscape in the cave in different forms, giving people different visual effects and different aesthetic impressions. When visiting the cave, there is a kind of "crossing into the side of the mountain" effect. After all, the cave is an interconnected underground space. With different stone shapes and forms as decorations, the cave has become a natural art palace. Shape is the most basic element of art, and the same is true for caves. Shape is the most important element and component of the cave art landscape. Because Guilin's geological environment is relatively special, there are caves in almost every mountain. The size and shape of caves differ between the mountains, but the landscape in the cave is surprisingly similar (fig. 1). They all have stone forest, stalactites, stalagmites, rivers, etc. Stone forest, stalactites and stalagmites are the most basic landscape components. However, the reason why the Guilin caves are so well-known across the world is because the landscapes of the caves, stone forests, and stalactites and stalagmites have a beauty that cannot be compared with other cave landscapes.

Figure 1. Variety of cave shapes



At present, the Guilin caves include the Reed Flute Cave (Lu Di Yan), the Seven Star Cave (Qixing Yan), the Crown Cave (Guan Yan), the Silver Cave (Yin Zi Yan), etc. (fig. 2). After viewing the beautiful scenery, one can step into the cave and admire hidden but beautiful spot. Guilin caves can stimulate different visual senses, each different cave has its own beautiful forms. Among the many caves in Guilin, the most representative one is the Silver Cave (Yin Zi Yan). Because of its vast space, diverse stone forms and spectacular views, it is known as the most beautiful cave in Guilin. For this reason, the Silver Cave attracts tourists from all over the world. The stalactites of different lengths hang from the top of the cave and the walls of the cave. Under the illumination of the light and shadow, the stalactites are like the Milky Way. The silver ore stacked in the mountains give the cave its light and colour, therefore, this cave is named “the Silver Cave” (Tian, 2013).

Figure 2. View of the Reed Flute Cave (Lu Di Yan), the Seven Star Cave (Qixing Yan), the Crown Cave (Guan Yan), the Silver Cave (Yin Zi Yan) etc.



In the Silver Cave, in addition to the shining stalactite forests like the Milky Way, there are long silver corridors. These corridors contain stalactites that are formed by different geological periods and other amazing stone forms. While stepping into the cave from the entrance, one can witness that the cave wall is densely covered with limestones. Stones are embedded on the cave wall or ground, which feels like the bamboo shoots, or like crawling turtles. Some stones resemble a girl waiting for a lover, others look like an old prostrated cow, others give the impression of a thousand pillars of ancient trees. The stalactites may look like a curtain, a spear, or needle, be either convex or concave. The cave is like a piece of art that has been carefully carved and has a variety of shapes.

Third, mysterious and beautiful colours of Guilin caves. We live in the world full of colours, and world of art is unthinkable without colour. Colour gives life to the form, and the form can show different artistic impressions (Hao et al., 2016). Different colours represent different emotions and artistic tastes. There are light and shadow in Guilin caves along with different colours. The stone forests seem to be transformed into a mysterious underground elf, awaiting to be discovered. With all its colours, the cave has become a gorgeous artwork.

When people are admiring artworks, they are often attracted to the unique colours at first, and then focus on the form and meaning (Zhang et al., 2019). In the Guilin Caves, colour is also the most eye-catching element. Concerning the Silver Cave, the origin of its name is not just

because of the colour, but also because of the combination of both colour and form. In the caves of Guilin, the stones of different shapes are illuminated by different lights. Some of the cave walls are covered with the colour of deep blue sea, and it is like walking under water. Some stone pillars are covered with a layer of sunset light. Because of the different geology, the stones reflect different radiances and colours. Thanks to the mysterious and varied colours, the originally cold caves can be perceived by tourists more vividly and brightly (Bi & Guanzeng, 2000).

The beauty, colourfulness, and mystery of the Guilin Caves are in the integration of underground stalactites, stalagmites, stone forests, stone pillars, rivers etc. The caves have an original aesthetic sense, which is supplemented by the variety of lights and shadows. The colours are vividly displayed for the beauty of the cave's landscape, like the final element: sacred and indispensable.

The colours and the various forms in the caves of Guilin are realized under the action of lights. Without illumination, Guilin caves would be just strangely shaped voids in the ground. However, in fact, the colour of the Guilin cave is created naturally, and the artificial lighting only assists the process. As the caves are formed in different periods, they have different calcareous components in the soil and thus reflect the light differently. Throughout the cave, it might appear as if a red cloud like a fire in the top of a cave. There is a mysterious turquoise swaying on the dark river and the cave wall. There are also autumn-like golden draperies over stones and stalagmites. One might see the fruitful harvest in the field, more sparkling silver and white swaying on the stalactites hanging everywhere. In the caves of Guilin, one can also enjoy a variety of transitional colours, or mixed colours, such as blue-violet, magenta, bright white, etc. It is advised to enjoy the long and deep cave gallery, the light and shadow, and the flickering and mysterious colours which make the Guilin Caves a natural artwork.

The fourth reason of uniqueness is the beauty of the artistic conception of Guilin caves. Famous French sculptor Auguste Rodin said that "Beauty is everywhere. It is not that it is lacking to our eyes, but our eyes that fail to perceive it" (Ryan, 2019), to which the authors of this article agree. The Guilin Caves need to be discovered and understood. Nature has given Guilin caves a variety of stone shapes and forms as well as mysterious and gorgeous colours. Appreciation of beauty can be divided into three levels. One is aesthetic feeling, the second is aesthetic association, and the third is aesthetic conception. The three levels are progressive, and the beauty of artistic conception can be referred to as the highest state of beauty (Shen & Zhou, 2011). It is a combination of form, light, water, and shadows that creates an amazing and fascinating view of the cave (for example, a resemblance of a clear, blue sky) (fig. 3). Sometimes, like a mirage, the entire cave is like a 3D magical art museum built with modern technology.

Figure 3. The combination of form, light, water, shadows, creating a mysterious view of the cave.



After analysing the images of the caves, the authors have come to the conclusion that sometimes Guilin caves resemble a pastoral painting: a slowly flowing river with its dark shores and shadowy trees of different size on both sides of the river. This pastoral painting is quiet and rich. However, sometimes, it is like a landscape painting: there are strange rock formations, peak cliffs, waterfalls, trees of various shapes that grow on the hills, and clear rivers flowing between the valleys. The Guilin Caves can also sometimes resemble a figure painting: chivalrous swordsmen, farmers, etc. It is like walking through every corner of the world and touching different eras, different characters.

The fusion of all these factors makes Guilin Caves unique. Basically, one can find different beautiful aspects of the Guilin Caves. Caves give different aesthetic conceptions, i.e. of quietness or movement, of animals or humans, of males or females, etc.

Conclusion

The Guilin Caves are natural masterpieces that are valuable objects of art and culture. The nature and society are expressed in the Guilin Caves in an artistic way. The Guilin Caves have a strong visual aesthetic impact on visitors.

The beauty of art lies in the shape, colour, and artistic conception. The caves of Guilin are an artwork created by nature. The caves have a variety of stone forms and shapes, along with mysterious and splendid lights and shadows. The Guilin Caves contain many artistic



conceptions, like a separate fairy tale world, full of various aesthetics. The caves are not only a marvellous tourist destination, but also a place for art creation. The authors believe that the Guilin landscape is one of the best in the world, the beauty of which needs to be discovered and felt with one's eyes and mind.

Acknowledgment

This article might be a basis for the capacity building project for young and middle-aged teachers in Guangxi. **Project title:** The application of artificial lighting as the unique spatial language in Guilin karst caves. **Project number:** 2018KY0235



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