

The Influence of Contemporary Figurative Painting in China (1989-2005): A Case Study of Contemporary Figurative Paintings by 5 influential artists

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Abstract

The research explored and analysed the art expressions based on satire, meddling, and overall cynicism about the changing systems of the economy due to the effect of globalization in China. This paper created a thematic division and comparative analysis of the selected paintings by the five artists in contemporary China between the years 1989 to 2005 using qualitative case study method. The economic dynamism and effect of globalization were effective in the mainstream cultural and social change. The study employed the theory of semiotics to understand symbolic representation, the use of colours, forms, and composition, and changing composition techniques in the development process of Chinese contemporary figurative paintings. This way, the study created a significant position in analysing the globalization effect on cultural expression through figurative Chinese art using selected case studies of five influential artists, Yue Minjun, Fang Lijun, Zeng Fanzhi, Wang Guangyi, and Zhang Xiaogang.

1. Introduction

The micro-level development and moulding of the perception of society towards change can be a direct result of artistic expression towards that change. It is necessary to understand the forces behind the changing narrative, especially in the context of image composition, form, and symbolism in the art history of Chinese contemporary figurative painting between 1989 and 2005 due to the influence of globalization. Urbaite (2024) asserts that globalization has aided in fostering the levels of interconnectivity, which allows cultures to share their beliefs, practices, and traditions across borders, which ultimately increases cultural awareness on global levels. This shows that the role of globalization in elevating cultural awareness on inter and intra-national levels to share traditions, beliefs, and practices leads to the adaptation of these traits to create a collective consciousness. Considering the overview, this paper aims to analyse the role of globalization and modernity on the individual and collective cultural identity in contemporary China through the case study of figurative paintings by five selected artists. The paper uses the paintings by Yue Minjun, Fang Lijun, Zeng Fanzhi, Wang Guangyi, and Zhang Xiaogang. Therefore, the primary objective of this paper is to find the meaning, emotions, and socio-political and

cultural interlinking of the symbols of artworks produced by painters such as Yue Minjun, Fang Lijun, Zeng Fanzhi, Wang Guangyi, and Zhang Xiaogang.

1.1 Background of the research

The effect of globalization can be seen in all spheres of life, including culture, art, media, social, cultural, political, and ways of self-expression. Globalization, on the one hand, influenced cultural identity with a push for interconnectivity between cultures with concerns about probable erosion of the local cultures due to the dominance and overshadowing by the western cultures, sometimes potential replacement of the cultural traditions (Urbaite, 2024). Here, the threat of dominance of the Western cultural influence over the local identity directly dependent on the cultural essence, which has been developing for thousands of years, needs to be reviewed as a result of globalisation. In this context, Assmann (2010) asserts that the Western culture works as a dominant entity which imposes cultural influence on the media, consumer practices, and values of marginalized or small cultures along with local traditions. This shows that the impact of globalization can be seen proliferating in the channels of media such as art, visual media, technological innovations, and so on. The traditional ways of reflecting the essence of cultural understanding, such as the expression of daily activities using specific paints to reflect the identities that are connected with nature can get violated by using paints which are available at much lower prices with less time. This could directly infiltrate the modern and globalized traits into the existing core cultural behavior. On the contrary, Hiswara et al. (2023) demonstrate that in some instances, media and technology serve as new tools for the communities to share, celebrate, and document their cultural heritage, resulting in wider access to the media. However, this source also points out limitations by providing the context of only a few cases, otherwise, the threat of globalization over the preservation of local culture and communities needs to be reviewed. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the background of the globalization effects on Chinese art and culture during the period of 1989 to 2005.

Now, the impact of globalization and new market reforms based on the economic development of the country can be derogatory to the sustenance of culture and human value in China. From 1989 to 1999, there was a prevalence of a market-oriented economy in which Gross Domestic Product was the parameter of the demographic division of China, where about ten million peasants migrated to the town and urban areas in search of jobs (Zhou, 2020). This resulted in the artistic expression based on satire and mockery called cynicism to give an effect of fakeness as a method of reappearance, imitation, and duplication (Zhou, 2020). Themes such as cultural escapism and political sarcasm became crucial with more commercial success and opportunities that change focus from the persona and experiences to the transcendental awareness to meddling with reality (Zhou, 2020). This indicates that the effect of globalization on the market in China not only affected the financial arena of the Chinese market but also the ways of subsistence, demographic division, and others. This resulted in the segregated effect on artistic expression, which was previously focused on the personal issues and evaluations that changed to the challenge of the altering political, economic, and social scenario in China due to globalisation. The themes of political sarcasm and cultural escapism as a mode of expression for the cynical expressionism in the artistic dwelling in the changing narrative in the Chinese context. Therefore, the globalization entering the Chinese market created a window to dynamically explore the artistic expression amongst the Chinese artists.

1.2 Significance of the study

The importance of this research lies in the exploration and analysis of the art expressions based on satire, meddling, and overall cynicism about the changing systems of the economy due to the effect of globalisation in China. This paper creates a thematic division and comparative analysis of the selected paintings by the five artists in contemporary China between the years 1989 to 2005, where the economic dynamism and effect of globalization were effective in the mainstream cultural and social change. The study employs the theory of semiotics to understand symbolic representation, the use of colours, forms, and composition, and changing composition techniques in the development process of Chinese contemporary figurative paintings. This way, the study creates a significant position in analysing the globalization effect on cultural expression through figurative Chinese art using selected case studies of five influential artists, Yue Minjun, Fang Lijun, Zeng Fanzhi, Wang Guangyi, and Zhang Xiaogang.

1.3 Research Objectives

- a. To study the basic visual principles and composition techniques that define the stylistic characteristics of Chinese contemporary figure paintings from 1989 to 2005.
- b. To explore the role of symbolic representation in shaping visual narratives and reflecting the sociocultural dynamics within Chinese contemporary figurative paintings.
- c. To summarize the interaction among composition, form, and symbolism in the development process of Chinese contemporary figurative paintings.

1.4 Research Questions

- What are the basic visual principles and composition techniques that define the stylistic characteristics of Chinese contemporary figurative paintings from 1989 to 2005?
- In Chinese contemporary figurative paintings, how does symbolic representation shape visual narratives and reflect sociocultural and ideological themes?
- How do the composition of images, form, and symbolism interact with each other and influence the evolution of Chinese contemporary figurative paintings from 1989 to 2005?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Analysing the basic visual principles and composition techniques that define the stylistic characteristics of Chinese contemporary figure paintings from 1989 to 2005

The basic visual principles and composition techniques that define the stylistic characteristics of Chinese contemporary figure paintings during the period of globalization were directly concentrated in the revival of old art forms of national identity to merge it with the change. Jiwu (2023) argues that the avant-garde art is an independent aesthetic category which originated during the social transition towards modernity with exceptional changes in the methods of representation, ecology of artists, and visual institution. Following this, this change in art form showcased the visual defiance which changed the perspective and visual strategies with a realisation of the secularisation of the images using hierarchical order, appropriation, and degradation (Jiwu, 2023). This reflects that there was an evident shift in the way figurative art used to be presented for the audience after the globalization in contemporary China in terms of strategic defiance, contention, and expression for the secularisation of the image that rejects the hierarchical positioning in the social order. Following this, during the period of 1990s, the contemporary artist named Li Luming appropriates hand gesture and posture of Buddha with a bright pink mobile phone with painted nails in vivid nail polish where the phone symbolises the technological progress, symbol of internet communication era, and the purple coloured nails represented the combination of femininity and fashion which directs towards the material consumption (Xu, 2024). In this period, the Chinese artists adopted radical attitude towards rejecting and breaking the traditional culture with a contrasting return back to reusing traditional artworks and symbols (Xu, 2024). This shows the maintenance of the national characteristics in the changing perception towards creation of artworks which incorporated the modern elements due to influence of the changing technological narrative, economic development, and overall impact of the globalization on China's cultural landscape. Thus, the contemporary figurative paintings in China reflected the combination of the traditional and modern elements which had a direct impact of globalised perspective towards change in symbolism, visual representation, and introduction to the stylistic composition.

2.2 Understanding the role of symbolic representation in shaping visual narratives and reflecting the sociocultural dynamics within Chinese contemporary figurative paintings

The role of symbolic representation in Chinese contemporary figurative paintings is crucial as it implies an identity of China as a country through the use of colours, such as red, symbols such as the Great Wall, and so on. Zhang et al. (2024) divide the Chinese cultural symbols in Confucian philosophy, calligraphy, the Forbidden City, Peking Opera, and the Great Wall in the international language models. This indicates that Chinese culture is disseminated to the international sphere mainly through these five cultural symbols mentioned above through different media channels such as paintings, sculptures, written, and technological media. Following this, Wang (2024) asserts that the Chinese cultural heritage contains motifs and images such as rivers and mountains, which are intertwined with the cultural, spiritual, historical, and national identity nurtured by the ancient civilisation. Moreover, the mountains and rivers not only symbolise the expanded form of nature but also create a sense of patriotism and deeply rooted identity in the psyche of the nation from a local area, small village, or a border nation with nondetachable devotion from the country (Wang, 2024). According to this, the symbolic representation of the Chinese motifs, such as mountains and rivers, not only reflects the grandeur of the said symbols but also their cultural and social importance by engaging the emotions of the people in China. These emotions are driven by strong feelings of patriotism irrespective of whether people come from a small village or a border nation. These emotions hold the nationals together forming a symbolic significance to the motifs and signs used in the scriptures of Chinese civilisation. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate the use of these symbols in various compositions, art forms, and so on that might reflect the spread of patriotism.

2.3 Summarizing the interaction among composition, form, and symbolism in the development process of Chinese contemporary figurative paintings

The interaction among the form, composition, and symbolism in the development process of Chinese contemporary figurative paintings is significant to understanding the development process in Chinese figurative painting. Miao and Ling-Ling (2015) assert that the ancient Chinese sculpture focuses emphasis on “spiritual similitude” over physical resemblance and anatomical precision which is evident. For example dynasties in China shifted from the realistic human figures to the favourisation towards stylistic images with meagre attention towards the facial features (Sulemana et al., 2025). This can be seen in the Han figures which lacked unique facial features which made them look identical (Sulemana et al., 2025). This shows that the development of Chinese art forms and symbols shifted its focus from intricately incorporating human features to the stylistic representation of decorative elements such as clothes and the style associated with them. This might have led to the monotonous look on the faces of Chinese art forms with the same facial features lacking uniqueness, such as smile lines, shape of eyes, lips, ears, and so on. Moreover, ancient Chinese art was influenced by the ideals of Confucian ideology and stressed the spiritual separation from the body, which restricted the representation of nudity in its art, which was viewed as pornographic, unclean, and unsuitable for the art (Kohut, 1993). This nudity started gaining acceptance in Chinese art in the early to mid-20th century with the influence of Western culture (Sulemana et al., 2025). This indicates that nudity was not allowed in the traditional Confucian philosophy where nudity in the art form is treated as something unclean and unsanitary, which was later introduced in the 20th century due to the interaction with Western culture. Additionally, the composition of ancient Chinese art was based on the highest degree of craftsmanship, and decorative patterns in the religious and mausoleum sculptures in temples and caves, for example, the Northern Wei open-air sitting Buddha (Sulemana et al., 2025). Accordingly, the craftsmanship and symbols of ancient Chinese art were based on the decorative capacity and visible intricate details in religious contexts in the caves and temples. Therefore, the interaction between cultures and the slow development of art led to the adoption of distinct features such as the incorporation of nudity and others in Chinese contemporary figurative art from ancient times.

The literature review researched the existing knowledge about the symbolic importance of the artworks produced in contemporary China. It searched the scholarly work on the response of artists and expressions to understand the symbolism in the backdrop of globalisation and relative social changes. This aids in highlighting the research gap in understanding the importance of this research that studies the case studies of the figurative paintings by Yue Minjun, Fang Lijun, Zeng Fanzhi, Wang Guangyi, and Zhang Xiaogang. The existing research does not contain detailed information about the comparative analysis of the Chinese comparative art form of the selected painters, which exemplifies the cruciality of the present research.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

2.4.1 Semiotics theory

The semiotic theory gives scope to explore the cultural, social, political, and other meanings behind the symbols, such as the use of colours, visual elements, and so on. This theory is specifically useful for the present research paper due to the importance of using it for the analysis of symbols, colour, signs, and motifs used in the selected paintings by Yue Minjun, Fang Lijun, Zeng Fanzhi, Wang Guangyi, and Zhang Xiaogang. The theory of semiology or semiotics was initiated by Ferdinand de Saussure, which is understood as the “science of signs” which releases narrative and produces cultural appearance for the interpretation of a sign (Bouzida, 2014, p.1001). This shows that the semiotics theory can aid in the interpretation of signs in art forms, images, and others with an intricate textual analysis and probable cultural contexts. In this study, semiotics can be useful for studying the colour, composition, textures, and use of symbols for the cultural, social, economic, and other interpretations of selected case studies of the five painters. Here, the sign can have two possible ways of interpretation one is denotation, which is dependent on the photographic image, and connotation is about intricate consideration of the abstract (Barthes, 1968, p.2.). The approach given by Barthes can be applicable to media domains such as films, arts, caricatures, cinemas, advertisements, and so on, using connotation for multiple possible interpretations (Bouzida, 2014). This proves the importance of the theory of semiotics in the research on the textual analysis of art forms, specifically in the domain of media. Moreover, Barthes situated a sign of function as a carrier of importance as well as a context that leads to a route between a signified and a signifier (Bouzida, 2014). According to this, signs in the textual image play a role as carriers of some context and signifier, which serves as a path for both receiving the importance and meaning of the sign. Moreover, Chandler (2022, p.69) asserts that cultural semiotics present a cultural and textual analysis of a sign, while general semiotics craves a “philosophical stance’ for reality and representation of the signs. This shows that the distinctive properties offered by the semiotics theory lead to the adoption of the probable meaning behind the signs, such as philosophical stance and cultural importance. This fits in the present research scenario where the core objective of this study lies in the study of composition, colours, structure, and other aspects of the selected paintings of Yue Minjun, Fang Lijun, Zeng Fanzhi, Wang Guangyi, and Zhang Xiaogang in the contemporary Chinese figurative

paintings. On the whole, the semiotics analysis is useful for studying the basic visual principles and composition techniques that define the stylistic characteristics of Chinese contemporary figure paintings from 1989 to 2005.

3. Methodology

The methodology of this paper employs the case study method of qualitative analysis to analyse the paintings of painters such as Yue Minjun, Fang Lijun, Zeng Fanzhi, Wang Guangyi, and Zhang Xiaogang to interrogate the usage of symbols, composition techniques, and others. Hammarberg et al. (2016) states that the qualitative method targets the conditions, understandings, and perspectives, or events from the personal perspective and interrogates a virtual document or image. This shows that the qualitative methods are useful in understanding the perspectives, events, and conditions for the narratives and interrogation of a virtual image or a document. This can be applicable to the selected images of five painters ue Minjun, Fang Lijun, Zeng Fanzhi, Wang Guangyi, and Zhang Xiaogang. The case study method in particular provides a wholesome analysis and description of a unique phenomenon, program, project with several “perspectives of the complexity” (Starman, 2013, p.32). Here, the perspectives of complexity might provide extensive themes for the collected data from the art works of selected painters in contemporary Chinese landscape. Moreover, a secondary qualitative method is a crucial for knowledge creation as it rebuilds the present data that provides scope for analysis (Cheong et al., 2023). A case study approach provides an extensive analysis of the selected case from a differentiated narratives of complexity and uniqueness (Starman, 2013). Furthermore, Priya (2021, p.100) argues that the case study method is a method which is more than a method of data collection and distributes a “research strategy” or structure for interrogating a social factor. According to this, the case study method which provides a research strategy is crucial in analysing the social factor behind the selected art work. A case study leads to the descriptive analysis when a researcher elaborates with minute details in the real- world context so that a thorough and deep analysis will follow (Priya, 2021, p.102). This shows that the minute details such as use of colours, structures, and composition styles, their similarities and differences in the patterns for the deep analysis.

This paper is collected data from the famous artworks of five painters Yue Minjun, Fang Lijun, Zeng Fanzhi, Wang Guangyi, and Zhang Xiaogang in contemporary figurative paintings. Noah’s Ark (2006) and Dog-Spring Culture (2009) by Yue Minjun, Pencil drawing No. 2 (1988) by Fang Lijun, Fang Lijun "Series of Smiling Faces" (1996) are used for the first two painters. Following this, Zeng Fanzhi’s Mask Series No. 9, 1994 and "The Last Supper" (2001), Wang Guangyi "Great Criticism - Coca-Cola" (1992), "Great Criticism - Marlboro" (1993) are used for the art works of Zeng Fanzhi and Wang Guangyi. Finally, Zhang Xiaogang "Bloodline: Big Family No. 1" (1995) and "Bloodline: Big Family No. 3" (1996) are employed for identifying themes and discussions. Therefore, the collected data is discussed using thematic distribution based on the colours, visual principles, composition techniques, symbolism, and so on.

4. Analysis and Findings

4.1 Introduction

The findings of the present research paper incorporates the thematic representation of the selected paintings by the five painters Yue Minjun, Fang Lijun, Zeng Fanzhi, Wang Guangyi, and Zhang Xiaogang in contemporary figurative paintings in China. The purpose of this chapter to aid in the discussion of the found themes of colours, visual principles, composition techniques, symbolism, and so on with the qualitative research and theoretical framework of the semiotics. The selected artworks are Noah’s Ark (2006) and Dog-Spring Culture (2009) by Yue Minjun, Pencil drawing No. 2 (1988) by Fang Lijun, Fang Lijun "Series of Smiling Faces" (1996) are used for the first two painters. Following this, Zeng Fanzhi’s Mask Series No. 9, 1994 and "The Last Supper" (2001), Wang Guangyi "Great Criticism - Coca-Cola" (1992), "Great Criticism - Marlboro" (1993) are used for the art works of Zeng Fanzhi and Wang Guangyi. Finally, Zhang Xiaogang "Bloodline: Big Family No. 1" (1995) and "Bloodline: Big Family No. 3" (1996) are employed for identifying themes and discussions. This will aid in discussion of the research questions:

- a. What are the basic visual principles and composition techniques that define the stylistic characteristics of Chinese contemporary figurative paintings from 1989 to 2005?
- b. In Chinese contemporary figurative paintings, how does symbolic representation shape visual narratives and reflect sociocultural and ideological themes?
- c. How do the composition of images, form, and symbolism interact with each other and influence the evolution of Chinese contemporary figurative paintings from 1989 to 2005?

4.2 Presentation of Data

Theme	Description of the theme	Analysis of art works by Yue Minjun, Fang Lijun, Zeng
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		Fanzhi, Wang Guangyi, and Zhang Xiaogang
Visual principles and composition techniques	This theme provides an extensive account of the composition techniques and visual forms such as use of colours, lines, patterns, and so on. This will lead to the understanding of the basic visual principles and composition techniques that define the stylistic characteristics of Chinese contemporary figurative paintings from 1989 to 2005	<i>Noah's Ark</i> (2006) and <i>Dog-Spring Culture</i> (2009) by Yue Minjun present vibrant use of colours such as red, blue, and shades of white. These paintings have similar face structures which look like identical clones of Chinese faces. The first painting has people with similar clothes laughing, and another has objects such as an Audi car, dinosaurs and two people dancing around, naked with a lizard in the corner (Images 1 and 2). Following this, Fang Lijun Pencil drawing No. 2 (1988) has a family with three balds, which might be male and one woman a family with white and black colours. "Series of Smiling Faces," (1996) by the same painter has similar-looking faces and vibrant colours such as purple, green, grey, and blue. The faces look melted and questionably smiling. Now, Zeng Fanzhi Mask Series and The Last Supper have elements of red ties and faces with masks with red food all over the table (Figures 5 and 6). Now, Wang Guangyi, Great Criticism - Coca-Cola and "Great Criticism - Marlboro has rebellious use of colours, such as red, and yellow, against Coca-Cola and Marlboro. Finally, Zhang Xiaogang's "Bloodline: Big Family No. 1" and "Bloodline: Big Family No. 3" have families with a red tie on a little girl and a red band on a green uniform on a boy (Refer to images 9 and 10).
Symbolic representation	This theme elaborates on the symbolic meaning behind the presentation of the artwork and emotional, cultural, and social narrative. This aids in exploring the symbolic representation shape visual narratives and reflect sociocultural and ideological themes	The Images by Yue Minjun and Fang Lijun have symbols of smiling faces in the given situations on the island, at sea, in a family condition, and in an unknown place. <i>Dog-Spring Culture</i> (2009) by Yue Minjun has naked figures enjoying their lives. The paintings of Zeng Fanzhi have masks and red colours as symbols that have cultural and national pride and significance. This can be applicable to the paintings of Wnag Guangyi, which have symbols such as bright red

		colours, a brush, a pen, and a book as a signifier of revolution. Lastly, the paintings by Zhang have a name bloodline tag with a red tie and a shoulder cap on the hand with a military suit.
Images, form, and symbolism	This theme explores the shapes, forms, and symbols in the artworks to understand the interaction with each other and influence the evolution of Chinese contemporary figurative paintings.	The images, forms and symbols have patterns of similarity such as the use of bright red colours and patterns with monotonous face structures in China with inherent meanings of revolution, effects of globalisation, and so on. The painting by Zeng Fanzhi Mask Series No. 9, 1994, has a direct reference to how a white mask of prevention is on due to the effect of globalisation in the Chinese market, which is replicated by using a suit (Refer to Image 5). The great Criticism images by Wang have a clear identification of forms with the aggressive and direct revolution against the globalisation impact. On the other hand, paintings by Zhang Xiaogang reflect the subtle level of opposition by looking straight into the eyes of spectators with a keyword bloodline.

5. Discussion

5.1 Key Findings and interpretations of findings

5.1.1 Research Question 1: What are the basic visual principles and composition techniques that define the stylistic characteristics of Chinese contemporary figurative paintings from 1989 to 2005?

Noah’s Ark (2006) and Dog-Spring Culture (2009) by Yue Minjun present vibrant use of colors such as red, blue, and shades of white. These paintings have similar face structures which look like identical clones of Chinese faces. The first painting has people with similar clothes laughing, and another has objects such as an Audi car, dinosaurs and two people dancing around, naked with a lizard in the corner (Images 1 and 2). During the period of 1990s, the contemporary artist named Li Luming appropriates hand gesture and posture of Buddha with a bright pink mobile phone with painted nails in vivid nail polish where the phone symbolizes the technological progress, symbol of internet communication era, and the purple colored nails represented the combination of femininity and fashion which directs towards the material consumption (Xu, 2024). In this period, the Chinese artists adopted radical attitude towards rejecting and breaking the traditional culture with a contrasting return back to reusing traditional artworks and symbols (Xu, 2024). Following this, Fang Lijun Pencil drawing No. 2 (1988) has a family with three balds, which might be male and one woman a family with white and black colours. This shows the use of traditional symbols and use of colours "Series of Smiling Faces," (1996) by the same painter has similar-looking faces and vibrant colours such as purple, green, grey, and blue. The faces look melted and questionably smiling.

Now, Zeng Fanzhi Mask Series and The Last Supper have elements of red ties and faces with masks with red food all over the table (Figures 5 and 6). Now, Wang Guangyi, Great Criticism - Coca-Cola and "Great Criticism - Marlboro has rebellious use of colours, such as red, and yellow, against Coca-Cola and Marlboro. Finally, Zhang Xiaogang's "Bloodline: Big Family No. 1" and "Bloodline: Big Family No. 3" have families with a red tie on a little girl and a red band on a green uniform on a boy (Refer to images 9 and 10). The change in art form showcased the visual defiance which changed the perspective and visual strategies with a realisation of the

secularisation of the images using hierarchical order, appropriation, and degradation (Jiwu, 2023). This reflects that there was an evident shift in the way figurative art used to be presented for the audience after the globalization in contemporary China in terms of strategic defiance, contention, and expression for the secularisation of the image that rejects the hierarchical positioning in the social order.

5.1.2 Research Question 2: In Chinese contemporary figurative paintings, how does symbolic representation shape visual narratives and reflect sociocultural and ideological themes?

The paintings of Zeng Fanzhi have masks and red colours as symbols that have cultural and national pride and significance. Wang (2024) asserts that the Chinese cultural heritage contains motifs and images such as rivers and mountains, which are intertwined with the cultural, spiritual, historical, and national identity nurtured by the ancient civilisation. The Images by Yue Minjun and Fang Lijun have symbols of smiling faces in the given situations on the island, at sea, in a family condition, and in an unknown place. Moreover, ancient Chinese art was influenced by the ideals of Confucian ideology and stressed the spiritual separation from the body, which restricted the representation of nudity in its art, which was viewed as pornographic, unclean, and unsuitable for the art (Kohut, 1993). This nudity started gaining acceptance in Chinese art in the early to mid-20th century with the influence of Western culture (Sulemana et al., 2025). This indicates that nudity was not allowed in the traditional Confucian philosophy where nudity in the art form is treated as something unclean and unsanitary, which was later introduced in the 20th century due to the interaction with Western culture. This can be seen in the Dog-Spring Culture (2009) by Yue Minjun has naked figures enjoying their lives. Moreover, the mountains are rivers not only symbolise the expanded form of nature but also create a sense of patriotism and deeply rooted identity in the psyche of the nation from a local area, small village, or a border nation with nondetachable devotion from the country (Wang, 2024). According to this, the symbolic representation of the Chinese motifs, such as mountains and rivers, not only reflects the grandeur of the said symbols but also their cultural and social importance by engaging the emotions of the people in China. This can be applicable to the paintings of Wang Guangyi, which have symbols such as bright red colours, a brush, a pen, and a book as a signifier of revolution. Lastly, the paintings by Zhang have a name bloodline tag with a red tie and a shoulder cap on the hand with a military suit.

5.1.3 Research Question 3: How do the composition of images, form, and symbolism interact with each other and influence the evolution of Chinese contemporary figurative paintings from 1989 to 2005?

The images, forms and symbols have patterns of similarity such as the use of bright red colours and patterns with monotonous face structures in China with inherent meanings of revolution, effects of globalization, and so on. Miao and Ling-Ling (2015) assert that the ancient Chinese sculpture focuses emphasis on “spiritual similitude” over physical resemblance and anatomical precision which is evident. For example dynasties in China shifted from the realistic human figures to the favourisation towards stylistic images with meagre attention towards the facial features (Sulemana et al., 2025). This can be seen in the Han figures which lacked unique facial features which made them look identical (Sulemana et al., 2025). This shows that the development of Chinese art forms and symbols shifted its focus from intricately incorporating human features to the stylistic representation of decorative elements such as clothes and the style associated with them. This might have led to the monotonous look on the faces of Chinese art forms with the same facial features lacking uniqueness, such as smile lines, shape of eyes, lips, ears, and so on. The painting by Zeng Fanzhi Mask Series No. 9, 1994, has a direct reference to how a white mask of prevention is on due to the effect of globalization in the Chinese market, which is replicated by using a suit (Refer to Image 5). The change in art form showcased the visual defiance which changed the perspective and visual strategies with a realisation of the secularisation of the images using hierarchical order, appropriation, and degradation (Jiwu, 2023). This reflects that there was an evident shift in the way figurative art used to be presented for the audience after the globalisation in contemporary China in terms of strategic defiance, contention, and expression for the secularisation of the image that rejects the hierarchical positioning in the social order. This can be seen in the great Criticism images by Wang have a clear identification of forms with the aggressive and direct revolution against the globalization impact. On the other hand, paintings by Zhang Xiaogang reflect the subtle level of opposition by looking straight into the eyes of spectators with a keyword bloodline.

5.1.4 Key Findings

In order to understand the basic visual principles and composition techniques that define the stylistic characteristics of Chinese contemporary figurative paintings from 1989 to 2005, this research examined the figurative paintings of Yue Minjun, Fang Lijun, Zeng Fanzhi, Wang Guangyi, and Zhang Xiaogang. Zeng Fanzhi

Mask Series and The Last Supper have elements of red ties and faces with masks with red food all over the table (Figures 5 and 6). Now, Wang Guangyi, Great Criticism - Coca-Cola and "Great Criticism - Marlboro has rebellious use of colours, such as red, and yellow, against Coca-Cola and Marlboro. Finally, Zhang Xiaogang's "Bloodline: Big Family No. 1" and "Bloodline: Big Family No. 3" have families with a red tie on a little girl and a red band on a green uniform on a boy (Refer to images 9 and 10). The key findings present that there was an evident shift in the way figurative art used to be presented to the audience after the globalization in contemporary China in terms of strategic defiance, contention, and expression for the secularisation of the image that rejects the hierarchical positioning in the social order. Moreover, the symbolic representation shapes visual narratives and reflects sociocultural and ideological themes in Chinese contemporary figurative paintings. The paintings of Zeng Fanzhi have masks and red colours as symbols that have cultural and national pride and significance. The symbolic representation of the Chinese motifs, such as mountains and rivers, not only reflects the grandeur of the said symbols but also their cultural and social importance by engaging the emotions of the people in China. This can be applicable to the paintings of Wang Guangyi, which have symbols such as bright red colours, a brush, a pen, and a book as a signifier of revolution.

Lastly, the paintings by Zhang have a name bloodline tag with a red tie and a shoulder cap on the hand with a military suit. Additionally, the composition of images, form, and symbolism interact with each other and influence the evolution of Chinese contemporary figurative paintings from 1989 to 2005. This can be seen in the evident shift in the way figurative art used to be presented to the audience after the globalization in contemporary China in terms of strategic defiance, contention, and expression for the secularisation of the image that rejects the hierarchical positioning in the social order. This can be seen in the great Criticism images by Wang have a clear identification of forms with the aggressive and direct revolution against the globalization impact. On the other hand, paintings by Zhang Xiaogang reflect the subtle level of opposition by looking straight into the eyes of spectators with a keyword bloodline.

5.2 Interpretation of Findings

The interpretation and the significance of this study is in exploring the role of globalization and modernity on the individual and collective cultural identity in contemporary China through the case study of figurative paintings by five selected artists. The findings when collaborated with the existing theories of semiotics and literature suggest a supporting stance to the hypothesis of the research questions. The findings supports the role of symbolic representation in shaping visual narratives and reflecting the sociocultural dynamics of changing effects of globalization on the within Chinese contemporary figurative paintings.

5.3 Summary

The main summary of this chapter indicates the exhibition of the interaction among composition, form, and symbolism in the development process of Chinese contemporary figurative paintings such as showcasing semi-nudes smiling paintings in the work of Yue Minjun as an effect of globalization and western art form adoption in 20th century. On the whole, the elements such as use of bright red colours and monotonous face structures indicates the retaining of the traditional cultural significance of Chinese figurative paintings.

6. Conclusion

This section of the paper incorporates the concluding remarks on the image composition, form, and symbolism on the backdrop of globalization and social and political transition through the artworks of selected artists. The selected artworks were Noah's Ark (2006) and Dog-Spring Culture (2009) by Yue Minjun, Pencil drawing No. 2 (1988) by Fang Lijun, Fang Lijun "Series of Smiling Faces" (1996) are used for the first two painters. Following this, Zeng Fanzhi's Mask Series No. 9, 1994 and "The Last Supper" (2001), Wang Guangyi "Great Criticism - Coca-Cola" (1992), "Great Criticism - Marlboro" (1993) are used for the art works of Zeng Fanzhi and Wang Guangyi. Finally, Zhang Xiaogang "Bloodline: Big Family No. 1" (1995) and "Bloodline: Big Family No. 3" (1996) are employed for identifying themes and discussions. The findings when collaborated with the existing theories of semiotics and literature suggest a supporting stance to the hypothesis of the research questions. The findings supports the role of symbolic representation in shaping visual narratives and reflecting the sociocultural dynamics of changing effects of globalization on the within Chinese contemporary figurative paintings. This section summarises the meaning, emotions, and socio-political and cultural interlinking of the symbols of artworks produced by painters. This includes the future scope of the research topic which lies in the particular focus of the research direction about studying contemporary Chinese figurative paintings with focus on the theme of globalization and studying the reception of spectators and their adoption. On the whole, the study creates a significant position in analysing the globalization effect on cultural expression through figurative Chinese art using selected case studies of five influential artists, Yue Minjun, Fang Lijun, Zeng Fanzhi, Wang Guangyi, and Zhang Xiaogang.

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Conflict of Interest

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of the paper.

Author Contribution

study conception and design: Shuwen Zhang, Sharmiza Abu Hassan, Liza Marziana Mohammad Noh; **data collection:** Shuwen Zhang; **analysis and interpretation of results:** Shuwen Zhang, Sharmiza Abu Hassan; **draft manuscript preparation:** Shuwen Zhang, Sharmiza Abu Hassan, Liza Marziana Binti Mohammad Noh. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Appendix A: An Example



Image 1: Noah's Ark (2006) by Yue Minjun(Meyer, 2024)
<https://artincontext.org/yue-minjun/>



Image 2: Dog-Spring Culture (2009) by Yue Minjun



Image 3: Pencil drawing No. 2 (1988) by Fang Lijun (*Pencil drawing No. 2, 1988 by Fang Lijun., 2025*)
<https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/327.1993/>



Image 4: Fang Lijun "Series of Smiling Faces" (1996) (*Fang Lijun Biography | Artworks | Cynical Realism | Interview Video.*, 2017) <https://alchetron.com/Fang-Lijun>

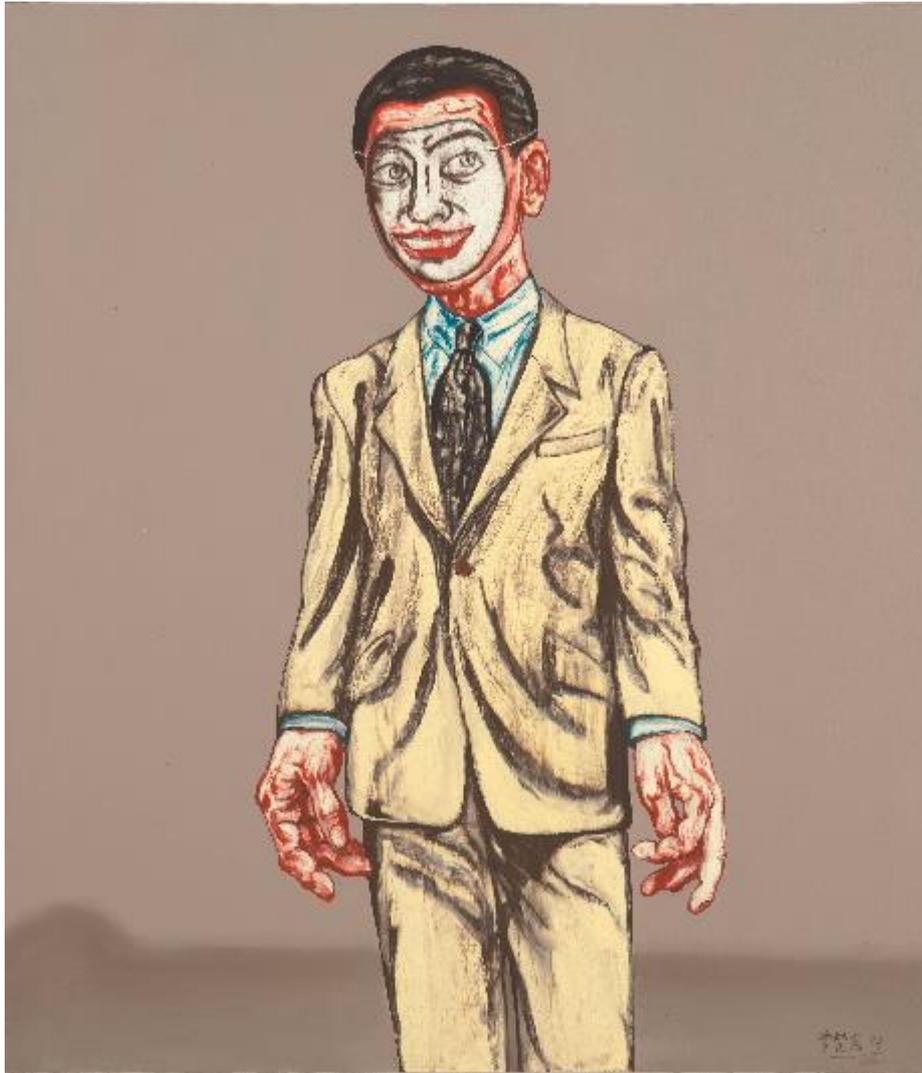


Image 5: Zeng Fanzhi- Mask Series No. 9, 1994 (*Mask Series No. 9*, 2025)

<https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/99.161/>



Image 6: Zeng Fanzhi "The Last Supper" (2001) (*Zeng Fanzhi's Last supper - One of China's most expensive paintings*, 2019) <https://publicdelivery.org/zeng-fanzhi-last-supper/>



Image 7: Wang Guangyi "Great Criticism - Coca-Cola" (1992) (WANG 王广义 G.-Y., 1990)
<https://digital.kenyon.edu/zhou/287/>

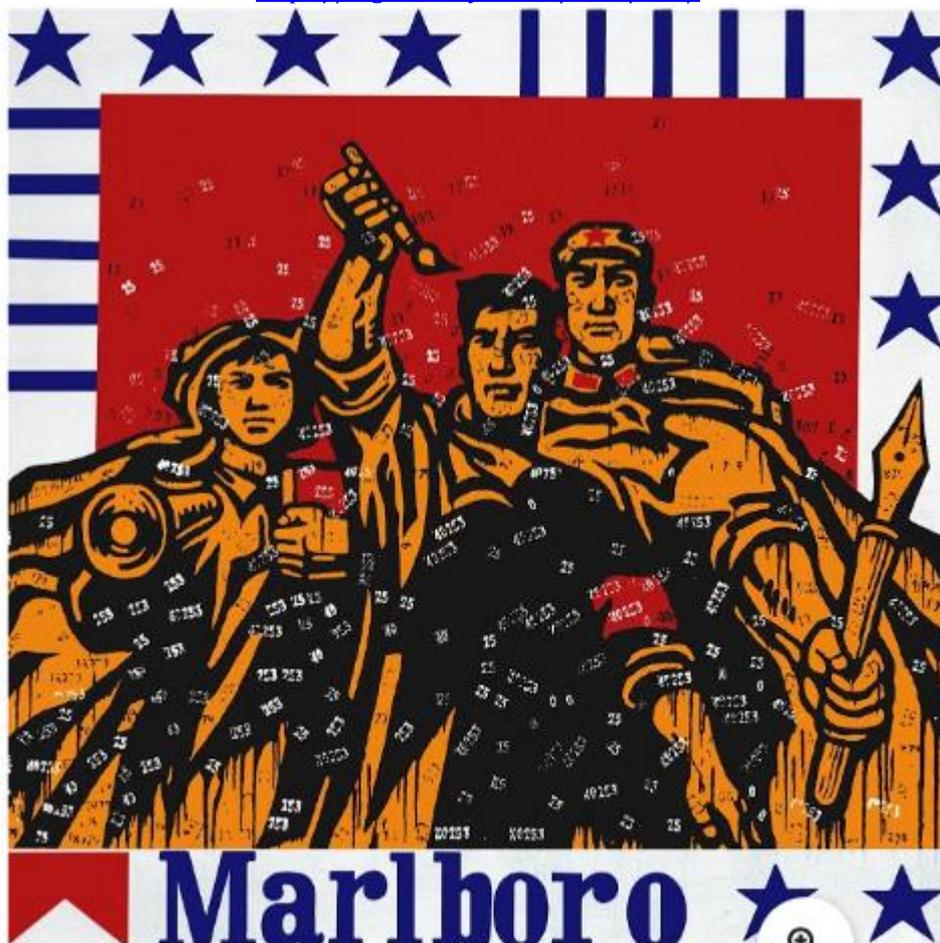


Image 8: Wang Guangyi "Great Criticism - Marlboro" (1993) (*Great Criticism-Marlboro - Wang Guang Yi - Google Arts & Culture*, 2017) <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/great-criticism-marlboro-wang-guang-yi/MwE0T7idjH3pHw?hl=en>



Image 9: Zhang Xiaogang "Bloodline: Big Family No. 1" (1995) ((#1075) ZHANG XIAOGANG | *Bloodline - The Big Family No. 1* 1997, 2024) <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2018/contemporary-art-evening-sale-hk0815/lot.1075.html>



Image 10: Zhang Xiaogang "Bloodline: Big Family No. 3" (1996) ((#145) Zhang Xiaogang, 2013) <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2014/modern-contemporary-asian-art-evening-sale-hk0528/lot.145.html>

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