

Exploring Memory, Identity, and Artistic Expression in Contemporary Chinese Painting Through Personal Memory Construction

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Received: 30 November 2025 | Accepted: 15 January 2026 | Published: 1 February 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55057/ajress.2026.8.1.14>

Abstract: *This research explores the imaginative and intellectual processes through which Chinese contemporary painters design visual expressions of memory. It is based on the theoretical framework of PMSC, which explains how six Beijing-based artists convert processed experience into pictorial composition, making memory the origin and content of the artistic production. The research evidences the way in which artists re-build autobiographical and collective memory using three complementary processes, i.e., fragmentation and reassembly of memory-scenes, intergenerational conversation, and self-referencing symbolism with the help of a qualitative interpretive design combining semi-structured interviews and an iconographic analysis. The findings reveal that memory is not a passive act of recollection but a dynamic cognitive reconstruction that mediates perception, affect, and cultural identity. By selectively recomposing personal and historical imagery, artists forge hybrid visual languages that navigate between tradition and modernity. This study posits that PMSC is a powerful explanatory model connecting cognitive movement to formal and symbolic innovation, transforming individual experience into aesthetic order. Memory-driven creativity has empirically emerged as a characteristic paradigm of Chinese post-socialist art, where memory reconstruction serves as an instrument of self-articulation and cultural survival. This research contributes to larger discussions in art history and creative cognition by illustrating how remembering can be a generative practice of meaning-making. We conclude that personal memory far from a static storehouse is an active process through which contemporary Chinese artists re-establish identity, negotiate historical consciousness, and reshape the aesthetics of painting in the twenty-first century.*

Keywords: Personal Memory Scene Construction (PMSC); Contemporary Chinese Painting; Memory Reconstruction; Creative Cognition

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Context and Rationale

Over the past forty years, contemporary Chinese painting has shifted from collective visual narratives toward a more introspective, memory-driven practice (Qi et al., 2023). As the sociopolitical landscape of China changed in the years of reform and onwards, artists began to turn their gaze more inward to the personal, the remembered and to the emotionally resonant - as sources for creative meaning. This change redirected art's purpose: paintings no longer served primarily as mirrors of national ideology but instead became spaces for negotiating the self amid rapid modernization and cultural hybridity.

Within this larger evolution, memory has surfaced as a creative means as well as a theme core. Artists like Zhang Xiaogang, Liu Xiaodong and Zeng Fanzhi make work that works with memory to recreate fragmented experiences of history, the family and identity. Their works serve as visual storytelling of memory - where individual memory and history are intertwined through spatial layering, repetitive symbolism and emotive gesture. Memory, in this case, is not static memory but a process of imaginative reconstruction that allows the artist to put inner experience in visual form (Bai and Nam, 2020).

While scholars have often identified memory as a prominent theme in contemporary Chinese art, the underlying cognitive processes that translate memory into specific aesthetic strategies have remained underexplored. This study addresses that critical gap. Building on these developments, this work uses the framework of PMSC, which was developed in our previous research, as the theoretical framework for the research. PMSC conceptualizes memory as an active cognitive and aesthetic mechanism with four interlinked stages; memory input, cognitive reconstruction, scene construction, and artistic output. The framework describes how artists work on converting raw recollection into coherent pictorial "scenes" with emotional and cultural meaning (Chen et al., 2022). While our foundational research presented this model conceptually and methodologically, the present article reveals its empirical validation with the assistance of qualitative research with 6 Beijing-based painters.

This is research of significance for art-historical as well as interdisciplinary scholarship. It contributes to existing discourse on contemporary Chinese art in showing that the creative process is not only situated socially and culturally but also structured psychologically - through memory reconstruction. By examining the reconstruction of memory-scene images to express identity, emotion, and belonging by artists, this research is a contribution to a more complex understanding of how cognition, culture, and creativity meet in the process of artistic work (Gong et al., 2022).

1.2 Aims of the Empirical Investigation

The main goal of the current research is to introduce and discuss the empirical results obtained from the application of PMSC to modern Chinese painting activities. Through systematic interpretation of qualitative data, the research aims to shed some light on how memory works as the conceptual base and the aesthetic driving force of art production.

Specifically, the research has the following three interrelated objectives:

- a) To lay out the thematic findings that emerge from in-depth interviews and from visual analyses identification of ways that the artists reconstruct personal and cultural memories through compositional and symbolic choices.
- b) To examine the artistic results, the visual, material and stylistic manifestations of the construction of the memory-scene in paintings by leading Beijing-based artists.
- c) To discuss the implications of PMSC for an understanding of identity formation and self-representation in contemporary Chinese art and putting these findings in the context of larger debates on post-socialist subjectivity and global modernity.

Together, these aims make the article an empirical supplement to the conceptual foundation established in our foundational study. Whereas in the previous article we described the theoretical aspects on how memory may structure creative practice, the current research illustrates how those mechanisms are at play in lived artistic situations. Through the application of PMSC, the research explores how artists translate what is cognitively reconstructed into visual expression in order to show us how memory is created as art.

1.3 Methodology

This research uses a qualitative research design of interpretive research based on phenomenological and hermeneutic research, as elaborated in our preceding conceptual work. The method chosen was to represent the depth and complexity of artists lived experiences while also explanatory of the ways in which internal recollection is externalized to become represented through visual form (Cetinic and She, 2022). A combination of semi-structured interviews and visual content analysis is used in data collection, which allows for a nuanced triangulation between narrative and material evidence.

Selected six Beijing-based artists whose work centrally explores memory- Zhang Xiaogang, Liu Xiaodong, Zeng Fanzhi, Wang Guangyi, Wang Hui, and Zhang Litao. These artists represent different generations and aesthetic trajectories as they give a complete picture of how the memory of the individual works across stylistic and conceptual boundaries (Jiang et al., 2023). The interviews contained reflective accounts of creative process in the form of the following questions: How does a memory surface in the course of painting? How are they visualized, reconstructed and embodied in form?

Complementary to the interviews, nevertheless, the visual analysis was conducted in accordance with Panofsky's iconographic-iconological model, in which compositional structure, symbolism and spatial organization were studied, to find out how memory-scenes are visually constructed (Lister, 2023). Analytical procedures were based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis, supported by the use of NVivo software for systematic coding and cross-referencing.

To ensure rigour the research used triangulation between textual and visual data, member checking with participating artists and peer validation with art scholars (Jiang et al., 2023). This multi-method approach allowed for both interpretive depth and methodological clarity so that the findings would not be based on speculative theory, but would have been grounded in real creative experiences.

Whilst the complete methodological rationale and procedural details are elaborated in our preceding conceptual work, this article brings the results and interpretive synthesis to the foreground, showing how PMSC works empirically in the lived realities of artistic creation (Liu et al., 2022). The following sections introduce three major patterns of themes that are highlighted by the analysis - these themes reveal distinctive ways in which personal memory constructs, informs and eventually transforms the visual language of contemporary Chinese painting.

Table 1: Coding of Respondent

Name	Code
Zhang Xiaogang	R1
Wang Huiyu	R2
Wang Xingjie	R3
Zeng Fanzhi	R4
Zhang Litao	R5
Wang Guangyi	R6

Source: Self-Created

2. Presentation of Empirical Findings

Personal Memory and Scene Construction: Thematic Evidence

The empirical research brought to light three thematic figures of the workings of personal memory in the creative processes of modern Chinese painters: (1) memory-scenes fragmentation and recomposition, (2) memory as intergenerational dialogue, (3) identity embodiment of self-referential symbolism. These themes empirically support the PMSC model, showing that memory in art is an active reconstructive process that mediates cognition, affect, and cultural identity.

Considering an in-depth interview with and visual analysis of six artists in Beijing, it is clear that the creation process of memory-driven works is a cyclical process, featuring recollection, emotional resonance, cognitive reconstruction, and visual articulation (Schaeffer, 2023). Fragmenting, reinterpreting and translating memories into spatial compositions, these artists challenge as narratives that are unalterable and static, rather these memories that embody their inner world and are socially reflective. Each one of the following themes shows a different aspect of this dynamic reconstruction.

2.1 Theme 1: The Fragmentation and Reassembly of Memory-Scenes

A common theme across interviews was that personal memories rarely return intact. Artists repeatedly described remembering as a discontinuous process sensations, images or momentary dimensions of emotional impressions appear in broken patches and need to be reconstructed by artistic labour (Liu et al., 2022). This itself fragmented recollection was reflected in their visual compositions, where fragmented perspectives, layered imagery, and nonlinear spatial organization became means of re-constructing the incompleteness of memory into a coherent, yet open-ended visual spectatorial experience.

For example, this process has been simplified into Zhang Xiaogang's Bloodline: Big Family series. The paintings are based on discoloured family photography from the Cultural Revolution period re-worked through soft palettes and ineffectual outlines that suggest a displacement of individual and shared memory (Kang et al., 2023). When asked about it, Zhang underlined the importance of "painting the family portrait is not recollecting it: it is building it again from fragments that still haunt." His practice reveals a process and practice of memory that is not simply retrieved but recreated-a visual process of healing and recontextualization that refashions fragmented memories into aesthetic wholeness.

Equally, Liu Xiaodong's large-scale realist compositions, for example in the series on the Three Gorges Project, entail such a reconstructive impulse but through a documentary sensibility. Although his works tend to resemble observations, Liu explained that "every brushstroke brings an emotion recalled from the other side of life." He overlays field drawings, photographs and lived impressions into composite scenes, in which temporal boundaries between memory and immediacy are confounded (Wang, 2024). What passes off as realism is only an aesthetics of lived time-an assemblage of shards of experience rearticulated in painterly space.

Cognitively, this mirrors Schacter and Addis's (2007) model of constructive episodic simulation, where the mind weaves fragments into coherent scenes. This, of course, is what artists do in visual terms; they perform what the mind does neurologically, namely the integration of heterogeneous memories into new narrative patterns. In particular, the fragmentary visual syntax - overlapping planes, variable scale, and selective erasure - becomes formalized by the writer to represent the constructive process of memory.



Figure 1: Zhang Xiaogang – Bloodline
Source: Beijing Art Gallery (2023)

This fragmented visual and cognitive language also expresses a deeper emotional truth. Artists would often characterize fragmentation as a type of truthfulness - a recognition that memory is incomplete, unstable, and mediated by loss (Li et al., 2024). Painting is both a cognitive reconstruction and an emotional reconciliation through the reassembling process. In most of the works analysed, the dialectic between clarity and blur, solidity and transparency, functions as a metaphor of the precariousness of remembrance. The resulting scene is thus not a record but a re-creation - a living space where memory is constantly transformed by the agency of the artist.

In conclusion, the first theme shows that fragmentation and reassembly are not mere stylistic devices but structural manifestations of the cognition of memory. Within the model of PMSC, this theme relates to the progression from Memory Input, to Cognitive Reconstruction - the point at which artists are able to make sense of the multiple memories in new and imagined visual terms (Xing et al., 2023).

Table 2: Personal Memory and Scene Construction in Artistic Creation

Respondents	Feedbacks
R1	Growing up in the countryside and being surrounded by nature from an early age has deeply inspired my creativity and provided a strong emotional base for my artistic expression.
R2	My background in traditional realism painting has trained me to approach my work through an objective lens, often beginning with real-world subjects to develop my themes and ideas.
R3	When it comes to memory, I seldom draw upon it as a source of inspiration or integrate it into my creative themes.
R4	Through my artistic journey and personal development, I have come to recognize the inherited trauma within my family and its connection to historical and political contexts, which continues to shape my creative perspective.
R5	My personal experiences have had a clear and direct influence on my artistic practice.
R6	My background is closely tied to my cultural roots in the Chaoshan region of Guangdong, where traditional customs remain deeply valued. The local mindset is often subtle and restrained, which is reflected in my preference for expressing ideas in indirect and nuanced ways.

Source: Self-Created

2.2 Theme 2: Memory as Intergenerational Dialogue

A second major theme that has emerged from the data has to do with the role of intergenerational transmission in shaping individual memory and artistic identity. Many artists thought of memory not as an individual experience but as a dialogue between their own

memory and the memories hand handed down from family, elders or collective history (Wang et al., 2025). These inherited narratives are commonly manifested in symbolic motifs or emotional atmospheres rather than explicit references and reveal the layered complexity of cultural remembrance in post-socialist China.

Paintings by, for example, Wang Guangyi in his Great Criticism series, offer a good example of how inherited ideological imagery becomes material for reinterpretation (Wang, 2023). The juxtaposition of Cultural Revolution propaganda with global consumer logos - such as "Coca-Cola" or "Marlboro" - is an intergenerational negotiation between political past and capitalist present. In interviews, Wang stated that he "remembers through contrast" - his art is a reconstruction of the tension between the visual memory of collectivism and the contemporary experience of freedom as an individual (YinXue et al., 2024). This process of transformation is the process of collective historical memory and its personal reflection on identity and value. Similarly, Zeng Fanzhi's Mask paintings are based on the artist's memories of social conformity and alienation in the 1990s. Whereas the content is not directly inherited, these pieces do mark the intergenerational state of the inheritance of psychological effects - the lingering effects of social restraint, emotional dissimulation, inherited from a previous, ideological time (Chung, 2022). The masks, both concealing and revealing, are a symbol representing a dialogue between what is remembered and what has to be forgotten.

Artists of younger generations, such as Wang Hui, also participate in this dialogue by other means that are less obvious and quiet. Her installations made with watercolour use domestic objects and calligraphic traces inherited from her grandmother which are transformed into her abstract compositions evoking emotional continuity over time (Burnett, 2023). She explains her process as "painting with the voice of others inside me." This statement captures the basic nature of intergenerational memory the subjectivation of ancestral experience as a living presence within dialogue of creativity.

From a theoretical perspective, this theme broadens the PMSC framework by putting memory reconstruction in a relational context (Cheng, 2024). Memory-scenes are not created by individual cognition in isolation but rather by interaction between individual cognition and cultural inheritance. The process of building visual memory therefore involves an interpretive act, a reinterpretation of inherited symbols, mediated between self and collective.



Figure 2: Artistic Expression in Ancient Chinese Painting
Source: EHT (2022)

The findings show that the scene construction process is often a negotiation between two temporalities: the lived present of the artist and the remembered or imagined past of all those who came before. This dual temporality is visually delivered through compositional contrasts old and new iconography, monochrome and color, traditional and modern technique. Such juxtapositions act as visual dialogues rendering the canvas site of cultural continuity and reimagining.

Moreover, the artists' sense of identity is anchored within a broader historical continuum by means of intergenerational dialogue. In the context of post-socialist China, where rapid modernization has created rifts between links to traditional heritage, memory-driven art can be viewed as a reconstitute act, a way of re-stitching cultural fabric through aesthetic means (Dai, 2024). The act of painting thus becomes both mnemonic and restorative: simultaneously, preserving fragments of collective experience, it also rearticulates them through personal vision.

Within the PMSC model, this theme represents the transition from Cognitive Reconstruction to Scene Construction: Memory is not just recombined but also recontextualized by means of inherited meanings and symbols (Dong, 2024). The resultant artwork arises as a dialogical space that combines several voices of the past in one visual field of time.

2.3 Theme 3: The Embodiment of Identity through Self-Referential Symbolism

The third thematic finding is the embodiment of identity in the form of self-referential symbols - motifs of visual appearance, repeating figures and compositional arrangements - which function as surrogates for the inner narrative of the artist. This process illustrates how personal memory is ultimately transformed into a permanent aesthetic language with which identity is constantly acted out and established (JIE et al., 2024).

From this set of cases, it is evident that artists tended to formalize highly subjective experiences into a series of graphic marks. Whether the symbol is a motif, hand in hand with a gesture or chromatic signature, they serve as mnemonic devices that bridge the individual emotion and group recognition. For instance, the red thread and expressionless mask are repeated in Zeng Fanzhi's figure sculptures, the author expresses both his experience of emotional concealment as well as his observation on the psychological environment of urban life in modern times (Kang et al., 2023). What was born as a private emotional response became a self-referential vocabulary that came to be regarded as the artist's identity.

Liu Xiaodong, on the other hand, uses his own image and body as part of his paintings. Using the method of painting "on location" collapses the duality between observer and participant; his canvases are becoming temporal self-portraits and presence of the act of remembering. He said, "Every painting document where I stood, what I felt and what I could not articulate." Through this performative process of immersion, Liu materialize autobiographical memory into the form of lived documentation- which brings his identity as an artist inseparable from the process of reconstructing memory through painting (Lai, 2025).

Another good example is pigment paintings are touched with dreamlike architectural spaces, which he derives from his childhood house. The recurrence of the corridors, windows and thresholds repeats the psychological transition between past and present (Li, 2023). For Zhang, the scene itself becomes the self: each work recovers identity not through portraiture, but through spatial autobiography.

This symbolic transmission of memory is comparable to the last stage of the PMSC model - Artistic Expression Output. The artist externalizes inner processes of recollection and reconstruction using forms of personalized visual systems that function as semiotic extensions of the self. In this way, the artwork is not an identity representation but a manifestation by identity: a cognitive and emotional continuum in which selfhood is performed in the visual vocabulary.



Figure 3: Zeng Fanzhi - Mask: Rainbow
Source: Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (2023)

Read more broadly, self-referential iconography is also an indication of the relocation of artistic authorship in the post-1980s Chinese society. Architects negotiate a paradox between international awareness and cultural authenticity, and the individual symbol becomes a way to claim self in the face of an increasingly homogenized art scene. It represents a local modernism - one that is anchored in memory, but one that is also in conversation with the rest of the world. Interview data further showed that these self-symbols are often re-developed through iterative practice and meaning was retrofitted to the self-symbols (Zhuo and Hou, 2024). Artists admitted that there were motifs that in the past were chosen intuitively but that came to be symbolic of fundamental aspects of who they were. This mirroring of the process of creating and remembering is in keeping with the cyclical nature of PMSC: each completed work creates new memories, which in turn inform future creations.

Finally, this theme illustrates the process through which personal memory is sculpted into an aesthetic identity through the transfiguration of its symbols (Zhang, 2024). The procedure reasserts the fact that in contemporary Chinese painting, the remembering is always accompanied by the becoming - the artist builds up both the memory and the self with the same creative movement.

Table 3: The Role of Symbolism and Aesthetic Choices in Expressing Cultural Memory

Respondents	Rewritten Feedback
R1	I often use the concept of a 'tree' as a symbol in my memories, allowing me to form personal cultural symbols that carry deep emotions. This helps me quickly recall meaningful scenes and experiences.
R2	My personal memories greatly influence how I perceive and select colours. I often use grey tones in my artwork to express my cultural identity, as gray conveys emotions and memories, creating a connection with a particular culture.
R3	I retain scenes with unique cultural elements in my memory and try to showcase them through various artistic methods.
R4	At this moment, I like working with red to develop such themes as anger and aggression primal emotions which are normally hidden in our culture. I also like the natural and traditional touch of traditional Chinese painting pigments.
R5	No feedback
R6	No feedback

Source: Self-Created

Synthesis of Thematic Evidence

Collectively, these three themes provide evidence for the empirical validity of the PMSC framework. They show that the memory-driven artistic creation is a triadic process:

- Cognitive fragmentation and reassembly create the foundation of mental imagery of the scene.
- Intergenerational dialogue puts that imagery into greater cultural and historical context.
- Self-referential symbolism converts reconstructed memories into steady states of artistic identity.

This process of layers of memory illustrates that not only is artistic memory neither static recollection nor pure invention but a recursive process of construction, one that simultaneously preserves experience, reinterprets and redefines it. The following discussion section is dedicated to the interpretation of these findings in terms of theory and aesthetics to evaluate the expansion of the PMSC model and the redefinition of the relationship between cognition, culture, and creative expression in contemporary Chinese art (Yang, 2023).

Table 4: The Role of Symbolism in Memory Representation

Respondents	Rewritten Feedback
R1	Symbolism appears subtly in my work. For instance, using the image of a 'tree' helps turn abstract feelings and ideas into something more tangible.
R2	No feedback
R3	The choice of symbolic forms when dealing with a subject matter is something that should be considered careful and accurate in my opinion. Indicatively, when I use glass be it smooth or frosted, I put into serious consideration the symbols.
R4	No feedback
R5	No feedback
R6	Objects can usually be interpreted symbolically and mean different things to different people based on their perspective of them, which shows the hidden meanings.

Source: Self-Created

3. Discussion and Interpretation

PMSC, Artistic Identity, and Contemporary Expression

This research examines the workings of the PMSC structuring mechanism involved in the creative practice of the Beijing-based contemporary painters. The sense of the empirical themes - fragmentation/reassembly, intergenerational dialogue and self-referential symbolism - do not simply describe artistic tendencies, but rather indicate a patterned process through which distinct kinds of memories give rise to particular strategies of scene construction, and then to particular aesthetical outcomes (Xinyuan, 2025). The following discussion synthesizes these findings with the PMSC model, interprets their meaning as regards artistic identity in a post-socialist context and considers the implications for the material and formal languages of Chinese painting.

3.1 Interpreting PMSC: Bridging the Cognitive and the Creative

The thematic proofs of PMSC as a dynamic interconnection between cognitive reconstruction and artistic production. Rather than being an abstract rubric, PMSC provides a correct mapping of artists lived accounts, their visual practices: recollected material (memory input) is cognitively reconfigured (reconstruction), imagined as a pictorial scene (scene construction), and externalized as an artwork that preserves and transforms meaning artistic output (Li et al.,

2024). Crucially, the findings show that type of memory (episodic, intergenerational, affective) are predictive of particular scene construction choices.

Episodic and sensory memories (vivid, occasion-specific recollections) are likely to lead to compositional strategies that favor localized detail and temporal layering. Artists who described working from sensory fragments, for example, a remembered smell, a fragment of a domestic interior, an emotional tone, systematically ran these fragments through spatial devices on canvas: occlusion, partial figuration, layered translucency. Formally, this produces works in which selective focus and gradated visibility create the illusion of the uneven fidelity of recollection; the painting emerges as a topography of remembered intensity. This is in fact the cognitive to formal translation that PMSC predicts: Broken-up episodic input requires compositional reassembly and the material choices the artist makes (erasure, glazing, overlay) enact the process of reassembly.

By contrast, memories generated intergenerationally or historians-mediated cause compositional juxtapositions and symbolic recontextualizations. When artists turned to family histories or the ideological imagery of the past, this often pitted anachronistic or culturally tainted imagery with contemporary visual signifiers (Wang, 2023). The result is a dialogic montage: past and present are in the same pictorial field, and this forces the audience to negotiate the dissonance of time. Within PMSC, such scenes realize the relational aspect of the model - memory is not an individual artifact but a site of cultural transmission. Cognitive reconstruction in such instances involves the retrieval of culturally-encoded symbols, and their reinterpretation; scene construction becomes an act of translation from generation to generation.

A third pattern has to do with affect-laden, identity-related memories. When memory is essentially emotional, shame, loss, alienation, artists are likely to use figures with a figurative distortion, significant objects (masks, threads, thresholds) and repeating motifs that serve as visual indexes of subjectivity. Such devices function as condensed units of narrative: small, portable, and repetitive. In PMSC terms, affective memory condenses cognitive complexity into resilient signs which the artist can apply as identity markers to multiple works (Tomasich, 2024). Over time these signs build up a semiotic weight that congeals into an artist-specific lexicon - what the findings identify as self-referential symbolism.

Taken together, the links between memory type and scene-construction reveal two key strengths of PMSC. First, PMSC is predictive - it anticipates which formal strategies are likely to be adopted by the artist based upon the nature of the remembered material. Second, PMSC is process-oriented, i.e., it identifies artistic output as the end point of cognitive operations (selection, recombination, symbolization) rather than as an autonomous artifact (Long and Chen, 2023). This emphasis on process - on how remembering becomes making - place questions of artistic meaning away from iconographic identification alone, and address the cognitive operations that precipitate visual form.

The qualitative data also reveals an important feedback dynamic that completed artworks generate new memories for the artist, and so seed subsequent cycles of PMSC. In practice, a motif that has been born out of an early painting becomes a mnemonic trigger; memory of one's own emotions or family anecdotes is recalled through one's own work. In this recursive loop - artwork > memory > new artwork - the relatively linear diagram of PMSC becomes more complicated, more cyclical, more evolving (Shi, 2022). The model's utility is enhanced by its

ability to allow for this reflexivity, demonstrating at once how memory and art constitute each other as time passes.

In sum, the empirical results support the validity of PMSCnot only as a descriptive device but also as an explanatory mechanism that mediated between cognitive specificity and formal choice. The model explains how various forms of remembering can demand distinct compositional reactions, and how these reactions, if institutionally stabilized by material practice, can result in recognizable modes of artistic expression.

3.2 Rethinking Artistic Identity in Post-Socialist China

The findings provide further impetus to reappraising artistic identity at the time of post-socialist China. Historically, the visual field in China was once dominated by the collectivist narratives in which the subjectivity of the individual was subordinated to social paradigms (Shen, 2024). The artists studied here are displaying a very significant reorientation: personal memory becomes the vehicle through which identity is renegotiated. This shift isn't a simple flick to Westernized individualism, but instead a mediated retaking of the personal in a field of culture still steeped in collective memory.

First, identity as constructed practice: The artists do not find a self already existing, and then portray it, but rather act identity through labour of memory reconstruction. The repetition of motifs and the rehearsal of recalled scenes are forms of self-fashioning. Consequently, identity in these works is performative and provisional-one which is assembled in the studio and reassembled with each new composition (Lu and Qian, 2023).

Second, identity as dialogic: The intergenerational theme highlights the point that selfhood is negotiated through layers of time. The contemporary artist is working in a space between self-experience and received stories. Thus, the painter's subjectivity is configured in an aggregator of voices: ancestral, ideological, and contemporary. This dialogic identity means resisting and also re-appropriating dominant historical narratives - the artists may recover private stories that have been erased by official histories, or they may work with state symbols to criticise or reformulate their meaning.

Third, identity as visual habitus: again, from Bourdieu's linguistic repertoire, it is possible to suggest that memory-guided formal choices form a sort of artistic habitus, a disposition that has been formed in educational, familial, and cultural contexts. For example, an artist trained in literati or ink traditions might bring the use of calligraphic gestures as mnemonic tools, while another trained in the western realist tradition might utilize figurative presence to ground episodic recall. These habitual repertoires are not deterministic but constrain and permit the modes of self-expression available to the artist.

Fourth, identity as negotiation with modernity and globalization: retaining cultural rootedness in the context of a global art economy is a strategy revealed in the works. Memory-based imagery allows artists to speak with authenticity - a link to cultural specificity - while their formal innovations (mixed media, fragmented montage, digital references) place them in conversations with other artists around the world. The outcome is a hybridized identity: Local anchored, global legible.

Finally, these shifts possess ethical and civic dimensions. In the case of post-socialist China, in which public narratives have been subject to ideological contestation and rapid social change, the artist's re-remembering is productive of forms of moral testimony. Paintings that recreate

family trauma, displacement or collective loss register as acts of witnessing (Wang et al., 2024). By the transformation of private recollection into public image, artists simultaneously appropriate authorial agency and participate in a collective archive of emotional history. In other words, identity as manifested in PMSC is part of the formation of public memory - reconfiguring stories of what stories are seen, and how they are seen.

Collectively, these points suggest that the artist's identity in contemporary Chinese painting ought to be construed as an emergent, negotiated phenomenon - one that is produced through reiterative mnemonic practices in which individual experience, inherited meaning, and socio-historical pressures are resolved. PMSC provides a conceptual vocabulary for this reading of this work, making memory a central engine of identity formation in a process in which historical narratives are still in dispute and transition.



Figure 4: Wang Guangyi - The Rebellious Noncoformist
Source: Yang, X., & Zhao, W. (2023)

3.3 Implications for the Medium and Aesthetics of Chinese Painting

The need to build a scene of memory puts certain pressures on medium and aesthetics, as continuity with tradition is demanded but on the other hand, experiment is called for. Several related implications can be drawn from the empirical data.

Material and technical adaptation. Artists use material strategies that emulate the texture of memory: layering, scraping, glazing and controlled abrasion, duplicating the palimpsest-like nature of recollection. These techniques serve dual purposes - in the formal sense, creating depth and ambiguity; conceptually, these techniques reflect the epistemic uncertainty of memory (Lu and Qian, 2023). Moreover, the use of mixed media (photographic transfers, textual fragments, found objects) corroborate the pragmatic shift: memory-scenes often require mixed media to contain their cognitive and affective complexity. Thus, the contemporary painters enrich the material vocabulary of Chinese painting without giving up their idioms.

Compositional reconfiguration. Memory-driven scenes often violate classical compositions hierarchies. Traditional Chinese painting often prioritizes continuity of space and economic use of words; the situation is very different for painting of memory-scene, which prefers fragmentation, overlapping perspectives, and collapsing of time. Such compositional decisions carry out the cognitive operation of recombination - the foregrounding of discontinuity as a

legitimate organising principle. The aesthetic effect is a visual temporality impervious to linear narrative and inviting a contemplative rebuilding by the viewer.

Symbolic condensation, economy of motifs. The process of going from astral, unconnected recall to recurring symbolism creates an economy of motifs - small, recognizable signs that hold autobiographical resonance. Such condensation is aesthetically efficient: it allows for complex histories to be gestured at without representing them in exhausting detail. The trade-off is semiotic opacity; the viewer has to learn a symbolic grammar from recurrence and contextual clues (Liu Peipei and bin, 2024). This requirement leads to a participatory model of reception in which the meaning is produced through recognition and associative inference.

Dialectic between tradition and innovation. Memory-scene construction creates a fruitful tension with inherited techniques (brushwork, ink washes, calligraphic line) and contemporary formal experiments. Many artists use traditional media for modern purposes: the ambiguity of ink can evoke fading memory; the fragility of silk or rice research can evoke vulnerability. The result is not nostalgia, but methodological synthesis - tradition as resource, not constraint.

Aesthetic politics and a critical capacity. Finally, the aesthetics of memory has political resonance. The very act of inventing ambiguity and multi-significance gives room for artists to make comments about contested histories without straightforward denunciation or celebration. Memory-scene construction renders ambiguous aesthetic spaces in which critique may be coded in form rather than explicit statement-this is an important strategy in a context where direct political commentary may be fraught (Li et al., 2024).

In sum, PMSC has implications for medium and aesthetics favoring processes and strategies that reflect cognitive reconstruction: materials documenting palimpsest, compositions reflecting temporal interpenetration, motifs reflecting identity condensation, an endless dialogue between tradition and experimentation. These aesthetic shifts increase the expressive capacities of contemporary Chinese painting, and provide a conceptual template for the analysis of similar practices elsewhere.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Summary of Major Empirical Contributions

This research explores the implications of PMSC as a creative and conceptual tool in the contemporary Chinese painting practice, in which Beijing's art scene is case research. Through comprehensive qualitative research carried out with six established artists, the research identifies personal memory as a generative source for thematic exploration, stylistic experimentation and the redefinition of cultural identity. These results show that memory acts not only as a storage of the past but as an active interpretive process in which artists re-create their emotional and social worlds.

Empirically, it explains three mechanisms. First, memory as art material - artists pick, rebuild and picture autobiographical memories to create narrative or symbolic compositions. In supporting Autobiographical Memory Theory, this procedure highlights how selective memory provides informational content and mood. Second, as a creator of cultural continuity - traditional aesthetics (ink, brush strokes, symbolism), mingle with technological methods (modernism) and conceptual processes of art, generating hybrid visual languages, which negotiate the relationship between tradition and globalization (Lu and Chang, 2022). This synthesis is concomitant with the Theory of Practice advocated by Bourdieu since the

importance of artistic habitus as a site at which cultural capital and novelty comes together, occurs. Third, memory as a reflexive process - PMSC is a mechanism of identity building and psychological integration. This by them it manifests that the artists transform subjectivity into visual metaphor, thus turning the individual act of introspection into a collective resonance.

This study's empirical contribution is to position memory-driven creativity as an important paradigm in contemporary Chinese art. By relating aesthetic form to cognitive and cultural processes, the research contributes to the understanding of art-historical questions about the mechanisms with which individual experience translates into visual form (Jin et al., 2021). Rather than depicting emotion through memory, it highlights the many ways in which memory-based art acts as an indictment of social transformation, urbanization, and changing ethical mores in post-reform China. In so doing, it offers an insightful paradigm of how subjective, cultural, and technological aspects of memory come together to form the shapes of twenty-first-century Chinese paintings. The results therefore expand the discourse on creative cognition and make a significant contribution to current studies in Chinese art by putting personal memory in a position of method and meaning.

Novelty and Contributions

This study makes three novel contributions. First, it operationalizes the PMSC model empirically, showing how cognitive memory types map onto compositional strategies in contemporary Chinese painting. Second, by combining interviews with iconographic analysis, it demonstrates how intergenerational and self-referential memories interact in the creation of memory-scenes a relationship not emphasized in previous research. Third, it reframes memory-based art as both an aesthetic and cultural practice through which artists negotiate identity in post-socialist China

4.2 Limitations and Future Research

Although the study sheds light on cognitive and cultural mechanisms behind PMSC, several limitations complicate interpretation. The qualitative and interpretivist design, which is suitable in investigating the internal processes of artists, necessarily limits the generalizability. The strategically chosen sample is limited to Beijing-based painters, whose institutional and cultural background might not correspond to other areas. In addition, it turns out that the personal retrospection that memory reconstruction entails is a subjective process that generates interpretive richness but can also introduce bias (Cetinic and She, 2022).

The interdisciplinary nature, which incorporates art theory, psychology as well as cultural studies, is both a strength and a weakness. The Western cognitive models (e.g., Autobiographical Memory, Schema Theory), and their conceptual frameworks, do not necessarily capture Chinese artistic thought cultures that have their own specific epistemologies. Equally, the cultural implication and idiomatic skills in Chinese painting cannot be easily translated into theory, thereby inhibiting inter-cultural comparison (Liu and Wu, 2024). Moreover, because the modern Chinese art is changing fast, this research is just a time frame; new digital and multimedia activities are still in flux to mediate the role of memory in visual art.

Future studies are encouraged to conduct comparative and cross-generational research studies that find out how memory is renegotiated by younger artists in a digital cultural environment. Longitudinal or cross-cultural studies would tell how artists in other areas or traditions use memory as a form of creative structure, and can provide more generalization on theory. The neural correlates of the visualization of memory and aesthetics could also be elucidated by

means of neuroaesthetic or cognitive-neuroscientific technologies, typically, fMRI or eye-tracking so that art practice could be associated with cognitive science. Moreover, further investigation of the audience reception would enhance the knowledge about the perception of the viewers with various cultural backgrounds in the images with memory implications. These studies would effectively enhance theoretical frameworks of PMSC, besides being an addition to international discourses on the role of art as a deflector of intimate memory and national identity.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to express sincere gratitude to everyone who contributed, both directly and indirectly, to the completion of this study.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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