



**Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts**

**Gong Bi Painting in Hunan Province through the Lens of Issues,  
Challenges, and Development Strategies**

**Xiao Kang**

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Gong Bi Painting in Hunan Province through the Lens of Issues, Challenges,  
and Development Strategies

Xiao Kang

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## DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. Except where due acknowledgements have been made, the work is that of the author alone. The thesis has not been accepted for any degree and is not concurrently submitted in candidature of any other degree.

肖康

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Signature

Name: Xiao Kang

Matric No.: 21010050

Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

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## ABSTRACT

Gong Bi painting is one of the oldest and most influential traditional Chinese art forms. It underwent significant changes in the 20th century, evolving into modern Gong Bi painting. Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP) experienced a resurgence in the 1980s, becoming a leading force in the field. However, since the 2000s, the influence of the HGP industry has been rapidly declining. Although existing research highlights the decline in HGP data, few studies have identified actual changes in the paintings themselves. To address this gap, this research adopts an imaginative theory and a qualitative case study approach to analyse five representative HGP works. Data were collected through document review, observation, and semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was guided by two objectives: to map the development of the HGP field and to identify its current key issues and challenges. The findings show that even a few award-winning pieces demonstrate remarkable innovation, each reflecting the unique identity of its creator. However, the number of Gong Bi productions has decreased, and many remaining works tend to be similar. These changes have been influenced by political, theatrical, cultural, and technological factors. Based on these findings, this study recommends that the government actively promote the creation of Gong Bi paintings to increase production and encourage diversity within HGP works, helping to sustain its vitality. The study contributes by providing practical recommendations and a conceptual framework for revitalising HGP.

**Keywords:** Gong Bi Painting, Hunan Gong Bi Painting, Imagology, Challenges and issues

## ***Lukisan Gong Bi di Wilayah Hunan dari Perspektif Isu, Cabaran dan Strategi Pembangunan***

### ***ABSTRAK***

*Lukisan Gong Bi merupakan salah satu bentuk seni tradisional China yang tertua dan paling berpengaruh. Bentuk seni ini telah mengalami perubahan besar sepanjang abad ke-20 dan berkembang menjadi lukisan Gong Bi moden. Lukisan Gong Bi Hunan (HGP) mula bangkit semula pada tahun 1980-an dan menjadi antara aliran utama dalam bidang seni halus China. Namun demikian, sejak tahun 2000-an, pengaruh industri HGP telah menurun dengan ketara. Walaupun penyelidikan sedia ada menyorot kemerosotan dalam data HGP, hanya sedikit kajian yang meneliti perubahan sebenar yang berlaku dalam karya lukisan itu sendiri.*

*Bagi mengisi kekosongan ini, kajian ini menggunakan teori Imagologi serta pendekatan kajian kes kualitatif untuk menganalisis lima karya HGP yang bersifat representatif. Data dikumpulkan melalui semakan dokumen, pemerhatian, dan temu bual separa berstruktur. Analisis tema dijalankan berdasarkan dua objektif utama: pertama, untuk memetakan perkembangan bidang HGP; dan kedua, untuk mengenal pasti isu serta cabaran utama yang dihadapi oleh industri ini pada masa kini.*

*Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa hanya sebilangan kecil karya yang memenangi anugerah memperlihatkan inovasi yang ketara, masing-masing mencerminkan identiti unik pelukisnya. Namun, jumlah hasil karya Gong Bi semakin berkurangan, dan kebanyakan karya yang dihasilkan menunjukkan kecenderungan kepada keseragaman. Perubahan ini dipengaruhi oleh faktor politik, ekonomi, budaya, dan teknologi. Berdasarkan penemuan ini, kajian mencadangkan agar kerajaan menggalakkan penciptaan aktif karya Gong Bi bagi*

*meningkatkan produktiviti dan memperluas kepelbagaian dalam karya HGP, sekali gus mengekalkan daya hidupnya. Kajian ini memberikan sumbangan dengan menawarkan cadangan praktikal serta kerangka konseptual bagi usaha menggiatkan semula pembangunan HGP.*

***Kata kunci:****Lukisan Gong Bi, Lukisan Gong Bi Hunan, Imagologi, Isu dan Cabaran*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  | <b>Page</b> |
|--|-------------|
| <b>DECLARATION</b>                             | i           |
| <b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENT</b>                         | ii          |
| <b>ABSTRACT</b>                                | iv          |
| <i>ABSTRAK</i>                                 | v           |
| <b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b>                       | vii         |
| <b>LIST OF TABLES</b>                          | xii         |
| <b>LIST OF FIGURES</b>                         | xiii        |
| <b>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</b>                   | xvi         |
| <b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</b>                 | 1           |
| 1.1 Introduction                               | 1           |
| 1.2 Research Background                        | 1           |
| 1.2.1 The Chinese traditional Gong Bi painting | 1           |
| 1.2.2 The Chinese Modern Gong Bi Painting      | 7           |
| 1.2.3 Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP)             | 9           |
| 1.3 Problem Statement                          | 11          |
| 1.4 Research Question                          | 14          |
| 1.5 Research Objective                         | 14          |

|                                     |  |    |
|-------------------------------------|--|----|
| 1.6                                 | Scope of Research                            | 16 |
| 1.7                                 | Limitations of the Research                  | 16 |
| 1.8                                 | Significance of the Study                    | 17 |
| 1.9                                 | Hunan Gong Bi Panting Forms Appendix         | 17 |
| 1.10                                | Conclusion                                   | 20 |
| <b>CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW</b> |  | 21 |
| 2.1                                 | Introduction                                 | 21 |
| 2.2                                 | The History of Chinese Gong Bi Painting      | 21 |
| 2.2.1                               | The Traditional Gong Bi Painting             | 22 |
| 2.2.2                               | The Golden Development of Gong Bi Painting   | 25 |
| 2.2.3                               | The Maturity Development of Gong Bi Painting | 32 |
| 2.3                                 | The Chinese Modern Gong Bi Paintings         | 38 |
| 2.3.1                               | The first phase, 1919-1948                   | 38 |
| 2.3.2                               | The second stage, 1949-1977                  | 41 |
| 2.3.3                               | The Contemporary Phase of Gong Bi Paintings  | 48 |
| 2.4                                 | Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP)                 | 53 |
| 2.4.1                               | The "Rise Period" of HGP,1980-2000           | 53 |
| 2.4.2                               | The Period of Stagnation of HGP,2000-2024    | 58 |
| 2.5                                 | Relevant Applications of Imagological Theory | 60 |
| 2.6                                 | Conclusion                                   | 70 |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <b>CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY</b>   | 71 |
| 3.1 Introduction  | 71 |
| 3.2 Aims of Research and Research Question  | 71 |
| 3.3 The Application of Imagology Theory   | 72 |
| 3.4 Research Strategy   | 74 |
| 3.4.1 Phase I- Reviewing the development of Hunan Gong Bi Painting(HGP)                                       | 75 |
| 3.4.2 Phase II- Mapping the Current Situation of HGP and Defining the Issues and Challenges Facing the Sector | 77 |
| 3.4.3 Phase III- Developing Recommendations for the HGP industry  | 78 |
| 3.5 Research Methods  | 79 |
| 3.5.1 Qualitative Data Collection   | 79 |
| 3.5.2 Data analysis   | 86 |
| 3.5.3 Trustworthiness of the Research   | 88 |
| 3.5.4 Research Ethics   | 89 |
| 3.5.5 Research Scopes and Limitations.  | 90 |
| 3.6 Conclusion  | 91 |
| <b>CHAPTER 4: DATA COLLECTION AND DISCUSSION</b>  | 94 |
| 4.1 Introduction  | 94 |
| 4.2 The Imagological Analysis of Painting Case  | 94 |
| 4.2.1 Case 1-March 3 <sup>rd</sup>  | 94 |
| 4.2.2 Case 2- Morning   | 97 |

|       |   |     |
|-------|---|-----|
| 4.2.3 | Case 3- Monsoon   | 99  |
| 4.2.4 | Case 3-Conversation with Carlo Crivelli                 | 102 |
| 4.2.5 | Case 5- Reflection of the Lotus Pond                    | 105 |
| 4.2.6 | Imagological Analysis of The Painting in HGP            | 108 |
| 4.3   | The Issue and challenge face by HGP industry            | 111 |
| 4.3.1 | Quantity: The Decrease in overall Painting Production   | 111 |
| 4.3.2 | Quality: The lake of Innovation in Subject Matter       | 113 |
| 4.4   | Conclusion  | 116 |
|       | <b>CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION</b>               | 118 |
| 5.1   | Introduction  | 118 |
| 5.2   | The Development Process of Hunan Gong Bi painting       | 118 |
| 5.2.1 | The Development of Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP)industry | 119 |
| 5.2.2 | The development of HGP Painting style                   | 122 |
| 5.3   | Challenges Facing Hunan Gong Bi Paining Industry        | 125 |
| 5.3.1 | Decrease in the Number of Gong Bi Paintings             | 125 |
| 5.3.2 | Homogenization of HGP Jobs                              | 126 |
| 5.4   | Discussion the result                                   | 130 |
| 5.4.1 | Culture Factor  | 130 |
| 5.4.2 | Economic Factor   | 133 |
| 5.4.3 | Technology Factor                                       | 136 |

|                              |   |     |
|------------------------------|---|-----|
| 5.4.4                        | Politic Factor  | 138 |
| 5.5                          | Conclusion  | 141 |
| <b>CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION</b> |   | 143 |
| 6.1                          | Introduction  | 143 |
| 6.2                          | Summary of the Research                                   | 143 |
| 6.3                          | Achieving Research Objectives                             | 145 |
| 6.3.1                        | Provide a comprehensive description of the HGP industry   | 145 |
| 6.3.2                        | Examine the Issues and Challenges Facing the HGP Industry | 145 |
| 6.4                          | Recommendations for Hunan Gong Bi Painting                | 146 |
| 6.4.1                        | Inner Circle: Recommendations for Practical Innovation    | 147 |
| 6.4.2                        | Outer Circle: Recommendations for Policy                  | 147 |
| 6.5                          | Research Outcomes   | 156 |
| 6.6                          | Contribution to New Knowledge                             | 157 |
| 6.7                          | Recommendations for future studies                        | 158 |
| <b>REFERENCES</b>            |   | 160 |
| <b>APPENDICES</b>            |   | 185 |

## LIST OF TABLES

|            | <b>Page</b>  |     |
|------------|--|-----|
| Table 1.1  | The exhibition in Hunan Gong Bi painting, during 1980-2000     | 18  |
| Table 1.2  | The exhibition in Hunan Gong Bi painting, during 2000-2024     | 18  |
| Table 1.3  | Hunan Gong Bi Painter part in The China exhibition 1980-2000   | 19  |
| Table 1.4  | Hunan Gong Bi Painter part in The China exhibition 2000-2024   | 19  |
| Table 1.5  | HGP painters core positions in the CAA                         | 20  |
| Table 2.1  | Related applications of imagology                              | 67  |
| Table 3.1  | The Painting Cases in the HGP Industry                         | 78  |
| Table 3.2  | The case of HGP  | 83  |
| Table 3.3  | The theme of this research                                     | 87  |
| Table 3.4  | Summarize the research plan                                    | 92  |
| Table 4.1  | Imagological Analysis of The Painting in HGP                   | 110 |
| Table 4.2  | The issue face by HGP industry                                 | 116 |
| Table 5.1  | Issues Faced by the HGP Industry and Their Influencing Factors | 140 |
| Table 6.1: | Improvement strategies   | 155 |

## LIST OF FIGURES

|   | <b>Page</b> |
|---|-------------|
| Figure 1.1 Xie Yi painting (Left); Gong Bi painting (Right)   | 2           |
| Figure 1.2 Character Dragon and Phoenix Painting, silk ink, 3rd century BC, 31.2 cm × 23.2 cm   | 3           |
| Figure 1.3 Bai Miao, Figure theme (Left); Dan Cai, Flower and bird theme (Right)  | 4           |
| Figure 1.4 Jiang Shan Qiuse Tu, silk ink, 11th century, 323 cm × 56.6 cm.   | 4           |
| Figure 1.5 Gao yuan (Left); Shen yuan (Middle); Ping yuan (Right)   | 6           |
| Figure 1.6 The material of Gong Bi Painting   | 7           |
| Figure 1.7 Ting Bi Qiang, Silk-ink, 1989, 68 cm X 68 cm   | 10          |
| Figure 1.8 The overview of Hunan Gong Bi Painting, a graph drawn by the researcher based on the above three aspects of data (detailed data are attached to Chapter 1.9) | 12          |
| Figure 2.1 The development stage of Gong Bi painting  | 22          |
| Figure 2.2 Mural painting of a fragment depicting a winged serpent man a heavenly deity and a raven against the background of the Sun.                                  | 24          |
| Figure 2.3 Han Xi Zai Ye Yan Tu (The Night Banquet of Han Xi Zai), silk ink, 10th century AD, 335.5 cm × 28.7 c.  | 26          |
| Figure 2.4 Qing Ming Shang He Tu (Along the River During the Qingming Festival), silk ink, 12th century AD, 528.7 cm × 24.8 cm  | 27          |
| Figure 2.5 Qian Li Jiang Shan Tu (A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains), silk ink, 12th century AD, 1191.5 cm × 51.5 cm  | 28          |
| Figure 2.6 Xie Sheng Zheng Qing Tu (Sketches of Rare Birds), silk ink, 10th century AD, 41.5 cm × 69.5 cm   | 30          |
| Figure 2.7 Zhigongjuan, silk ink, 16th century AD, 580.3 cm × 29.5 cm   | 33          |
| Figure 2.8 Portrait of Liu Bo-yuan, silk ink, Ming Dynasty, 26.4 cm × 45.4 cm   | 33          |
| Figure 2.9 Chang Jiang Wan Li Tu (A Thousand Li of the Yangtze River), silk ink, 16th century AD, 1233 cm × 35.2 cm   | 35          |
| Figure 2.10 Eight Horses, silk ink, 18th century AD, 139.3 cm × 80.2 cm   | 36          |

|             |  |     |
|-------------|--|-----|
| Figure 2.11 | The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains, silk ink, 1940, 143 cm × 423 cm   | 40  |
| Figure 2.12 | The New Year paintings: Liu Hai Xi Jin Chan                                  | 43  |
| Figure 2.13 | The Unity of the Chinese Nation, rice paper, 1953, 129 cm × 196 cm           | 43  |
| Figure 2.14 | The Red Sun's Glory Warms Ten Thousand Generations, 1972, 67 cm × 76 cm      | 45  |
| Figure 2.15 | Spring Bird, Silk-ink, 132 cm X 50 cm  | 49  |
| Figure 2.16 | Jiangnan in Artistic Conception, Silk-ink, 125 cm X 245 cm                   | 50  |
| Figure 2.17 | Autumn Meditation, Silk-ink, 203 cm X 150 cm                                 | 51  |
| Figure 2.18 | Miao Jia Huan Ge, Xuan paper-ink, 1982                                       | 54  |
| Figure 2.19 | Falling Clouds, Xuan paper-ink, 1997, 132 cm X 62 cm                         | 55  |
| Figure 2.20 | Ning, Silk-ink, 1989, 110 cm X 110 cm  | 56  |
| Figure 3.1  | Imagological Analysis Framework  | 73  |
| Figure 3.2  | Research strategy adopted for the study                                      | 74  |
| Figure 3.3  | The painting case of this research   | 77  |
| Figure 3.4  | Data collection process  | 80  |
| Figure 4.1  | March 3rd, Silk-ink, 1981, 68 cm X 68 cm                                     | 95  |
| Figure 4.2  | Morning by Wu Ron-guang, Xuan paper-ink, 1983, 140 cm X 70 cm                | 97  |
| Figure 4.3  | Monsoon, Silk-ink, 2008, 180 cm X 120 cm                                     | 100 |
| Figure 4.4  | Conversation with Carlo Crivelli, Silk-Ink, 2016, 190 cm X 120 cm            | 103 |
| Figure 4.5  | Reflection of the Lotus Pond, Silk-ink, 2020, 220 cm X 160 cm                | 106 |
| Figure 5.1  | The Red Sun's Glory Warms Ten Thousand Generations, 1972, 67 cm × 76 cm      | 121 |
| Figure 5.2  | Spring, Kang Yue, 2020 (Left); Moving towards covid, An Yanyue, 2020 (Right) | 127 |
| Figure 5.3  | Sketch (Left); Coloring (Right)  | 128 |
| Figure 5.4  | Painter digital hand-drawn sketch demonstration                              | 128 |
| Figure 5.5  | The Eight Horses by Lang Shining (left); by Xu Beihong (right)               | 132 |

|            |   |     |
|------------|---|-----|
| Figure 6.1 | Chinese tea brand Cha Yan Yue Se uses Gong Bi as a design element for its packaging and posters | 152 |
| Figure 6.2 | Chen Bai-Yi' s line drawing   | 153 |

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|      |                                    |
|------|------------------------------------|
| HGP  | Hunan Gong Bi Painting             |
| CAA  | China Artists Association          |
| CANE | China National Art Exhibition      |
| HAA  | Hunan Artists Association          |
| CHAA | China Gong Bi Painting Association |

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the relationship between traditional Chinese culture and Gong Bi painting, a key factor in understanding its context in Hunan province. It also highlights the importance of research on Gong Bi painting in Hunan. Additionally, this section outlines the problem statement, research objectives, limitations, scope, and significance.

### 1.2 Research Background

#### 1.2.1 The Chinese traditional Gong Bi painting

In Chinese art, art can be categorised into "muse art" and "practical art." Muse art encompasses individual perspectives, including literature, music, dance, and performance. In contrast, practical art encompasses objective cultural creations, such as architecture, ruins, carvings, paintings, bronzes, porcelain, manuscripts, and other forms (Kagan, 1972).

Traditional Chinese painting can be divided into two styles: Xie Yi and Gong Bi (Ruan, 1994). Xie Yi, meaning "describing artistic conception," generally does not concentrate on the accuracy of the depicted objects but rather on the painter's subjective expression through simple, freehand brushwork. Conversely, Gong Bi painting emphasises precision and intricate details (Zeng, 2001).

Gong Bi painting is characterised by neat, meticulous brushwork. In the Complete Guide to Chinese Painting Art - Gong Bi Painting (2006), "Gong" is defined as "neat and meticulous," while "Bi" refers to "pen." Gong Bi painting involves using the brush with

precision, emphasizing accurate depictions and fine details (Zhang, 2006). As shown in Figure 1.1, Huang (2005) compares the difference between Xie Yi and Gong Bi painting to the distinction between Western Impressionism and Realism.



**Figure 1.1:** Xie Yi painting (Left); Gong Bi painting (Right)

Source: Courtesy of the studio of Xiao Jian

Notably, Gong Bi painting is one of the oldest and most influential forms of traditional Chinese painting (Zhang, 2006). The origins of Gong Bi painting can be traced back to the Han Dynasty (3rd century BC). According to the Complete Identification of Chinese Art (Zhang, 2006), the "Character Dragon and Phoenix Painting" (shown in Figure 1.2), unearthed in Changsha, Hunan Province in 1949, is the earliest known Chinese Gong Bi painting. Furthermore, Gong Bi painting is regarded as one of the most influential types of traditional Chinese painting. The National Cultural Heritage Administration of China (2008) listed The Ten Most Famous Ancient Paintings Passed Down Through Generations, all of which are Gong Bi paintings.



**Figure 1.2:** Character Dragon and Phoenix Painting, silk ink, 3rd century BC, 31.2 cm × 23.2 cm

Note. Reprinted from Hunan Museum, China (1949).

The development of Gong Bi painting during the Tang and Song dynasties (6th-13th centuries AD) established its unique and standardized techniques. Visually, Gong Bi painting primarily uses ink brushes on rice paper or silk, with a drawing technique primarily based on lines (Teng, 2011; Wang, 2013; Gu, 2016). Gong Bi painting employs three main techniques, which are as follows:

- i. Bai Miao (Line technique): This method uses only lines to outline the shape of an object, focusing on the accuracy of its form (Figure 1.3).
- ii. Dan Cai (Light Color): Outlined with lines and filled with light colors, this technique emphasizes the balance between the accuracy of form and the use of color (Figure 1.3).

- iii. Zhong Cai (Heavy Color): Outlined with lines and filled with bold colors, this technique emphasizes the use of color, including thick black ink and bright hues (Figure 1.4).



**Figure 1.3:** Bai Miao, Figure theme (Left); Dan Cai, Flower and bird theme (Right)

Source: Chinese Artists Official Account



**Figure 1.4:** Jiang Shan Qiuse Tu, silk ink, 11th century, 323 cm × 56.6 cm.

Note. Reprinted from The Palace Museum, China (1925).

Gong Bi paintings are categorized into three main thematic subjects:

- i. Figure theme refers to human figures as the subject of representation (as shown in Figure 1.3, Left).

- ii. Flower and bird theme, refers to flowers, plants, birds, fish, insects, animals, etc. (as shown in Figure 1.3, Right).
- iii. Landscape theme: This theme portrays landscapes with mountains and water (as shown in Figure 1.4). It is noteworthy that the techniques used to depict these themes are flexible. For example, line drawing can represent both flower and bird themes or landscapes, while light ink can be used to portray figures.

Each of these three themes displays distinct characteristics. The figure theme emphasizes realism, focusing on the outline, atmosphere, and dynamics of the figures, but not on the interplay of light and shadow. Figure-themed paintings are typically used to depict religious figures, court officials, and characters from historical stories and legends (Chen, 2012). The "Flower and bird" theme emphasizes the depiction of natural reality, embodying a romantic and gentle quality. Typically, they feature small, concrete compositions, with the most famous technique being the "Zhe Zhi Fa" (Take a branch method), which limits the scope of expression to a single branch.

The Landscape theme, in contrast to the "Flower and bird" theme, The Landscape theme aims to present a "robust" and "majestic" atmosphere (Qian, 2015). The Landscape theme features three standard compositional techniques, known as San yuan fa (Three distant compositions), shown in Figure 1.5. This method, first proposed by the 11th-century painter Guo Xi, has been widely used ever since:

- i. Gao yuan (High and far): This perspective is like the upward view in Western paintings, offering a view from the base to the summit of the mountain and showcasing vast peaks, creating a sense of height.

- ii. Shen yuan (Deep and far): Like the downward view in Western paintings, this perspective involves viewing mountains from a high vantage point, evoking a sense of depth and the expansive rolling mountains in the distance.
- iii. Ping yuan (Horizontal and Far): This perspective is akin to the direct view in Western paintings, where viewing distant mountains from an angle equal to the height of the mountain creates a sense of levelness, making the mountains appear more intimate and peaceful, as shown in Figure 1.5.



**Figure 1.5:** Gao yuan (Left); Shen yuan (Middle); Ping yuan (Right)

Source: Changsha Artists Association WeChat Official Account

The unique expressions of Gong Bi paintings are created using specialized materials, typically on thin surfaces such as silk or rice paper, which add to their complexity. The brushes are made from soft materials, such as Lang hao (a brush made from wolf hair). There are two types of brushes: outlining brushes for drawing lines and coloring brushes for applying paint. Colors are created using ink and stone pigments. Ink is black and diluted with water to control its shade, while stone pigment is a mineral-based color made from ground stones mixed with glue, also diluted with water for shading, as shown in Figure 1.6.



**Figure 1.6:** The material of Gong Bi Painting

Source: Painting Consumables WeChat Official Account.

Overall, Gong Bi painting is a distinct traditional art form in China that embodies various aspects of traditional Chinese philosophy and aesthetics (Li, 2019). According to Bourdieu, artwork is not only a creation crafted by talented artists but also must be recognized by society. Only artwork that is suitable for society possesses aesthetic value (Yang, 2020). In other words, jobs reflect society, which evolves alongside social development. In the context of China, society underwent profound changes in the 20th century, transitioning from thousands of years of imperial rule to the Republican era. Against this backdrop, traditional Gong Bi paintings evolved into modern versions of the style.

### **1.2.2 The Chinese Modern Gong Bi Painting**

The 1911 "New Culture Movement" marked the divide between traditional Chinese art and modern art (Zhao, 2005). During this movement, Chinese artists and scholars sought to study Western art, which embodied the values of 'Science' and 'Enlightenment,' to rescue war-torn China. In this context, all art aimed to support this goal. Specifically, themes became more directly responsive to contemporary social phenomena, and the style aligned

more closely with Western realism (Wang, 2014). Scholars argue that Western realism directly represents easily understandable themes.

Among various art forms, Gong Bi painting became the focus of reform due to its inherent realistic style and broad influence. Compared to 'Xie Yi' painting, Gong Bi was better suited to expressing the movement's goals (Ning, 2014). This reform was initially advocated by practitioners and scholars and continued until 1949, eventually entering a more radical phase.

In 1949, with the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the government explicitly defined art as a 'tool for political propaganda' and 'the voice of the Party' (Zhang, 2023). The government initiated the reform process. To serve social functions, themes became politically essential, and the style adopted a more realistic approach. All traditional styles were labelled as 'outdated' and 'feudal.' This control peaked during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), when the government banned all other styles to ensure the purity of art. The goal of art was to spread the Party's ideas to all, ensuring that even the illiterate could understand the messages conveyed through the paintings.

After 1978, hailed as 'China's new era,' political control over art diminished, and art returned to its multifaceted social roles. After a decade of strict control, society sought lighter and more diverse styles of art to break the mold. In this context, Hunan Gong Bi painting was the first to break this pattern, creating a new style in which Hunan painters used traditional techniques to depict contemporary life. In the 1980s, Hunan Gong Bi paintings began to influence modern Gong Bi art in China officially (Pan, 2000).

### **1.2.3 Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP)**

Hunan Province, located in the south-central region of China, is home to two World Natural and Cultural Heritage sites and one World Cultural Heritage site (UNESCO website). According to 2023 data from the National Bureau of Statistics, Hunan ranks ninth among China's 31 provinces in terms of population and economic strength. It is home to several villages inhabited by various ethnic minorities, as reported by the Hunan Provincial Government website. In terms of culture, China's cultural and artistic centers are traditionally located in Beijing and Shanghai. Hunan's cultural and artistic scene has not received much attention. However, the 1980s marked a golden era for Gong Bi painting in Hunan (Si,1996).

After the Cultural Revolution, Hunan painter Chen Bai-Yi, the founder of HGP, introduced the core concept of "one hand grasping tradition and one hand grasping contemporary life." (Li, 2013). Li (1996) explained that HGP differed from other provinces' styles, drawing inspiration from local life in Hunan and infusing paintings with a relaxed and vivid style. For example, Chen's representative work "Ting Bi Qiang" depicts local life in Hunan, as shown in Figure 1.7.



**Figure 1.7:** Ting Bi Qiang, Silk-ink, 1989, 68 cm X 68 cm

Source: Courtesy from Artist Chen Ming-da

Guided by the principle of "using traditional techniques to depict modern life," Chen Bai-yi organized several Gong Bi painting workshops in the 1980s, cultivating numerous talents and deepening the practice of this theme (Pan, 2000). As a result, numerous jobs were created, propelling Hunan Gong Bi painting onto the national stage. Specific data are presented in the appendix of Chapter One.

Ultimately, during the 1980s and 1990s, this group of artists and their jobs had a significant impact on the era. For instance, Hunan was once renowned as "China's strongest Gong Bi painting province" (Wang, 2006; Sixty Years of Hunan Fine Arts, 2013; Li, 2013), and HGP became a textbook for Gong Bi painting in universities (Li, 2013; Huang, 2018).

However, after 2000, the advantages of HGP began to decline, entering a "bottleneck period." Li Pu-Xing, the only Gong Bi painting critic in Hunan province, wrote in 2016: "The current third generation of painters (post-2000 artists) has not surpassed the first and second generations (1980–2000s) and may even be considered inferior. By the 2010s, the development of Gong Bi painting in Hunan had hit a 'bottleneck period,' struggling to break through to new levels" (P126).

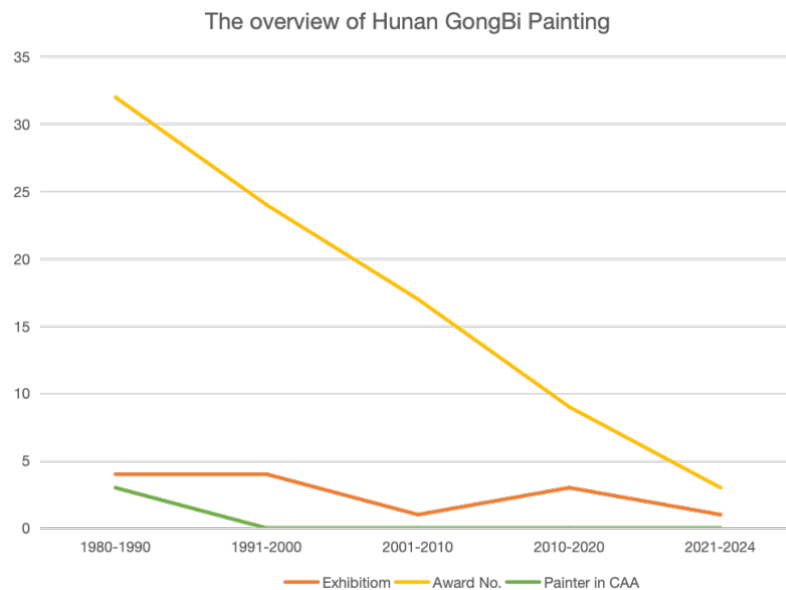
In summary, Gong Bi painting is an ancient Chinese art form that not only represents great artwork but also reflects Chinese society. Gong Bi Painting has experienced two levels of development: traditional and modern. During modern times, Hunan's Gong Bi painting has made a significant contribution. It has successfully carried forward traditional techniques while also establishing its own style, influencing the direction of Gong Bi painting in China. Undoubtedly, Hunan's Gong Bi painting played a major role in Chinese modern Gong Bi painting. However, today's Hunan Gong Bi painting has gradually lost that high-speed creativity and faces various challenges.

### **1.3 Problem Statement**

Chinese Gong Bi painting is an ancient and highly influential form of traditional Chinese art. Research on Gong Bi painting involves not only honoring tradition but also exploring avenues for future development. With the diversification and complexity of social culture, the techniques, themes, and materials used in painting have become more diverse. As a result, the once-dominant position of traditional Gong Bi painting in Chinese art has shifted, and its influence has significantly declined (Guo, 2021). Practitioners must find ways to integrate traditional and modern artistic expressions to ensure the relevance of Gong Bi

painting today. Integrating traditional and modern art ensures that Gong Bi painting can adapt to the contemporary social context.

Hunan Gong Bi painting (HGP) was among the first to explore the integration of traditional and modern elements. Starting in the 1980s, Hunan Gong Bi painting began to gain national attention. By the 1990s, Hunan was hailed as "the strongest province in China for Gong Bi painting." However, HGP gradually declined in prominence thereafter. This decline can be observed through three key indicators: 1) Gong Bi painting exhibitions held in Hunan, 2) awards won by HGP at the China National Art Exhibition, and 3) the recognition of Hunan painters in significant roles within the Chinese art scene, as shown in Figure 1.8.



**Figure 1.8:** The overview of Hunan Gong Bi Painting, a graph drawn by the researcher based on the above three aspects of data (detailed data are attached to Chapter 1.9)

Firstly, Reduction in Hunan Gong Bi Painting Exhibitions: Between 1980 and 2000, 8 Gong Bi painting exhibitions were held in Hunan. However, from 2001 to 2024, only 5 exhibitions took place. Additionally, there has been a significant decrease in the number of

Gong Bi paintings displayed, from 120 pieces in 2008 to just 12 pieces in 2011. In a 2023 interview, Li explained that this sharp decline was not limited to these three years. The 2008 exhibition primarily featured painters from the 1980s and 1990s, and today, only a few young Hunan painters are selected for major exhibitions in China.

Secondly, Reduction in Awards at the China National Art Exhibition (CANE): The CANE is the most prestigious art exhibition in China. The first session was held in 1949, marking the establishment of the new China, and it became a symbolic exhibition representing the Chinese government, held every five years. Co-organized by the Ministry of Culture of the Chinese government, the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, and the China Artists Association, the CANE reflects society's mainstream consciousness and aesthetic judgment (Official website of the China Artists Association). However, from 1980 to 2000, 22 jobs were selected from Hunan Province. From 2000 to 2020, only 9 jobs were selected.

Thirdly, Reduction in Recognition of Hunan Painters in Significant Roles within the Chinese Art Scene: The China Artists Association (CAA) is the central organization for Chinese artists, a government-regulated body under which various painting associations are established, including the China Gong Bi Painting Society, China Oil Painting Society, China Printmaking Society, and China Watercolor Painting Society, among others. Each province has its branch, such as the Hunan Artists Association, which, in turn, houses various painting societies, including the Hunan Gong Bi Painting Society and the Hunan Oil Painting Society. In the 1980s, three HGP painters held significant roles in the CAA. However, after 2010, no HGP painters have assumed core positions in the CAA.

Overall, the data from three aspects indicates a gradual decline in Hunan Gong Bi painting. Firstly, the number of painting exhibitions held in Hunan has shown a consistent downward trend, with 8 Gong Bi painting exhibitions held between the 1980s and 2000, and only 5 exhibitions from 2000 to 2024. This data illustrates the gradual decline of Hunan Gong Bi painting. The previous researchers have divided the history of HGP into two stages: the rise of Hunan Gong Bi painting from 1980 to 2000, and its subsequent loss of direction from 2000 to 2024.

However, although existing research has highlighted the decline in HGP data, few studies have identified actual changes to the paintings themselves. This raises an essential question: has the decline of HGP resulted from the loss of technical excellence, or from the stagnation of its thematic content? To address this gap, this study adopts an imagological perspective and case studies to examine how HGP evolved from the 1980s to the 2020s. It also explores the social and cultural causes behind these changes. Through this approach, the research offers new insights into how theory can explain HGP's development and proposes practical ways to revitalize the art within modern Chinese painting.

#### **1.4 Research Question**

- i. What is the entire development process of HGP?
- ii. What are the key issues and challenges faced by the HGP industry?
- iii. How can the sustainability of the HGP industry be enhanced?

#### **1.5 Research Objective**

This study aims to contribute to the future development of HGP. The study is divided into three sub-objectives:

- i. To provide a comprehensive description of the sociocultural and institutional development of Hunan Gong Bi painting.
- ii. To critically examine the challenges faced by Hunan Gong Bi painting.
- iii. To provide recommendations for the artistic, cultural, and institutional development of HGP.

The first objective provides an overview of HGP, reviewing its origins and entire development process, which is divided into two parts: traditional Gong Bi painting and modern Gong Bi painting. This context helps identify the status of HGP, laying the foundation for the second research objective.

The second objective focuses on the contemporary issues and challenges threatening the sustainability and development of HGP. This goal is achieved through a combination of Gong Bi painting analysis, in-depth observations, and interviews. By engaging with the current state of HGP, this objective aims to uncover the specific factors hindering its progress and recognition within the broader context of Chinese and global art. The insights gained are crucial for developing effective strategies to address these challenges.

The third objective aims to synthesize the findings from the first two objectives to offer actionable guidance for HGP practitioners. By providing targeted recommendations, this objective contributes to ongoing efforts to ensure that HGP remains a vibrant and relevant part of China's cultural heritage.

Together, these objectives form a strategic framework for preserving Hunan Gong Bi painting (HGP) and enabling its evolution in response to contemporary challenges. This approach highlights the importance of deep historical understanding, clear identification of

present-day challenges, and the formulation of practical strategies to ensure the art form's continued relevance and vitality. By integrating historical analysis, current assessment, and strategic development, this study aims to support the sustainable growth and adaptation of HGP, ensuring it remains a significant and vibrant part of China's cultural heritage.

## **1.6 Scope of Research**

This study focuses on the challenges faced by Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP) after the year 2000. It employs a case study approach and adopts an imagological perspective, interpreted here as a visual semiotic and ideological framework that examines how images, artistic narratives, and institutional discourses construct meaning. The study analyzes the interaction between the visual evolution of HGP and broader social transformations, exploring how artistic, institutional, and ideological changes have influenced the art form's development and sustainability.

In addition, this research incorporates a comparative dimension, drawing on examples from other regions and countries such as Japan, Italy, and South Korea. By examining their successful strategies for preserving and revitalizing traditional art forms, the study seeks to identify valuable lessons and propose new, context-specific solutions for addressing the challenges faced by the HGP industry.

## **1.7 Limitations of the Research**

Firstly, published literature on HGP is limited, so the researcher gathered a significant portion of data through field research, including unpublished articles, private collections, and interviews detailing the status and issues of Hunan Gong Bi painting.

Secondly, the analysis is limited to the cases selected for this study, which, while representative, have their limitations, as no single case can fully represent an era.

## **1.8 Significance of the Study**

There is a lack of research literature on HGP in the Chinese art academic field, resulting in a comprehensive understanding gap regarding this regional art tradition and its development. This study aims to fill this gap, enriching and refining the theoretical framework of regional painting research.

Additionally, the significance of this study extends to Hunan's art community by offering insights into the developmental trajectory of Gong Bi painting, providing a reference for future directions. For Gong Bi painters, the study presents new perspectives on how to inherit and protect Gong Bi painting, aiding them in better preserving this artistic heritage. By addressing the historical, contemporary, and future aspects of HGP, this research contributes to a deeper and more nuanced appreciation of this important art form.

## **1.9 Hunan Gong Bi Painting Forms Appendix**

The development of the Hunan Gong Bi painting (HGP) industry saw significant growth from the 1980s to the 2000s, followed by a period of stagnation after 2000, as shown in the data below. Firstly, the number of Gong Bi painting exhibitions in Hunan decreased: 8 exhibitions were held between 1980 and 2000, while only 5 took place between 2001 and 2024, as shown in Table 1.1 and Table 1.2.

**Table 1.1:** The exhibition in Hunan Gong Bi painting, during 1980-2000

| <b>Time (1980-2000)</b> | <b>The exhibition of Hunan Gong Bi painting</b>     | <b>City</b>       |
|-------------------------|---|-------------------|
| 1983                    | Hunan Gong Bi Painting Exhibition                   | Bei Jing; China   |
| 1984                    | Bei Jing; Hunan Gong Bi Painting Joint Exhibition   | Bei Jing; China   |
| 1987                    | Hunan Chinese Painting Exhibition                   | Hong Kong; China  |
| 1988                    | Hunan Gong Bi Painting Exhibition                   | Guang Dong; China |
| 1988-1996               | Hunan Gong Bi Painting 30 cities Touring Exhibition | China             |
| 1991                    | Hunan Painting; Calligraphy Exhibition              | Singapore         |
| 1992                    | Hunan Gong Bi Painting Exhibition                   | Hunan; China      |
| 1993                    | Hunan Painting; Calligraphy Exhibition              | Siga, Japan       |
| 1996                    | Hunan Gong Bi Painting Exhibition                   | Bei Jing; China   |

**Table 1.2:** The exhibition in Hunan Gong Bi painting, during 2000-2024

| <b>Time (2000-2024)</b> | <b>The exhibition of Hunan Gong Bi painting</b> | <b>City</b>     |
|-------------------------|---|-----------------|
| 2007                    | Hunan Gong Bi Painting Exhibition               | Bei Jing; China |
| 2008                    | Hunan Art Exhibition(120 paintings)             | Hunan; China    |
| 2011                    | Hunan Art Exhibition(12 paintings)              | Hunan; China    |
| 2012                    | Hunan Major Historical Theme Art Exhibition     | Hunan; China    |
| 2013                    | Hunan Youth 's Gong Bi Painting Exhibition      | Hunan; China    |
| 2023                    | Hunan Gong Bi Painting Exhibition               | Hunan; China    |

Additionally, there was a decline in the number of Hunan jobs selected for the China National Art Exhibition (CANE): from 1980 to 2000, 22 jobs from Hunan Province were selected, while only 9 jobs were chosen from 2000 to 2020, as shown in Table 1.3 and Table 1.4.

**Table 1.3:** Hunan Gong Bi Painter part in The China exhibition 1980-2000

| <b>Time (1980-2000)</b> | <b>Hunan Gong Bi Painter part in The China exhibition</b> | <b>Painting number</b> |
|-------------------------|---|------------------------|
| 1984                    | 6 <sup>th</sup> China National Art Exhibition.            | 22                     |
| 1989                    | 7 <sup>th</sup> China National Art Exhibition             | 10                     |
| 1994                    | China Gong Bi Painting Exhibition                         | 13                     |
| 1997                    | Association Chinese Gong Bi Painting 1900-1997            | 38                     |
| 1999                    | 9 <sup>th</sup> China National Art Exhibition             | 11                     |

**Table 1.4:** Hunan Gong Bi Painter part in The China exhibition 2000-2024

| <b>Time (2000-2024)</b> | <b>Hunan Gong Bi Painter part in The China exhibition</b> | <b>Painting number</b> |
|-------------------------|---|------------------------|
| 2004                    | 10 <sup>th</sup> China National Art Exhibition            | 9                      |
| 2007                    | China Chinese Painting Exhibition                         | 2                      |
| 2009                    | 11 <sup>th</sup> Chinese National Art Exhibition          | 8                      |
| 2014                    | 12 <sup>th</sup> Chinese National Art Exhibition          | 8                      |
| 2016                    | China Contemporary Gong Bi Painting Exhibition            | 1                      |
| 2019                    | 13 <sup>th</sup> Chinese National Art Exhibition          | 11                     |
| 2019                    | China Gong Bi Landscape Exhibition                        | 1                      |
| 2021                    | China Gong Bi Painting Exhibition                         | 3                      |

The decline in the recognition of Hunan painters in significant roles within the Chinese art scene: The China Artists Association (CAA), which is the central organization for Chinese artists and government-regulated, has not seen any HGP painters in core positions since 2010, as shown in Table 1.5.

**Table 1.5:** HGP painters core positions in the CAA

| <b>Time</b> | <b>Name</b>     | <b>Organization</b>   | <b>Position</b> |
|-------------|-----------------|---|-----------------|
| 1980-2000   | Chen Bai-Yi     | The China Artists Association<br>(The central organization for Chinese artists, a government-regulated) | Director        |
|             | Zheng Xiao-Juan | The China Artists Association   |                 |
|             | Zhu Xun-de      | The China Artists Association   |                 |

### 1.10 Conclusion

This chapter introduces the significance and objectives of the study on HGP. The chapter outlines the historical context and development of Gong Bi painting, emphasizing the distinction between traditional and modern forms. The chapter identifies the current challenges faced by HGP, with a focus on the decline in exhibitions, awards, and recognition of Hunan painters. The study's objectives are presented in three sub-objectives: historical review, current assessment, and strategic development. Finally, the chapter discusses the research limitations and the study's contribution to filling the gap in literature, offering insights into the future development and preservation of HGP.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Introduction

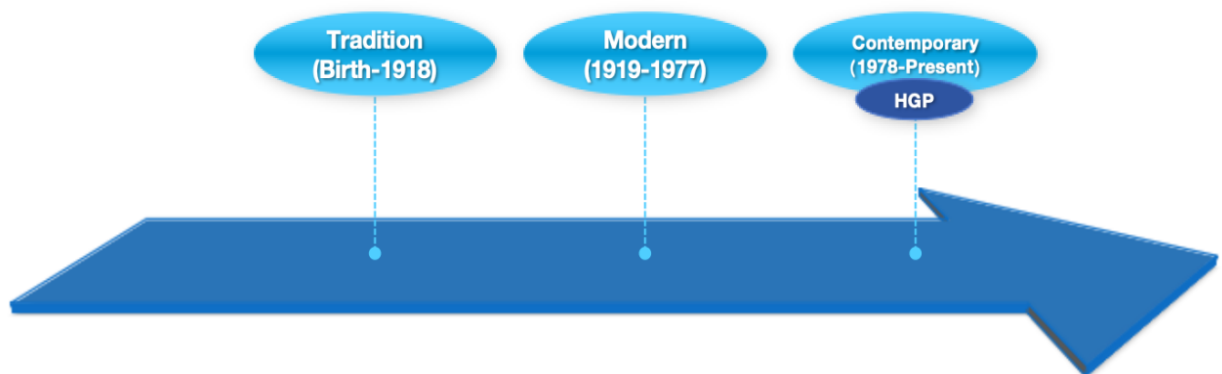
This chapter presents a literature review, divided into three sections. The first section reviews the history of Chinese Gong Bi painting, providing essential background for understanding Hunan Gong Bi painting. The second section examines existing research on Hunan Gong Bi painting, identifying gaps in current studies and suggesting directions for future research. The third section reviews the application of "Ideology" theory in the field of painting, explaining its relevance to this study's analysis. Through these discussions, the chapter provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding the background of Hunan Gong Bi painting.

#### 2.2 The History of Chinese Gong Bi Painting

Gong Bi painting, one of the oldest and most influential forms of Chinese art, has undergone a long and evolving process. Its development can be divided into three distinct stages, which is the traditional phase, the modern phase, and the contemporary phase.

- i. The traditional phase, which extends from the birth of the style up to 1918, saw a natural progression in Gong Bi painting. During this period, techniques and themes became increasingly intricate and refined, reflecting traditional Chinese philosophy and culture. Painters emphasized meticulous brushwork, symbolic composition, and Confucian–Daoist aesthetics, forming a style that valued moral cultivation and harmony with nature. This period established the artistic foundation later generations would transform (Wang, 2015).

- ii. The modern phase, spanning from 1919 to 1977, began with the New Culture Movement of 1919. This movement introduced Western artistic influences, prompting a significant evolution in Gong Bi painting as it adapted to modern techniques and ideas. According to Wang (2019), this stage marked a dynamic transition in Gong Bi painting, where the fusion of classical brushwork with modern sensibility began to redefine the relationship between tradition and innovation.
- iii. Finally, in the contemporary phase, beginning in 1978, Gong Bi painting returned to a more stable path of development. Artists began to explore a fusion of traditional and modern elements, seeking to blend the best of both worlds. Among them, Hunan Gong Bi painting (HGP) is an outstanding representative of contemporary Gong Bi painting (Chen, 2012). This progression is illustrated in Figure 2.1.



**Figure 2.1:** The development stage of Gong Bi painting

### 2.2.1 The Traditional Gong Bi Painting

The study of traditional Gong Bi painting, known for its meticulous and highly detailed style, reveals a rich and complex history spanning several centuries. Gong Bi is characterized by precise brushstrokes and intricate attention to detail, especially in depicting figures, birds, and flowers. Rooted in these core themes, the technique has evolved from its

early, rough forms into a more refined and mature style, reflecting broader cultural and artistic developments (Huang, 2024).

The evolution of traditional Gong Bi painting can be divided into three distinct phases. The initial form emerged during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) and reached its peak during the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE). By the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1840 CE), Gong Bi painting had fully matured, with more sophisticated and standardised techniques and styles (Sun, 2013).

#### 2.2.1.1 The Traditional Gong Bi Painting

The origins of Gong Bi painting can be traced back to the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) (Krupa, Li, & Sun, 2020). Although the term 'Gong Bi' had not yet come into use, early examples display the foundational characteristics of this style. Research on excavated Han artefacts, such as stone carvings, brick paintings and silk paintings, reveals that the focus was primarily on drawing with minimal use of color. This emphasis on linework laid the groundwork for later developments in Gong Bi painting (Barnhart, 1997; Fong, 1992; Loehr, 1980; Krupa, Li, & Sun, 2020).

Ren Wu Long Feng Tu (The Dragon and Phoenix Figures) is one of the earliest and most well-preserved examples of the Han dynasty. Both Dai (2006) and Wang (2012) argue that this painting, which served as a burial shroud covering a coffin during funeral rituals, exemplifies the early exploration of Gong Bi's 'bai Maio' technique. This technique involved the use of coarse outlines to depict symbolic images (Figure 1.2). Cai (2017) suggests that the painting represents the deceased's aspiration to ascend to the heavens. The upper half of the composition shows dragons and phoenixes in flight, symbolising their

journey through the sky, while the lower half portrays human figures, representing the earthly realm, praying for the souls to be guided to the heavens.

Krupa et al. (2020) conducted a comparative analysis of approximately 1,500–2,000 wall paintings from 30 Han dynasty tombs, revealing that line drawing was the dominant feature in Han art, with color playing a secondary role. The murals depicted a wide range of subjects, including religious beliefs, social life, and historical events, blending realism with mythological and religious imagery (Figure 2.2). This analysis further highlights the transition in Han painting from mysticism to a more grounded realism.



**Figure 2.2:** Mural painting of a fragment depicting a winged serpent man a heavenly deity and a raven against the background of the Sun.

Source: Krupa etc (2020)

Furthermore, Chen (2015) and Cai (2017) assert that much of the artwork during this period was closely tied to burial practices, reflecting the belief in the immortality of the soul. Influenced by Daoism, the ruling class sought immortality and viewed burial paintings as

essential symbols guiding the soul's ascension to the afterlife. Wang (2012) also highlights that Han art was shaped by animism, the belief that all things possess a spirit, which played a significant role in the symbolic representation of the afterlife.

In summary, Gong Bi painting during the Han dynasty represented an early developmental phase for the art form. The image (Painting work), characterized by its early experimentation with fine line work and simple composition, reflects the initial technical exploration that sought order, symmetry, and meaning within form. The text (Content), expressed through visual narratives of immortality, filial piety, and cosmic order, communicates the moral and cosmological beliefs of the Han people. The ideology underlying these jobs embodies the state's political doctrine and Confucian ethics, where art served as both spiritual expression and an instrument of social order. Thus, Han Gong Bi paintings functioned as mirrors of their society, transforming aesthetic representation into a visual reflection of collective faith and imperial ideology.

### **2.2.2 The Golden Development of Gong Bi Painting**

Beginning in the 7th century, Gong Bi painting entered its golden age during the Tang and Song dynasties (618–1279 CE). This period marked the rise of powerful Chinese dynasties and the blending of diverse cultures, which significantly contributed to the flourishing of Gong Bi art (Wang, 2011). Gao (2014) notes that the economic prosperity of the Tang and Song periods, coupled with rulers' emphasis on cultural development, created a favorable environment for artistic growth. The era's open and inclusive social climate fostered the emergence of a rich cultural ideology and a well-defined aesthetic system, laying the foundation for the advancement of Gong Bi painting.

During this time, Tang dynasty artists built upon the painting techniques inherited from the Han dynasty, continuously innovating and achieving new artistic heights in Gong Bi (Liang, 2011). Notably, figure, bird-and-flower, and landscape painting became distinct genres that endured as classic forms of Gong Bi painting (Bush, 1998; Li, 2022).

### 2.2.2.1 The Figure Painting Theme

Among the most iconic and well-preserved figure paintings from this period are ‘Han Xi Ye Yan Tu’ (The Night Banquet of Han Xi Zai) and ‘Qing Ming Shang He Tu’ (Along the River During the Qingming Festival), both of which are long scroll paintings, ‘Han’ depicts a lively banquet scene on a long scroll (335.5 cm X 28.7 cm), while ‘Qing’ captures scenes of daily life along a river during the Qingming Festival, spanning an impressive 528 cm X 24.8 cm (Palace Museum, 2022) (Figure 2.3 and Figure 2.4).



**Figure 2.3:** Han Xi Zai Ye Yan Tu (The Night Banquet of Han Xi Zai), silk ink, 10th century AD, 335.5 cm × 28.7 c.

Note. Reprinted from The Palace Museum, China (2015).



**Figure 2.4:** Qing Ming Shang He Tu (Along the River During the Qingming Festival), silk ink, 12th century AD, 528.7 cm × 24.8 cm

Note. Reprinted from The Palace Museum, China (2015).

Zhihui (2015) and Yang (2022) note that these paintings employed a montage-style composition, where objects and scenes were meticulously arranged to depict multiple events occurring simultaneously, effectively illustrating the complexities of social life. This compositional innovation marked a significant shift in the role of painting, transitioning from religious rituals to more realistic depictions of daily life. The integration of visual and narrative elements in these jobs heightened their dramatic impact and coherence, allowing for a more dynamic portrayal of the world. Additionally, landscape painting, which emerged as a prominent theme during this period, reached its zenith, setting standards that remain difficult to surpass even today (Wang, 2019).

#### 2.2.2.2 The Landscapes Painting Theme

The independent development of landscape painting during the Tang and Song periods marked a significant achievement in Gong Bi painting. A prime example from this era is Qian Li Jiang Shan Tu (A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains), a long scroll painting measuring 1191.5 cm X 51.5 cm, as shown in Figure 2.5. In this masterpiece, the rolling

mountains convey the rhythm and cadence of both music and poetry, symbolizing the harmonious connection between nature and art (Fan, 2019).



**Figure 2.5:** Qian Li Jiang Shan Tu (A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains), silk ink, 12th century AD, 1191.5 cm × 51.5 cm

Note. Reprinted from The Palace Museum, China (2015).

In this painting, color plays a central role in shaping forms, rather than relying solely on traditional line drawing. The technique, known as "spring color," involves using a dry brush dipped in undiluted ink to rub across the surface, sculpting the mountains (Zhang, 2001). Following this, color is applied, and various brush strokes are used to enhance volume, creating subtle variations in light and shadow that give the painting a rich, layered appearance. This method became a hallmark of Gong Bi painting and continues to be used today (Yang, 2019).

Hu & Wang (2010) emphasize that the flourishing of poetry during this period greatly inspired landscape painting. The rhythm and structure of these paintings often mirrored the cadence of poetry, allowing artists to blend the visual and literary arts to express a profound reverence for nature and life. Lin & Xu (2022) suggest that the Qian Li Jiang Shan Tu can be divided into six sections, each corresponding to stages of a musical composition: prelude,

rise, development, climax, finale, and conclusion. The painting exhibits a strong sense of rhythm and order, with the mountains stretching across the scroll, their heights varying to enhance the sense of progression.

Furthermore, Peng (2014) notes that landscape paintings of this period were deeply influenced by Confucian philosophy, particularly the concept of "the unity of heaven and humanity," which views humans as microcosms of the universe. In this context, artists used landscapes to convey their inner emotions and worldview. Yang & Ding (2019) explains that the colors in these landscapes do not strictly adhere to the natural hues of objects but are used expressively, reflecting the artist's personal emotions and ideals. Li (2021) also emphasized this approach is a creative act that blends subjective will with emotion, employing color freely to evoke an idealistic and romantic mood. Additionally, the genre of bird-and-flower painting also saw distinct improvements, further advancing Gong Bi painting.

#### 2.2.2.3 The Bird and Flower Painting Theme

Bird-and-flower painting became a distinct genre during the Tang Dynasty (7th century AD). Previously, plants and animals were depicted only as secondary subjects in figure painting (Zhang, 2017). For instance, in jobs like the Character Dragon and Phoenix Painting, the focus was on human figures, while the dragon and phoenix were secondary themes. However, with the rise of bird-and-flower painting, these subjects began to be portrayed with a newfound emphasis on realism and detail, marking a shift in artistic expression.

A prime example of this genre is Huang Quan's *Xie Sheng Zheng Qing Tu* (Sketches of Rare Birds), a work that is both a representative masterpiece of bird-and-flower painting and a model for later generations of artists (Wang, 2016), as shown in Figure 2.6.



**Figure 2.6:** *Xie Sheng Zheng Qing Tu* (Sketches of Rare Birds), silk ink, 10th century AD, 41.5 cm × 69.5 cm

Note. Reprinted from The Palace Museum, China (2015).

This painting exemplifies the meticulous techniques of Gong Bi painting, with Huang Quan employing the “double contour line” method to depict the texture and volume of bird feathers (Zhou, 2019). First, a light ink brush was used to outline the shape of the bird, followed by the application of colour. A second, darker ink line was then added to reinforce the contours, creating a striking contrast that emphasised the feather’s texture and depth. This technique showcases the precision and delicacy that define traditional Gong Bi painting, establishing a standard for future generations of bird-and-flower painters (Huang, 2022).

Meng & Chen (2019) argue that this thematic focus reflects a broader ideological shift during the Tang Dynasty. As superstition waned, there was a growing focus on nature and the world around humans. This period, at the height of China’s feudal society, saw a

shift in the role of painting, which was no longer limited to artistic expression alone. Instead, it began to serve as a tool for educating the public about nature and promoting scientific understanding. Zhang & Wu (2022) explain that the emergence of animal paintings, such as birds, also contributed to the development of natural sciences at the time. At this point, the ornithischian order had not yet emerged scientifically, and species like cranes, finches, storks, and pheasants were categorized as "birds" in an early form of biological classification. The paintings of these birds even contributed to the evolution of early Chinese calligraphy, particularly in the form of oracle bone inscriptions.

During the Tang and Song dynasties, Gong Bi painting evolved through three main themes: figure painting, bird-and-flower painting, and landscape painting, each with its unique artistic features. According to Wang (2016), figure painting in this period was characterised by a flat, two-dimensional style, emphasising the overall narrative atmosphere. In contrast, landscape painting adopted a more abstract approach, emphasizing grandeur and solemnity. Bird-and-flower painting, on the other hand, was known for its meticulous detail and precision, demonstrating careful observation of nature.

Overall, Gong Bi painting during the Tang and Song dynasties (618 - 1279) reveals a highly developed. The image (painting work) demonstrates technical precision and aesthetic refinement through balanced composition, elegant lines, and subtle colouration, symbolising the artistic maturity of the period (Gao, 2018). The text (content) shows a broadening of subjects from religious and courtly themes to depictions of Figures, Landscapes, and Flowers and Birds, reflecting a shift toward humanistic values and natural observation. The ideology level embodies the philosophical integration of Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist thought, where the painting became a moral and intellectual mirror of the

harmony between humanity and nature. Through this triadic framework, Tang and Song Gong Bi art transformed visual representation into a reflection of social ethics and cultural consciousness, marking the height of artistic and ideological synthesis in Chinese painting.

### **2.2.3 The Maturity Development of Gong Bi Painting**

Gong Bi painting underwent a resurgence during the Ming and Qing dynasties (14th to 19th centuries), achieving stable development after a period of marginalization. Following a century of marginalization due to the Mongol conquest in the 13th century, during which the Mongols favoured freehand styles over Gong Bi, the art form reemerged as a central element of imperial culture (Wang, 2006).

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Gong Bi painting became closely associated with royal art. Rulers commissioned detailed and precise Gong Bi paintings for portraits and depictions of court life, leading to the establishment of court painting institutions that played a central role in the style's development (Zhu, 2021). These jobs placed greater emphasis on realism. In the 18th century, the Qing dynasty introduced Western techniques of perspective and light-and-shadow, which further enhanced the realism in Gong Bi painting.

#### **2.2.3.1 The Figure Painting Theme**

During the Ming dynasty, Gong Bi figure paintings primarily depicted court events, driven by the demand for records of court life and historical events. Brushwork became a central element of royal art (Gao, 2022). A famous example is "Tribute Bearers" by Qiu Ying, a long scroll measuring 580.3 cm X 29.5 cm (Figure 2.7). Zhang (2022) observes that figure painting during this period shifted toward lavish and luxurious settings, often set within palaces or opulent gardens. The figures in these paintings became livelier and more dynamic in their expressions.



**Figure 2.7:** Zhigongjuan, silk ink, 16th century AD, 580.3 cm × 29.5 cm

Note. Reprinted from The Palace Museum, China (2015).

Additionally, Liu (2023) highlights the rise of portraiture as a new theme in figure painting during the Ming and Qing periods (Figure 2.8). The meticulous and realistic characteristics of Gong Bi painting made it ideal for portraiture, which became popular among the elite. Portraits focused on accurately depicting individual features, with the primary aim of capturing the subject's likeness (Liu, 2023).



**Figure 2.8:** Portrait of Liu Bo-yuan, silk ink, Ming Dynasty, 26.4 cm × 45.4 cm

Note. Reprinted from The Nanjing Museum, China (1933).

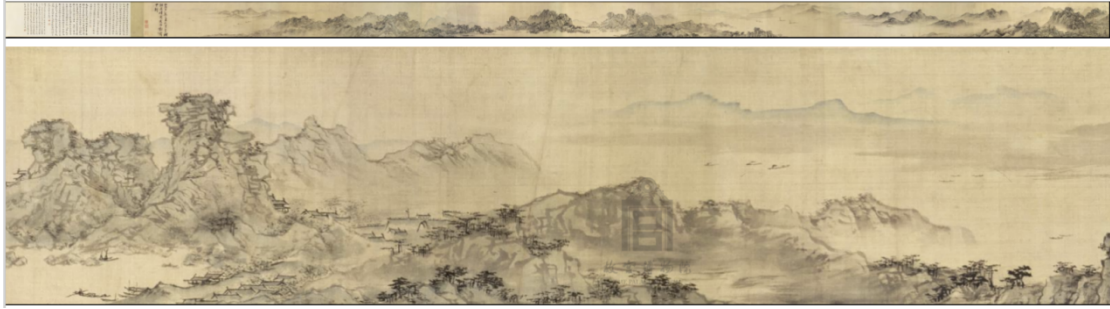
The figure painting theme of this period, with its greater emphasis on realism, incorporated techniques such as perspective and shading, along with more lavish and

realistic use of colour (Gao, 2022). This progress was driven by advancements in materials and the introduction of Western painting techniques by missionaries and diplomats (Tang & Wu, 2023). However, this preference for a realistic style somewhat limited the development of landscape painting. Meanwhile, the Landscape Painting Theme has made remarkable progress.

#### 2.2.3.2 The Landscape Painting Theme

Landscape painting developed the slowest among the three themes because its focus on abstraction contrasted with the period's pursuit of realism. Zhang (2021) and Fan (2018) argues that the rise of the Xie Yi during this period significantly hindered the development of Gong Bi landscape painting. The spontaneous brushstrokes and expressive ink splashes of Xie Yi were more effective in capturing the grandeur of natural landscapes, whereas Gong Bi's meticulous and realistic approach struggled to convey the same emotional impact.

During this period, the concept of "Literati painting" became prominent. Literati paintings were created by scholars to express their inner thoughts and emotions rather than to accurately depict the physical world (Chen, 2020). A notable example is Wu Wei's *Chang Jiang Wan Li Tu* (A Thousand Li of the Yangtze River), a long scroll measuring 27.8 cm X 976.2 cm (Figure 2.9). Zhang (2015) explains that this painting captures the relentless force of the Yangtze River, symbolizing the artist's broad vision and inner strength, despite its significant divergence from the actual landscapes and towns along the river.



**Figure 2.9:** Chang Jiang Wan Li Tu (A Thousand Li of the Yangtze River), silk ink, 16th century AD, 1233 cm × 35.2 cm

Note. Reprinted from The Palace Museum, China (2015)

Overall, the literati paintings of this period did not fundamentally differ from earlier landscape jobs, maintaining an abstract narrative style. In contrast, bird-and-flower painting underwent significant changes.

### 2.2.3.3 The Bird and flower Painting Theme

In the realm of bird-and-flower painting, the Ming and Qing dynasties placed greater emphasis on realism. During the later Qing period, court painters began to incorporate Western techniques of perspective and shading, elevating the lifelike quality of these paintings to new heights (Pei, 2024). For example, the Italian painter Giuseppe Castiglione, known as Lang Shining in China, became a court painter and produced jobs that combined Western realism with traditional Chinese Gong Bi techniques. The themes also expanded to include larger animals and complex scenes, often incorporating elements of landscape painting to create a sense of depth and volume (Wang, 2022). Lang's Eight Horses is a representative work, measuring 139.3 cm X 80.2 cm (Figure 2.10).



**Figure 2.10:** Eight Horses, silk ink, 18th century AD, 139.3 cm × 80.2 cm

Note. Reprinted from The Palace Museum, China (2015).

Liu & Cheng (2010) explain that Lang Shining's method combined Western sketching with Chinese Gong Bi techniques. He began with a precise sketch to outline the horses, applied layers of light ink wash and color using Chinese techniques and finished with fine brushstrokes to detail the manes and tails. This fusion of styles became a distinctive feature of Qing dynasty painting (Sun, 2019).

Overall, Gong Bi painting during the Ming and Qing dynasties reflects a complex interaction between painting and society. The image (Painting work) reveals heightened technical realism, with artists adopting Western techniques such as perspective, light, and shading to enhance visual depth and lifelike detail. This visual refinement demonstrates not only technical progress but also a shift toward mimetic representation. The text (Content), however, became increasingly constrained by imperial and courtly themes. Paintings were often produced to glorify power, virtue, or ritual hierarchy, resulting in the decline of narrative diversity and personal expression (Liu, 2015; Cheng, 2016). The ideology level

embodies the centralization of cultural authority under imperial patronage. Art became an instrument of political legitimacy, reflecting Confucian ideals of order and loyalty while suppressing individual creativity. Thus, Ming and Qing Gong Bi painting mirrors the tension between artistic sophistication and ideological constraint: it reached a technical zenith while losing the dynamic freedom that characterised earlier periods.

This section reviews the research on traditional Gong Bi painting and traces its developmental trajectory. From an imagological perspective, the evolution of traditional Gong Bi painting over more than two millennia can be understood as a dynamic interplay between image, text, and ideology that reflects the cultural and social transformations of China. The image level reveals the continuous refinement of visual language, from the symbolic line work of early periods to the sophisticated realism of the Ming and Qing dynasties, illustrating how aesthetic form evolved alongside technological innovation and material progress. The text level embodies the shifting themes of Gong Bi painting, moving from religious cosmology to representations of humanity, nature, and moral virtue. Each historical stage corresponded to changing conceptions of life, harmony, and the human spirit. The ideology level demonstrates how art functioned as a mirror of political and philosophical systems: Confucian ethics, Daoist naturalism, and later imperial authority all shaped the meanings embedded in visual representation.

In this sense, the trajectory of Gong Bi painting is inseparable from the broader ideological development of Chinese civilization. Its evolution not only recorded social structures and moral ideals but also visualized the Chinese worldview of harmony between heaven, earth, and humanity. However, this organic evolution came to a halt in the early twentieth century. The collapse of the imperial order and the impact of Western modernity

introduced new artistic paradigms, disrupting the inherited balance between image, text, and ideology. As a result, Gong Bi painting entered a new phase of transformation, where tradition and modernity began to coexist, negotiate, and redefine the meaning of Chinese art.

### **2.3 The Chinese Modern Gong Bi Paintings**

During this period, the primary focus shifted to learning from Western culture. One of the most significant reforms in the arts was the "May Fourth Movement" of 1919, also known as the "New Culture Movement," which aimed to modernize Chinese culture by integrating Western ideas (Shi & Wang, 2021). Xu (2012) observes that traditional Chinese painting aesthetics began to lose their dominance in the art world during this period. As Western culture gained wider acceptance within Chinese society, Western painting techniques began to spread, leading to profound changes in Chinese art (Kong, 2005, Wei, 2016). Specifically, the transformation of Gong Bi painting during this period can be divided into two distinct stages: the first from 1919 to 1949, and the second from 1949 to 1978.

#### **2.3.1 The first phase, 1919-1948**

From the early 20th century onward, China entered a semi-colonial era following the Opium War, which brought unprecedented political and cultural upheaval. Western powers imposed new systems of trade, education, and aesthetics, introducing Western artistic concepts that gradually reshaped China's cultural landscape. The New Culture Movement of 1919 marked the beginning of modern Chinese culture, emphasizing science, democracy, and the rejection of feudal traditions. Under these circumstances, Gong Bi painting gradually lost its central role in the national art system and entered a period of ideological and stylistic transformation.

According to Yan (2022), the once-influential Lingnan Gong Bi School struggled to survive amid continuous warfare and social instability, resulting in a decline in experienced artists and the absence of new talent. Meanwhile, Western realist painting began to dominate the curriculum of emerging art academies in major cities. For instance, the Shanghai Fine Arts College (founded in 1918) primarily emphasized oil painting and watercolour, leaving little space for traditional Gong Bi training (Qiu, 2019). As Yan (2022) notes, many Chinese students who studied abroad brought back Western ideas and techniques, accelerating the integration of Western realism into Chinese art. Therefore, these changes collectively pointed toward the reconstruction of Gong Bi painting through Western technical frameworks.

Within this colonial and revolutionary context, the social function of painting shifted toward political propaganda, directly shaping both its themes and visual strategies. Li & Yao (2007) observed that the previously diverse subjects of figure, flower-and-bird, and landscape painting were largely reduced to figure painting, as abstract or lyrical themes were considered inadequate for mass communication. Similarly, Zhao (2023) emphasized that figure painting better reflected the human-centred and social focus of the time. Consequently, realism became the dominant aesthetic, merging Western perspective and anatomy with traditional Chinese brushwork.

The most influential reformer of Gong Bi painting during this era was Xu Beihong, who championed the concept of “Fusion of East and West” (Huang, 2023). As Chen (2015) explains, Xu integrated the meticulous linework of Gong Bi with the expressive qualities of Xie yi (freehand) painting, fostering greater emotional flexibility and narrative clarity. Xu further asserted that “drawing is the foundation of the plastic arts”, advocating for the

adoption of Western realism as a means to modernize Chinese painting (Yang, 2022). According to Li (2015), Xu's advocacy not only reshaped Gong Bi's technical system and subject matter but also established realism as the prevailing artistic ideology throughout much of the 20th century.

Xiao (2024) analysed *The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains* from an imagological perspective, a long scroll measuring 143 cm × 423 cm (Figure, 2.11). At the image level, the work is rooted in the meticulous linework of traditional Gong Bi painting, yet integrates the light and shadow techniques of Western oil painting, creating a striking visual fusion between Eastern precision and Western realism. At the text level, the painting depicts the well-known ancient Chinese myth of the Foolish Old Man (Yu gong) who, through perseverance, attempts to remove the mountains blocking his way until the Emperor of Heaven intervenes. Notably, Xu Beihong incorporated Western-style nude figures, reinterpreting the traditional story through a modern, humanistic lens. At the ideological level, the painting reflects the national spirit of perseverance and unity during a period of national crisis.



**Figure 2.11:** *The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains*, silk ink, 1940, 143 cm × 423 cm

Note. Reprinted from Hunan Broadcasting System, China (2018).

Zhu (2023) explains that this work clearly demonstrates the social function of 'enlightening the people,' using symbolic language to inspire unity and resistance during

wartime. Unlike traditional Gong Bi paintings, which often used nature to express personal emotions or philosophical reflections, Xu's adaptation reflects a realist spirit, directly and clearly conveying a message of perseverance (Wu, 2012). Similarly, Ling & Zuo (2018) and Su (2020) conclude that Xu's innovation symbolizes the collective resilience and determination of the Chinese people in overcoming hardship.

Overall, this phase marked the transformation of Gong Bi painting from tradition to modernity. At the image level, Gong Bi lost its traditional symbolic precision and spiritual depth, becoming increasingly shaped by Western realism in composition, anatomy, and spatial perspective. At the text level, themes narrowed from the diverse triad of figures, landscapes, and flowers-and-birds to a primary focus on figure painting. The art no longer embodied Confucian or Daoist moral ideals or poetic emotion but reflected social reality and human struggle under modernization and revolution. At the ideological level, art was redefined as a medium for public education and collective mobilization. Although this shift diminished the artistic autonomy of traditional Gong Bi, it established the foundation for its later political instrumentalization. After 1949, this ideological trajectory enabled Gong Bi painting to evolve into a vehicle for socialist propaganda and cultural construction, transforming visual art into a tool for expressing national identity and ideology.

### **2.3.2 The second stage, 1949-1977**

In 1949, the People's Republic of China was founded, and during this period, the government explicitly defined art as a propaganda tool. Unlike the first phase, which was led by scholars' spontaneous reforms, this phase was dominated by government policies. Art became a vehicle for politics, serving as a "political symbol" (Zhu, 2014; Tang, 2023). This

policy can be traced back to the 1942 Yan 'a Literary and Artistic Symposium, which emphasized three key points.

- i. Art serves as an ideological and educational tool of society, propagating political, moral, philosophical, aesthetic, and other ideas in line with specific class interests.
- ii. To make culture and art integral parts of the entire revolutionary machinery
- iii. Culture and art reflect the revolutionary struggle and real life, serving workers, peasants, soldiers, and the masses.

During this period, Gong Bi painting became a powerful tool for political propaganda and ideological education. It was shaped to align with the slogan "serve the people." Zhang (2014) explains that Gong Bi's detailed brushstrokes and highly realistic characteristics gave it strong visual impact and narrative power, making it well-suited to depict themes such as national construction and the lives of workers and farmers. Compared to Xie Yi (freehand) and abstract painting styles, Gong Bi was better suited for conveying clear political messages and core ideas, helping the public easily grasp the content of the artwork (Tan & Wang, 2015).

Specifically, the government repurposed the traditional 'New Year painting,' typically characterized by vibrant Gong Bi style depictions of auspicious figures and animals meant to bring good fortune and blessings for the New Year (Figure 2.12). Traditionally, New Year paintings were simple and easy to understand, making them accessible to a broad audience. However, during this period, the government transformed New Year painting into a tool for promoting socialist themes (Cheng, 2009; Fei, 2012).



**Figure 2.12:** The New Year paintings: Liu Hai Xi Jin Chan

Source: Feng (2010)

A notable example of this transformation is *The Unity of the Chinese Nation* (Figure 2.13). The painting received widespread critical acclaim. Xu Bei-Hong praised the work as outstanding and invited the artist, Ye Qian-Yu, to teach at Beijing Art College (the predecessor of the Central Academy of Fine Arts). The Artists' Association, the leading authority in the art world at the time, hailed the painting as the finest work produced in the first five years after the founding of New China (Hao, 2021).



**Figure 2.13:** *The Unity of the Chinese Nation*, rice paper, 1953, 129 cm × 196 cm

Note. Reprinted from National Art Museum of China, China (1953).

The painting features 41 figures, with Chinese President Mao Zedong in the center, Premier Zhou Enlai on the left, and two other Chinese officials on the right. The remaining

figures represent ethnic minorities from across China, surrounding the leaders and raising cups in a communal toast. Wen (2024) argues that while traditional Gong Bi paintings depicted ancient mythological figures or historical heroes, these New Year paintings featured contemporary Chinese leaders, adding a "lively sense of epoch-making" as leaders became the new symbols of faith for the people.

Tang (2023) observes that the 'New Year painting' technique used in the artwork still follows the framework developed by Xu Bei-Hong in the previous period. The artwork retains traditional fine line sketching and color rendering, with lines outlining the characters' clothing, accessories, and textures. The figures are depicted realistically, with dynamic forms that make the content easy to comprehend.

At that time, as the newly established government sought cultural control and aimed to create a stable society, it was essential for the paintings to convey an overall atmosphere of "peace," "stability," and "happiness for all." To ensure widespread dissemination, the artwork needed to be simple and easy to understand (Li, 2010, Zhang, 2023). Thus, the Gong Bi painting style was chosen for these promotional New Year paintings.

The peak of art's propaganda function occurred during the Cultural Revolution. From 1967 to 1977, China underwent an intense cultural reform movement, during which Gong Bi painting was transformed into a powerful political propaganda tool, centering on Chairman Mao (Liu, 2011). The government exerted strict control over all aspects of society, and Gong Bi painting themes were entirely dictated by government policy, often being printed as posters or featured in books and newspapers to disseminate political messages

During this period, artwork evolved into 'Propaganda Posters,' characterized by bold, striking, and passionate slogans. These posters were prominently placed in high-traffic

public areas, directly addressing the masses and shaping public opinion (Li, 2013). Wang (2011) explains that Gong Bi painting's most important role during this time was to educate the people with new content. Artists were constrained by political requirements and only jobs that aligned with these demands held significance. One of the most famous propaganda Gong Bi paintings from this period is *The Red Sun's Glory Warms Ten Thousand Generations* (Figure 2.14).



**Figure 2.14:** *The Red Sun's Glory Warms Ten Thousand Generations*, 1972, 67 cm × 76 cm

Note. Reprinted from National Art Museum of China, China (1972).

Liu (2015) explains that the painting's central focus is a picture of Chairman Mao Zedong hanging on a classroom wall, with a colorful banner displaying the slogan "Live Forever Chairman Mao." This reflects the era's deep reverence for Mao's teachings, encapsulated by the common saying, "Chairman Mao shines in all directions like the red sun." Furthermore, painting supports policies such as reducing illiteracy, popularizing education, and encouraging scholars to teach in rural areas. According to Zhang (2014), the artwork aligns with key slogans of the time, such as "Knowledge is Power" and "Children

and Youth are the Flowers of the Motherland." The subject matter during this period became more restricted and controlled, with paintings serving as blunt instruments of propaganda.

Wang (2007) argues that the figures in these propaganda posters, typically centered around Mao, depicted core socialist figures. Workers and peasants became primary subjects because they symbolized those who supported and contributed to the construction of socialism.

Additionally, the paintings supported policies such as reducing illiteracy, popularizing education, and encouraging scholars to teach in rural areas. According to Yang (2013), *The Red Sun's Glory Warms Ten Thousand Generations* aligns with two prominent slogans of Chinese society at the time: "Knowledge is Power" and "Children and Youth are the Flowers of the Motherland." Overall, the subject matter of the paintings during this period became more restricted and controlled, serving as a blunt and unadorned tool of propaganda.

Overall, during this period, painting became entirely a tool for propaganda. From image perspective, Despite the shift in subject matter, the techniques remained consistent with the previous period. Lu (1998) notes that the composition and figure-drawing techniques continued to follow Xu Bei-Hong's principles of scientifically improving Chinese painting. The layout of figures in these jobs resembled realistic oil paintings, while the line drawing and color rendering remained characteristic of Gong Bi painting. Text, the artistic value of Gong Bi painting was almost entirely disregarded during this period. The creative process was highly politicized, with artists focusing solely on socialist construction and revolutionary themes. Individual artistic expressions and personal style were largely suppressed. Ideology Lu (1998) concludes that the art of the Cultural Revolution was a

fanatical product of centralism and modern superstition, an art form dominated by what he describes as "red modernism." However, it still brought positive aspects, solidifying its role as an official art form. Through widespread exposure via exhibitions, publications, and political propaganda, Gong Bi painting gained prominence in both the minds of artists and the public (Yang, 2010).

Overall, this period marked the complete politicization of Gong Bi painting, as art became a tool of propaganda. At the image level, despite changes in subject matter, the techniques remained consistent with the previous period. Lu (1998) notes that composition and figure-drawing still followed Xu's scientific reform principles, combining realistic oil-painting layouts with the linear precision and color rendering of Gong Bi style. At the text level, the artistic and aesthetic value of Gong Bi painting was largely disregarded. The creative process was highly politicized, focusing exclusively on socialist construction and revolutionary subjects. Individual expression and stylistic diversity were suppressed in favor of collective ideological representation.

At the ideological level, Lu (1998) characterizes the art of the Cultural Revolution as a product of "red modernism", a centralized, fanatical form of art that merged political devotion with aesthetic modernity. Yet, as Yang (2010) observes, this period also strengthened the institutional authority of Gong Bi painting. Through state-sponsored exhibitions, publications, and propaganda, Gong Bi became firmly established as an official art form, gaining visibility among both artists and the public.

### 2.3.3 The Contemporary Phase of Gong Bi Paintings

In 1978, under the leadership of the new chairman Deng Xiaoping, China embarked on a new course of development guided by the principles of "Reform and Opening Up" and "Seeking Truth from Facts." This became the cornerstone of Chinese economic reform, and over the next 40 years, China experienced rapid economic growth, becoming the world's second-largest economy. This economic transformation brought about several key changes:

First, political control over the arts decreased significantly. Second, Yang (2011) and Shao (2008) both believed economic growth fuelled artistic development, allowing Chinese art to diversify and flourish once again. Freed from the constraints of strong political agendas, art entered a period of remarkable revival, often compared to a "renaissance"(Xia, 1991; Ma, 2010). Wang et al. (2019) and Xie (2020) note that since the 1980s, Chinese art has experienced increasing openness and vitality. No longer merely a tool for political or religious indoctrination, art has come to reflect the broader ideological landscape of contemporary society.

During this phase, Gong Bi painting underwent a comprehensive revival, with long-dormant themes such as landscapes and bird and flower subjects re-emerging (Gu, 2008; Chen, 2012; Guo, 2021). Mou (2021) notes that artists enthusiastically broke through the boundaries of realism and explored new styles that fused traditional elements with modern influences.

Cui (2019) analyzed the award-winning bird-and-flower painting *Spring Bird* from the 1980s (Figure 2.15). This work revived the traditional Song dynasty technique of the "branch folding" method, where only select branches and leaves are depicted, often

accompanied by several birds. This composition emphasizes the artist's attention to detail, showcasing the aesthetic beauty of classical bird-and-flower paintings.



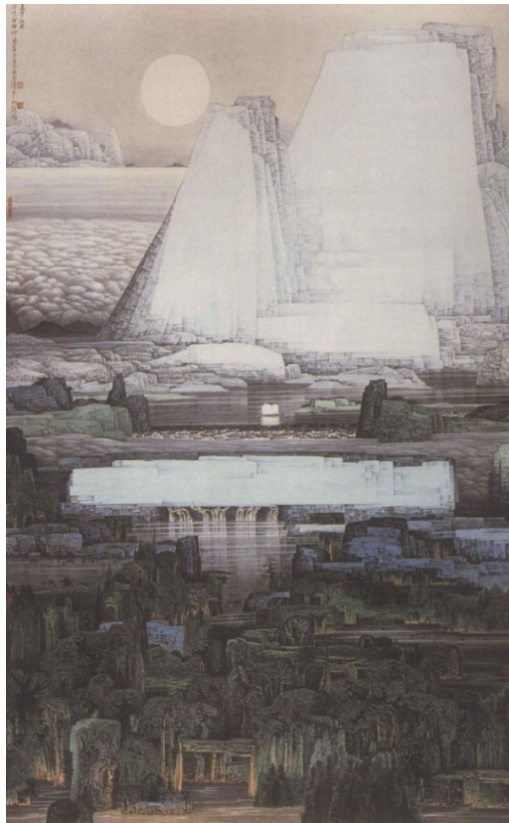
**Figure 2.15:** Spring Bird, Silk-ink, 132 cm X 50 cm

Source: Jiang (2017)

Liu & Liu (2020) further explains that Spring Bird also revived traditional Song dynasty dyeing techniques. Jiang applied bright colors followed by repeated washing with clear water to tone down the pigments, creating a textured background that exudes a calm, classical aesthetic. This technique enhances the decorative quality of the colors, imbuing the painting with a serene, timeless beauty.

Lang (2018) observes that bird-and-flower paintings during this period returned to traditional themes, incorporating metaphorical and symbolic expressions. While these paintings often maintained a decorative nature, the themes reflect renewed artistic freedom, signaling a shift back to exploring the essence of art itself. Spring Bird serves as a successful example of the inheritance of traditional techniques (Cui, 2013). Liu (2017) further explains that this return to tradition in bird-and-flower painting can be attributed to the emotional and aesthetic satisfaction it provided, fulfilling the public's sentimental and emotional needs during that time.

In addition to the revival of tradition, there was bold experimentation. Tang (2014) analyzed the landscape painting *Jiangnan in Artistic Conception* (Figure 2.16), noting that it transcended the traditional "three-far method" by reconstructing mountains and stones into geometric shapes. This created a solemn visual effect, with large rock formations dominating the composition. The background features a high peak shrouded in clouds and moonlight, while the foreground shows waterfalls, rivers, and forests. The vertical composition deviates from the horizontal layouts commonly used in traditional landscape paintings.



**Figure 2.16:** *Jiangnan in Artistic Conception*, Silk-ink, 125 cm X 245 cm

Source: He (2021)

Li (2017) and Chang (2021) stated that the aesthetic concept in his landscape painting contrasts with the feudal literati pride exhibited by ancient landscape painters. He (2021) believes that the "peacefulness" typically expressed in traditional landscape painting has

evolved under the pressures of industrialization and urbanization. Today, the desire for freedom and tranquility is a universal sentiment. The dreamlike scenery in the painting offers viewers a sense of relaxation and spiritual enjoyment.

Figure painting also saw a return to its artistic essence after being freed from its role as a political tool (Xiao, 2018). *Autumn Meditation* (Figure 2.17), a Gong Bi figure painting in vibrant colors by He Jiaying, is a standout example. Wang (2017) highlighted the breakthroughs in *Autumn Meditation*, noting that this work's meticulous use of lines reflects the inheritance of traditional Gong Bi techniques. He used lines with varying textures to depict different objects while incorporating Western realism to preserve the relationship between light and shadow throughout the painting.



**Figure 2.17:** *Autumn Meditation*, Silk-ink, 203 cm X 150 cm

Source: He (2015)

Chen (2020) believes that the non-traditional panoramic composition only captures the middle and lower parts of the birch forest as the subject. Regarding color, traditional Gong Bi figure paintings tend to be vibrant and thick, with little consideration for the

interplay of warm and cool colors. However, Kang (2023) explained the influence of Western color language can be observed in He Jiaying's work.

The painter He (2015) expressed in his article, "Autumn, the most touching season, where falling leaves evoke a sigh for the passing of life. In this season, the girl in the painting shows a sense of confusion about life, which is also the confusion we all experience at some stage of life, pondering about the future and life itself." Wen & Zhang (2021) interpreted He's point of view and believed that contemplation also exhibits realistic characteristics, expressing the artist's concern for people in the context of modern society.

From an imagological perspective, the contemporary phase of Gong Bi painting reflects a renewed balance among image, text, and ideology. At the image level, Gong Bi painting re-entered a relatively free creative environment, allowing artists to experiment with diverse visual vocabularies that blend traditional meticulous linework with modern techniques such as abstraction, symbolism, and digital media (Wang, 2019; Cheng, 2021; Fan & Chu, 2023). At the text level, the content has shifted from collective revolutionary narratives to more personal, emotional, and philosophical themes, reflecting the artists' renewed awareness of identity and subjectivity. At the ideological level, Gong Bi painting has moved away from its former propagandistic function toward becoming a medium of cultural reflection and value reconstruction, encouraging dialogue between heritage and modern aesthetics (Xue & Su, 2020).

Ultimately, the key question for Gong Bi painting today lies in how to balance continuity and innovation, how to preserve the moral and technical essence of the tradition while engaging critically with modern aesthetics. Against this social and artistic backdrop,

Hunan Gong Bi painting emerged, creating a new style that revives tradition while innovating. It has become a leading force in contemporary Gong Bi painting.

## **2.4 Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP)**

Existing research on the Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP) industry focuses primarily on two phases. The first phase represents the Rise Period (1980–2000), while the second phase represents the Period of Stagnation (2000–2024). These phases are discussed in detail below.

### **2.4.1 The "Rise Period" of HGP, 1980-2000**

At this stage of the research, focus on explore the distinctive features of HGP jobs and exploring the reasons for its rise. Feng (2017) analyzed the common characteristics of HGP jobs from the 1980s, noting that they often focused on the lives of ethnic minorities in Hunan. Artists frequently visited various ethnic villages to capture the local essence through sketches, documenting the unique styles of Hunan's local culture (Chu, 1996). According to *Sixty Years of Hunan Art*, published by the Hunan Artists Association, from the late 1970s to the 1990s, under the leadership of Chen Bai-Yi, several painting artists were sent across the province to live and work in different areas, producing art based on their experiences. They also organized multiple Gong Bi painting workshops, further enhancing the style.

Xun & Liu (2011) conducted an analysis of the Gong Bi painting by Chen Bai-Yi, emphasizing how its narrative structure has significantly diverged from the stylistic conventions of the 1960s. This divergence is characterized by a return to traditional line-based techniques, moving away from the predominant use of Western-style light and shadow. The facial features were depicted with light colors, and clothing was rendered in pure, flat

colors, minimizing the realistic tonal transitions typically associated with Western realism. This approach was seen as a return to the artistic essence of traditional Chinese painting.

Wang (2017) focused on the thematic elements of Chen, noting that it often depicted ordinary moments from the lives of minority women. The simplicity, naturalness, and elegance of the jobs became defining characteristics of HGP, giving rise to what is now referred to as the "Hunan style." Li (2005) and Chen (2017) shared a similar opinion, analyzing Chen Bai-Yi's work *Miao Jia Huan Ge* (Figure 2.18), which also depicted ethnic minority life and labor. These pieces, with their rich regional and cultural characteristics, resonated with the public, offering a sense of relief from the heavy political atmosphere of the post-Cultural Revolution era.



**Figure 2.18:** *Miao Jia Huan Ge*, Xuan paper-ink, 1982

Source: Courtesy from Artist Chen Ming-da

Cao (2017) examined Yang Xian-Shun's landscape painting *Falling Clouds* (Figure 2.19), which was selected for seven China National Art Exhibitions during the 1990s. Yang, another prominent Hunan artist, also focused on the local village life of Hunan but

introduced technical innovations. First, he broke away from the traditional Gong Bi landscape's typical blue-and-green color palette by introducing red hues, which were rarely seen in traditional Gong Bi paintings. This innovative use of color brought new vitality to his work. Additionally, Yang deviated from the standard landscape composition by filling the entire canvas with subjects rather than leaving space for sky or ground. His portrayal of distorted houses and trees added a modern dimension to the traditional landscape format.



**Figure 2.19:** Falling Clouds, Xuan paper-ink, 1997, 132 cm X 62 cm

Source: WeChat official account of Hunan Artists Association

Mo Gao-Xiang is another prominent figure in HGP, particularly known for his bird-and-flower painting Ning (Figure 2.20). In an interview with Mo by Chen et al (2013), Mo explains that his work employs the traditional "folding branch" technique, representing life in Hunan through subtle, everyday imagery. He emphasizes the importance of finding beauty in the ordinary, encouraging artists not to merely imitate traditional subjects but to paint

what moves them personally. Wu (2018) wrote that Mo Gao-Xiang was best at using the "ordinary" to create jobs that moved the audience.



**Figure 2.20:** Ning, Silk-ink, 1989, 110 cm X 110 cm

Source: WeChat official account of Hunan Artists Association

Previous research shows that the distinctive feature of HGP jobs is their focus on local life in Hunan, particularly in figure paintings. Technically, HGP artists maintain traditional line-drawing and shading techniques while also incorporating varying degrees of individual innovation. Beyond the quality of the work themselves, several factors contributed to the rise of HGP.

The Sixty Years of Hunan Art conference emphasized that Chen Bai-Yi (1926-2014) was a key figure in the rise of HGP. Liu (2009) noted that Chen's strategy of "using traditional techniques to depict modern life" was a groundbreaking concept in post-Cultural

Revolution China. Chen's strong foundation in Gong Bi painting techniques was also crucial to the success of this style, as he had honed his skills as a propaganda artist during earlier decades.

Deng (1996) similarly believed that Chen Bai-Yi's work was pivotal to the flourishing of the HGP industry. Chen began creating jobs focused on the Miao people of western Hunan as early as the 1960s, gaining recognition within the province. After the Cultural Revolution ended in the 1980s, Chen continued to develop this style by merging local ethnic themes with traditional techniques. He mentored a new generation of artists and ultimately established a distinct Hunan Gong Bi style.

Chen (2011) also attributed HGP's success to Chen Bai-Yi, praising his mastery of traditional line techniques. Chen's ability to capture the spirit and expressions of figures through the fluidity and density of his lines allowed for vivid character portrayals, a key feature that influenced most figure painters in Hunan and shaped the overall style of HGP.

Zhou (2002) highlighted the role of government support in HGP's success. Hunan was one of the first provinces to prioritize the development of Gong Bi painting. In 1979, the Hunan Artists Association resumed operations and swiftly responded to China's 11th Third Plenary Session's cultural strategy by focusing on developing Gong Bi painting. In the early 1980s, the government began organizing field studies for Hunan Gong Bi artists and established training programs.

Lu (2011) attributed the success of HGP to its geographic advantages, noting that Hunan's diverse landscape and ethnic composition, with 55 recognized minority groups and several autonomous ethnic areas, offered artists rich cultural inspiration. Hunan's diverse

natural features, including UNESCO World Heritage sites like Zhangjiajie, Langshan, and Dong-ting Lake, as well as Hengshan Mountain, provided fertile ground for artistic creation.

Wu (2013) also considered economic factors in the success of HGP. They compared the bird-and-flower paintings of Guangdong and Hunan, noting that Guangdong's more affluent economy allowed greater cultural exchange, resulting in a stronger Western influence on their artwork. Hunan, being more rural and economically less developed, maintained a stronger connection to traditional painting styles.

In conclusion, prior research shows that the Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP) industry possesses distinct artistic characteristics. The rise of HGP can be attributed to a combination of factors, including the contributions of individual artists, political support, geographic diversity, cultural richness, and economic conditions. However, after 2000, the HGP industry has faced various challenges and experienced a noticeable decline in several areas.

#### **2.4.2 The Period of Stagnation of HGP,2000-2024**

As society progressed, the influence of Hunan's Gong Bi painting industry diminished. Li (2016) summarized this issue, commenting that Hunan Gong Bi paintings are now marked by the "homogenization of artistic individuality," a "diminishing sense of regional identity," and an "aging Gong Bi painting community." He noted that 'since the 21st century, fewer young painters have participated in Gong Bi painting exhibitions, and almost no young artists have gained recognition within the Chinese Gong Bi painting community. Hunan is no longer referred to as a 'strong province of Chinese Gong Bi painting,' indicating that its development has entered a bottleneck.'

Teng (2011) also addressed this decline, attributing it to changes in the cultural environment. He argued that the impact of modern, diverse cultures, combined with weakening confidence in traditional culture and a lack of exploration into these traditions, has made it difficult for contemporary Hunan Gong Bi painting to maintain its previous prominence.

Li (2013) agreed with Teng's view, noting that the indirect influence of Western culture has contributed to the weakening of traditional arts. They argue that most painters active after 2000 were shaped by the cultural education of the 1990s, which was influenced by the modern aesthetic movements that emerged in the late 1980s, such as the "85 New Wave." Li (2017) explained this movement encouraged artists to move away from tradition and incorporate Western modern art into their Gong Bi creations.

Lu (2011) emphasized that to revive Hunan Gong Bi painting, it is essential to preserve the region's cultural uniqueness. He compared traditional Hunan music, dance, and art with modern popular forms, arguing that the success of Hunan's cultural endeavours lies in their distinctiveness.

The literature review reveals that the Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP) industry has experienced a significant decline since the early 2000s. However, the underlying causes of this decline remain insufficiently explored. Existing research mainly describes surface-level phenomena, such as the reduction in exhibitions, awards, and public influence, without systematically analyzing the transformations in the form, content, and social function of HGP jobs.

To truly understand the roots of this decline, it is necessary to examine the specific changes in the images and themes of HGP jobs, as these visual and narrative transformations

often reflect deeper cultural, institutional, and ideological factors. Without analyzing how artistic expression and social context interact, explanations of HGP's decline remain incomplete and superficial.

In response to this gap, imagology provides a highly suitable analytical framework. By examining art through the interrelated dimensions of image, text, and ideology, imagology connects visual form with cultural meaning and social structure. This approach allows a deeper understanding of how HGP's aesthetic evolution corresponds to shifts in ideology, identity, and institutional context. It not only enhances the academic understanding of HGP's transformation but also offers valuable insights for developing strategies toward its sustainable revitalization.

## **2.5 Relevant Applications of Imagological Theory**

The theory of imagology has developed from a method of formal art analysis into a comprehensive framework for interpreting visual meaning and cultural signification. This theory, originating from Cesare Ripa's *Imagology*, published in 1592 (Huang, 2022), subsequently underwent three significant developmental phases. First, Erwin Panofsky's humanistic model established the interpretive foundation of visual meaning through the notion of symbolic form. In *Studies in Iconology* (1939), Panofsky proposed three analytical levels: pre-iconographical description, iconographical analysis, and iconological interpretation. Progressing from visual observation to intellectual understanding. For Panofsky, works embody a worldview (*Weltanschauung*) that reflects the intellectual and cultural structures of their time. This transformed art history from the study of form into a study of meaning, positioning the historian as an interpreter of cultural symbols. As Hasenmueller (1978) notes, Panofsky's approach functions as a "semiotics of art,"

anticipating later linguistic and structuralist perspectives that treat images as coded systems of knowledge.

Second, Barthes (1980) and Louis Althusser redefined imagology through linguistic and ideological theory. Barthes extended Saussure's semiotics to visual communication, arguing that images, like language, are composed of signifiers and signifieds that produce meaning. In *Mythologies* (1972), he showed how visual culture naturalises ideology by turning social values into "myths." Althusser, in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (1970), provided the political dimension of visual meaning, proposing that ideology functions by interpolating individuals as subjects within social structures. Building on these ideas, W. J. T. Mitchell (1994) merged Althusser's theory of ideology with Panofsky's interpretive method, introducing the notion of "visual ideology." This reoriented imagological analysis toward questions of power, identity, and representation, where the viewer is no longer neutral but is positioned and shaped by the image itself.

Third, the post-structural and visual culture turn since the 1980s has extended imagology into interdisciplinary domains. Scholars such as Mieke Bal, Norman Bryson, and Mitchell emphasized that meaning is not inherent in the image but produced through interpretive acts shaped by discourse and context. Mitchell (2012) advanced this into the concept of the "pictorial turn," arguing that images have surpassed language as the dominant mode of cultural expression. He proposed that art should be understood as a mirror through which society can be seen, a site where visual forms reveal collective desires, anxieties, and ideologies. This view situates the image as both an aesthetic and a social text, enabling scholars to examine how cultural power and identity are reflected through visual media.

Specifically, Mitchell's (2012) synthesis defines imagology through three interrelated levels: 1). Image referring to form, painting, or likeness. Aristotle regarded the image as a "visible form" and a "form of sensation" emitted by objects, encompassing a wide range of visual manifestations. 2). Text encompassing words, thoughts, discourse, or systems of meaning. This level concerns representation, signification, and interpretation 3). Ideology addressing the socio-cultural context that shapes both the "Image" and the "Text. Overall, this triadic framework establishes a clear connection between visual form, artistic content, and social context, enabling the analysis of how paintings both reflect and construct cultural reality.

In recent years, numerous scholars have applied Mitchell's (2012) imagological approach to interpreting paintings. Han & He (2011) examined how imagology can bridge traditional symbolism and contemporary interpretation, while Wang (2022) noted that the complexity of modern society introduces uncertainty into visual analysis, requiring attention to artists' lived environments. These studies demonstrate that imagology offers a multidimensional framework for examining not only aesthetic form but also social meaning.

Firstly, imagology has proven effective in revealing the direct relationship between jobs and local culture in the context of Chinese painting. This aligns with the goals of this study, which seeks to understand how changes in HGP reflect Hunan's unique cultural landscape. For example, Huang (2018) applied iconographic theory to analyze the jobs of Hunan oil painter Chen Hexi, highlighting the fusion of traditional Chinese culture with modern oil painting techniques. His work not only expressed nostalgia and love for rural life but also conveyed the distinct regional culture and ethnic spirit through depictions of people, animals, and natural landscapes.

Similarly, Zhou (2022) applied imagology to the analysis of the Lijiang School in Guangxi Province. By examining the regional cultural features and national spirit conveyed through landscape paintings, Zhou demonstrated how these jobs expressed reverence for local culture and nature. Iconographic analysis effectively uncovered the cultural significance and distinctiveness of the Lijiang School in modern society.

Xie (2022) applied imagology to study the art of the Zhuang farmers in Jiangxi, Guangxi, revealing how their jobs reflect the spiritual world of the Zhuang people. These jobs have become valuable resources for cultural revitalization and economic development in the modern era, as they not only depict daily life but also serve as important tools for cultural and economic growth.

Xiao (2023) analyzed the multicultural characteristics of jobs from northern Xinjiang using imagology, focusing on how social, historical, and cultural meanings are embedded in the visual elements of these jobs. The study provided insights into the symbolic significance and aesthetic value of regional art, revealing the deeper meanings behind the artwork's symbols, colors, and compositions.

Gao (2019) used imagology in his dissertation to study the transformation of flower-and-bird paintings in Heilongjiang Province. He revealed how the province's unique regional style emerged during the reform of Chinese flower-and-bird painting, particularly in the portrayal of northern ecological landscapes and human spirit. Gao argued that imagology enables researchers to analyze complex visual jobs in stages, highlighting regional cultural characteristics and presenting unique aesthetic values. This approach offers a new perspective for studying the development of regional painting schools in China.

In addition, previous studies have shown that imagological can uncover deeper symbolic meanings embedded in jobs. This complements the goals of the current research, which aims to understand the social factors behind the changes in HGP. For instance, E. Macri (2017) used iconographic theory to analyze contemporary Chinese landscape paintings, revealing how traditional landscape art has been redefined in modern contexts. The study emphasized how landscape paintings shifted from a philosophical perspective to environmental ethics, reflecting concerns about environmental degradation and inspiring public discourse on sustainability.

Egenhöfer (2014) applied imagology to political-themed paintings in the 2009 Chinese art exhibition celebrating the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. Her analysis showed how this oil paintings conveyed political and educational messages, enhancing viewers' sense of national identity and historical awareness through the symbolic representation of historical events.

Yao (2024) used imagology to analyze changes in Gong Bi flower-and-bird paintings, comparing traditional and modern elements. Yao highlighted that the innovation in these paintings goes beyond technical advancements and lies in how artists address contemporary social issues through their jobs. This integration of tradition and modernity not only adapts traditional art forms to contemporary aesthetic needs but also imparts deeper social and cultural significance.

Zhang (2014) used imagology and semiotics to examine Ming dynasty literati paintings, revealing hidden concepts and symbolic values. The study emphasized the interaction between images, language, and symbols, providing deeper insights into the symbolic meanings and metaphors embedded in these jobs.

Huang (2024) applied iconographic analysis to the painting *A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains*, focusing on its artistic style, cultural symbolism, and historical context. Huang argued that the painting not only offers visual impact but also carries rich cultural connotations, reflecting Song dynasty social ideals and the artist's emotional world.

Li & Lu (2023) analysed Gu Kai-Zhi's *The Nymph of the Luo River* using iconographic theory, exploring how female imagery was portrayed in the painting and its cultural significance. The authors argued that while the nymph appeared as a beautiful and free figure, she remained confined by patriarchal norms and moral codes, symbolizing the limitations faced by women in public life during that era.

Zhang (2012) applied imagology to study Li Tang's *Gathering of Scholars*, incorporating the "code theory" concept, which helps viewers understand the cultural and historical symbols in the painting. Zhang argued that imagology can serve as an effective framework for analysing traditional Chinese paintings, revealing the cultural and historical meanings behind their symbolic systems.

Furthermore, art as a mirror of society, has been widely applied in visual culture and art history research. Several recent studies demonstrate that this theoretical approach is both flexible and empirically grounded across cultural contexts. Crespi (2020) applied Mitchell's imagology and "pictorial turn" framework to examine early twentieth-century Chinese manhua (cartoons). Through analysing narrative structure, visual humour, and socio-political allegory, Crespi demonstrated how popular illustrations mediated tensions between modernity and tradition, revealing how visual images functioned as mirrors of urban social transformation in Republican China. This study confirmed the cross-cultural validity of

Mitchell's framework by showing that Chinese visual practices can be understood as part of the global visual turn.

Belting (2005) expanded Mitchell's image–text–ideology triadic model through an anthropological perspective. He argued that the human body operates as a “living medium” of images, connecting artistic expression with embodied cultural experience. Belting's research underscored that images are not passive reflections of culture but active participants in shaping social meaning and identity, further validating the interpretive depth of imagological analysis.

Mitchell (2012) operationalized his theory in *Seeing Through Race*, analyzing artworks, photography, and mass media to illustrate how visual representations both construct and expose racial ideology. His work demonstrated that images are political and performative agents that shape collective perception—thus reaffirming the imagological premise that visual forms both reflect and produce ideology.

Purgar (2014) reassessed Mitchell's “pictorial turn” two decades later, emphasizing its methodological flexibility within visual studies. He argued that imagology functions as an interdisciplinary method that bridges artistic form, social discourse, and media representation. This approach provides a replicable analytical model for contemporary art and cultural research.

He (2022) adopted Mitchell's imagological principles to analyse contemporary Chinese photographic art, focusing on the interaction between text and image as a means of expressing cultural identity and critical reflection. By examining how photographers construct meaning through visual-textual synthesis, He demonstrated the adaptability of

Mitchell’s theory to Chinese contemporary visual practices, validating its applicability to non-Western artistic contexts.

Collectively, these studies indicate that Mitchell’s imagology offers a rigorous and translatable framework for connecting visual form, textual meaning, and ideological context. It has been successfully employed to interpret both Western and Chinese art, proving that imagology provides a viable theoretical foundation for this study’s exploration of Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP) as a reflection of cultural and social transformation (Table 2.1).

**Table 2.1:** Related applications of imagology

| <b>Authors</b>        | <b>Research target</b>  | <b>Results</b>  |
|-----------------------|---|---|
| Huang (2018)          | Oil painting of Hunan painter Chen Hexi.                        | Chen's work reflects a deep connection to regional culture and ethnic spirit, combining tradition and modernity.                  |
| Han & He Wanli (2011) | Chinese paintings; imagology.                                   | imagology offers new perspectives but needs localization to account for cultural differences.                                     |
| Wang (2022)           | Modern Chinese art.   | imagology provides multidimensional insights but must consider social context to avoid misinterpretation.                         |
| Zhou (2022)           | Lijiang School in Chinese Guangxi Provence landscape paintings. | Lijiang School landscape paintings express regional cultural reverence, and imagology reveals their modern cultural significance. |
| Xie (2022)            | Chinese Guangxi Zhuang farmer paintings                         | Zhuang farmer paintings reflect the spiritual world and have become valuable cultural and economic resources in modern society.   |

**Table 2.1** continued

|                  |  |   |
|------------------|--|---|
| Xiao (2023)      | Chinese northern Xinjiang art.                                   | Northern Xinjiang art contains rich symbolic meanings, reflecting the region's multicultural heritage.                |
| Gao (2019)       | Chinese He Longjiang Flower and Bird painting                    | Flower-and-bird paintings in Heilongjiang reveal unique aesthetic and cultural values.                                |
| Macri (2017)     | Contemporary Chinese landscape paintings                         | Contemporary landscape paintings address environmental concerns, inspiring reflection on sustainability.              |
| Egenhöfer (2014) | Political-themed paintings from the 2009 Chinese art exhibition. | Political artworks convey strong national identity and historical awareness   |
| Yao (2024)       | Gong Bi flower-and-bird paintings                                | Flower-and-bird paintings evolve by integrating social commentary, balancing tradition with modern aesthetic demands. |
| Zhang (2012)     | Ming dynasty Southern School                                     | Imagology and semiotics uncover hidden symbolic values in Ming dynasty Southern School                                |
| Li & Lu (2023)   | Gu Kaizhi The Nymph of the Luo River                             | Female imagery in The Nymph of the Luo River reflects societal constraints and cultural symbolism.                    |
| Huang (2024)     | landscape paintings ‘Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains’        | The painting encapsulates Song dynasty ideals, combining visual impact with deep cultural connotations.               |

**Table 2.1** continued

|                 |  |   |
|-----------------|--|---|
| Crespi (2021)   | Chinese <i>manhua</i> (cartoons) and the <i>pictorial turn</i> in modern Chinese visual culture. | Demonstrated how visual narratives mediated tensions between modernity and tradition, showing that images reflected and               |
| Belting (2005)  | The human body as a medium of images in art and culture.   | Expanded Mitchell’s imagology into an anthropological perspective, arguing that the body serves as a living medium that links art,    |
| Mitchell (2012) | Visual representation of race in art, photography, and media.                                    | Applied imagological theory to show how images construct and expose racial ideology, revealing the political and performative         |
| Purgar (2015)   | The methodological evolution of the <i>pictorial turn</i> in visual studies.                     | Reviewed how imagology functions as an interdisciplinary method connecting artistic form, social discourse, and media                 |
| He (2022)       | Contemporary Chinese photographic art combining text and image.                                  | Used Mitchell’s framework to explore how text–image interaction expresses cultural identity, proving the adaptability of imagology in |

Therefore, imagology has significant potential for conducting an in-depth analysis of HGP. It provides a framework that connects HGP jobs to Hunan's cultural landscape and reveals the underlying social motivations driving changes in the HGP industry. This approach addresses the research gaps identified in the previous section and offers a comprehensive understanding of HGP's evolution.

## 2.6 Conclusion

This section reviews the history of Chinese Gong Bi painting, highlighting its development over thousands of years and the formation of its distinctive techniques and themes. In the 20th century, Gong Bi painting underwent modernization, gradually aligning with Western realism. After 1978, Gong Bi entered the contemporary phase, during which artists began experimenting with a fusion of traditional and modern styles. Within this context, the Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP) school emerged.

The HGP school rose to prominence in the 1980s and reached its peak in the 1990s, establishing a clear style of "using tradition to depict contemporary life." Its success was attributed to a combination of cultural, economic, political, and individual factors. However, since 2000, HGP has experienced a significant decline. Current research on HGP is limited, with little attention given to the changes in HGP work after 2000 or the reasons behind these changes.

Additionally, the researcher reviewed the relevant applications of imagology theory, demonstrating that this approach can not only reveal the relationship between jobs and local culture but also uncover deeper cultural motivations. Therefore, the researcher believes that this study, using imagology, can provide new insights into the HGP industry and offer a fresh perspective on its evolution.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research design, and the specific methodologies employed to ensure alignment with the study's trajectory and facilitate the achievement of its objectives. Establishing an organized and systematic framework is essential for collecting and managing research data before analysing the results. This chapter is divided into three sections: research objectives, research strategy, and research methods, ensuring that each step and approach is closely tied to the overall research goals.

#### 3.2 Aims of Research and Research Question

Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP) is regarded as a leading school of contemporary Chinese Gong Bi painting. It originated in the 1980s and reached its height in the 1990s, earning the reputation as the "strongest region for Chinese Gong Bi painting." However, since 2000, HGP has faced a noticeable decline, evident in three main areas: fewer Hunan Gong Bi painting exhibitions, fewer HGP artists winning awards at the China National Art Exhibition (CANE), and a decline in the number of Hunan artists holding key positions in China's top painting organizations. Li (2016) observed that since 2000, HGP has entered a "the Period of Stagnation" of growth.

As a practitioner within the HGP industry, the researcher believes that HGP still holds the potential to remain a prominent school of Chinese painting. Therefore, this study aims to propose suitable recommendations to enhance the sustainability of the HGP industry. The three core research questions are.

- i. What is the entire development process of HGP?
- ii. What are the most important issues and challenges faced by the HGP industry?
- iii. How to Enhance the Sustainability of the HGP Industry?

### **3.3 The Application of Imagology Theory**

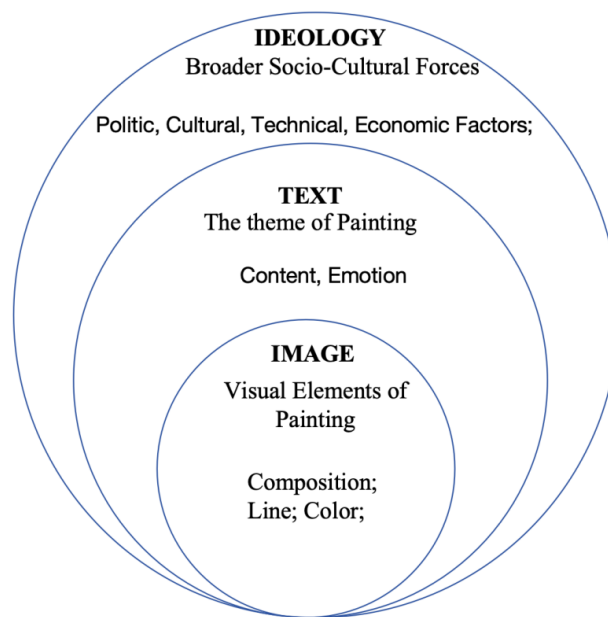
Based on the literature review's findings, existing studies have primarily identified the decline of the HGP industry, such as the reduction in exhibitions, awards, and public influence. However, there is a lack of a detailed analysis of the transformation within HGP jobs themselves. This gap prevents a comprehensive understanding of the current crisis and its underlying causes.

To address this limitation, the present study adopts Mitchell's (2012) concept of Imagology as its theoretical framework. As discussed in Section 2.5, Imagology has undergone a long process of development and has become a central analytical perspective in visual art studies. It offers a systematic approach for interpreting images and revealing their deeper cultural and symbolic meanings, thereby providing an effective lens for examining the evolution and significance of HGP jobs.

According to Mitchell (2012), iconology operates across three interrelated levels: Image, Text, and Ideology. Together, they offer a comprehensive lens for analysing artistic jobs.

- i. Image refers to the visible form, such as a painting, a shape, or a likeness (Mitchell, 2012). As Aristotle described, an image is the "visible form" and "form of sensation" produced by objects. In this study, the Image level is applied to the visual elements of the artwork, including line, color, and composition.

- ii. Text encompasses denotation, representation, and signification, focusing on the work's thematic and emotional dimensions (Mitchell, 2012). In this research, the Text level addresses the subject matter, content, and expressive emotions of the painting.
  - iii. Ideology concerns the broader social, cultural, and historical contexts that shape both Images and Texts (Mitchell, 2012). In this study, the Ideology level is used to analyse the external social factors, including economic, cultural, technological, and political influences, that inform the creation and interpretation of the artwork,
- Figure 3.1.



**Figure 3.1:** Imagological Analysis Framework

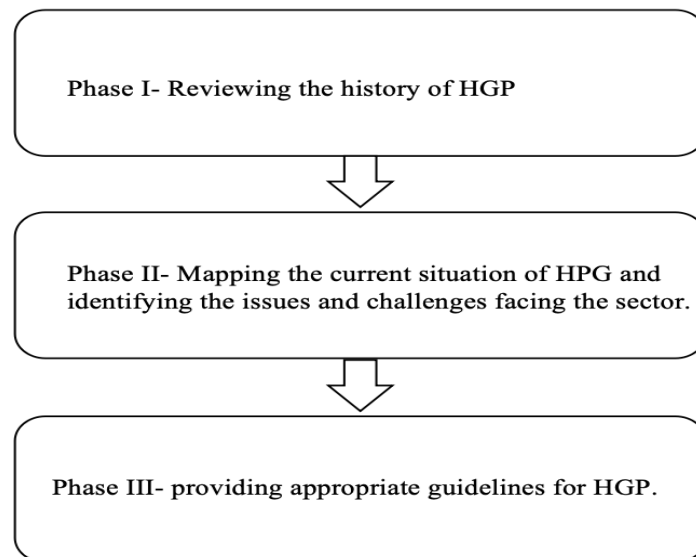
Source: The Researcher

Overall, this research adopts an Imagological perspective to conduct a comparative analysis of POQ jobs from the 1980s to the 2020s, examining specific transformations in their visual forms, thematic expressions, and underlying meanings. Through these artistic changes, the study seeks to reveal the broader social, cultural, and ideological shifts that have

shaped the development of the HGP industry. Building on this analytical foundation and drawing upon successful experiences and best practices from related cultural conservation initiatives, the research proposes practical and context-sensitive recommendations aimed at revitalizing the HGP industry and sustaining its cultural significance in the contemporary era.

### 3.4 Research Strategy

The strategy of this study, based on the research questions involved, primarily consists of three phases. The first phase involves reviewing the history of the Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP) industry. The second phase focuses on mapping the current state of HGP and identifying the issues and challenges faced by the sector. The third phase aims to explore guidelines to enhance the industry's sustainability. This strategy is illustrated in Figure 3.2.



**Figure 3.2:** Research strategy adopted for the study

Source: The Researcher

This strategy is appropriate because it is grounded in a deep understanding of the history and practice of Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP). By objectively analysing the current state of HGP and identifying the underlying causes of its challenges, the study can propose suitable guidelines to address these issues by drawing on successful case studies from similar contexts. As a result, the outcomes will offer relevant and practical guidance for the sustainability of HGP today. The researcher will outline each phase of the research in detail.

### **3.4.1 Phase I- Reviewing the development of Hunan Gong Bi Painting(HGP)**

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive description of the development of Hunan Gong Bi painting. Primarily through two strategies: First, a comprehensive literature review of the related research about HGP. Include the origins, development, and evolution of Gong Bi Painting and the develop of HGP. The history of Chinese Gong Bi painting is divided into four key stages:

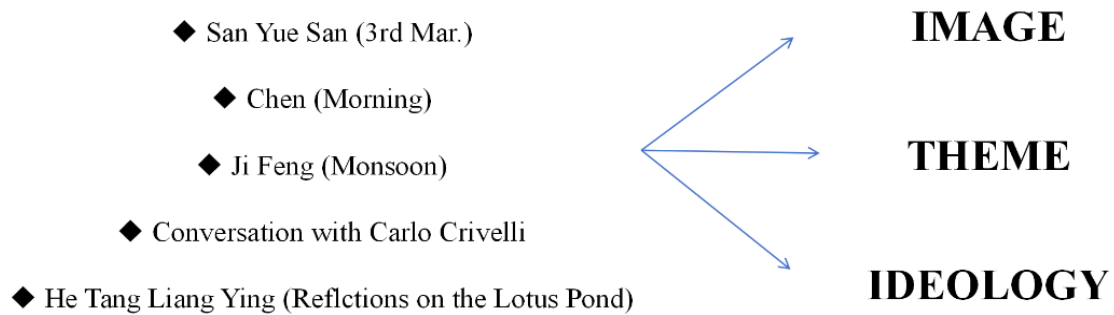
- i. The Traditional Phase of Chinese Gong Bi Painting (Imperial Period to 1918): Gong Bi painting originated in the 2nd century BC, reached its peak between the 7th and 13th centuries, and matured from the 13th to the 20th century, forming a distinct Chinese style.
- ii. The Modern Phase of Gong Bi Painting (1919–1977): During this period, Gong Bi painting increasingly leaned toward Western realism, reaching its height between 1967 and 1977.
- iii. The Contemporary Phase of Gong Bi Painting (1978–present): Gong Bi painting experienced a resurgence, with artists exploring a fusion of traditional and modern elements. Hunan Gong Bi Painting emerged as a prominent school during this period.

- iv. Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP): The researcher examines all existing studies on (HGP) industry. Current research mainly focuses on the "Rise Phase" of the HGP industry (1980–2000) and the "the Period of Stagnation" (2021-2024).

Through this process, the researcher has mapped the macro development trajectory of Chinese Gong Bi Painting, providing the necessary background for understanding the current state of the Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP) industry.

Secondly, the researcher analysed the evolution of jobs from the 1980s to the 2020s from an imagology perspective. Employing a case study approach, Case studies are useful for elucidating and explaining specific phenomena of interest (Thomas, 2011). The researcher conducts an in-depth analysis of representative jobs that reflect the developmental trajectory of HGP painting. Following a purposive sampling strategy, five paintings were selected as the primary cases for analysis, each representing one historical phase from the 1980s to the 2020s. The selected jobs include March 3rd (1980s), Morning (1990s), Monsoon (2000s), Conversation with Carlo Crivelli (2010s), and Reflections on the Lotus Pond (2020s).

The selection process was based on two key considerations. Firstly, the timeline of analysis was divided into five phases, with each ten-year period treated as one phase. This division aligns with the schedule of the National Art Exhibition, which is held every five years. Since HGP jobs did not consistently receive awards in every exhibition cycle, two consecutive rounds were combined into a single analytical phase. Secondly, from each phase, the highest-awarded painting was selected as the representative case, as these jobs best capture the dominant artistic tendencies, aesthetic standards, and institutional recognition of their respective periods, Figure 3.3.



**Figure 3.3:** The painting case of this research

Source: The Researcher

Overall, this study integrates two complementary research strategies. First, from a macro perspective, it reviews existing literature to trace the historical development, social position, and overall trajectory of the Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP) industry. Second, from a micro perspective, it employs the Imagological framework to analyse the concrete transformations within HGP jobs, thereby visualizing the industry’s evolution through its artistic expressions. By combining these two analytical dimensions, the study aims to address the first research question, provide a comprehensive description of the development of HGP industry, encompassing both its historical context and artistic transformation.

### **3.4.2 Phase II- Mapping the Current Situation of HGP and Defining the Issues and Challenges Facing the Sector**

This phase aims to identify and analyse the key issues and challenges currently confronting the HGP industry. To achieve this objective, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with five artists, each serving as the creator of one of the five selected case studies (Tabel 3.1). Following a purposive sampling strategy, these participants were selected for their established reputation, professional recognition, and representative influence within the HGP community. The artists range in age from 30 to 70 years old, thereby encompassing

different generational cohorts within the field. This diversity allows the research to capture a comprehensive range of experiences and perspectives, facilitating an in-depth understanding of the HGP industry’s evolving conditions, challenges, and professional dynamics over time.

**Table 3.1:** The Painting Cases in the HGP Industry

| <b>Time</b>                                | <b>Interviewees</b> | <b>Year</b> |
|--|---------------------|-------------|
| The Rise Phase<br>(1980-1999)              | Chen 1              | 1980s       |
|  | Wu 2                | 1990s       |
| The Period of<br>Stagnation<br>(2000-2024) | Xiao 3              | 2000s       |
|  | Chen 4              | 2010s       |
|  | Yan 5               | 2020s       |

The interviews focus on each artist’s professional trajectory, creative experience, and perceived challenges, with particular attention to issues such as economic pressures, institutional constraints, market transitions, and cultural transformation. Specific questions are presented in Section 3.5.1.3. This approach enables the study to capture both the shared experiences and generational differences among practitioners, offering valuable insights into the realities of contemporary HGP development

### **3.4.3 Phase III- Developing Recommendations for the HGP industry**

In this phase, the research addresses the final research question: How can the sustainability of Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP) be enhanced? The recommendations are derived from the identified issues and challenges facing the HGP industry. The researcher

identified that the problems currently faced by HGP are common to many traditional art forms in the context of cultural globalization. Several countries, including Italy, Japan, and South Korea, have implemented successful strategies to protect their traditional cultures. By reviewing relevant documents and drawing on their successful experiences, the researcher proposes strategies to enhance the sustainability of the HGP industry.

To gather comprehensive data on the current state of HGP, the researcher conducted multiple interviews with practitioners, participated in exhibitions, and engaged in discussions at various meetings. For example, during exhibitions, the researcher observed Gong Bi paintings, and at meetings, practitioners shared their experiences, facilitating in-depth discussions on the challenges faced by the artists. This process involved specific steps for data collection and analysis to ensure a thorough understanding of the challenges within industry.

### **3.5 Research Methods**

The researcher adopted a qualitative research approach, as it focuses on the social construction of meaning and aims to answer questions about how social experiences are created and interpreted (Denzin & Lincoln, 2007). This approach aligns with the goal of exploring the structure and evolution of the Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP) industry, as well as identifying strategies for its sustainable development.

#### **3.5.1 Qualitative Data Collection**

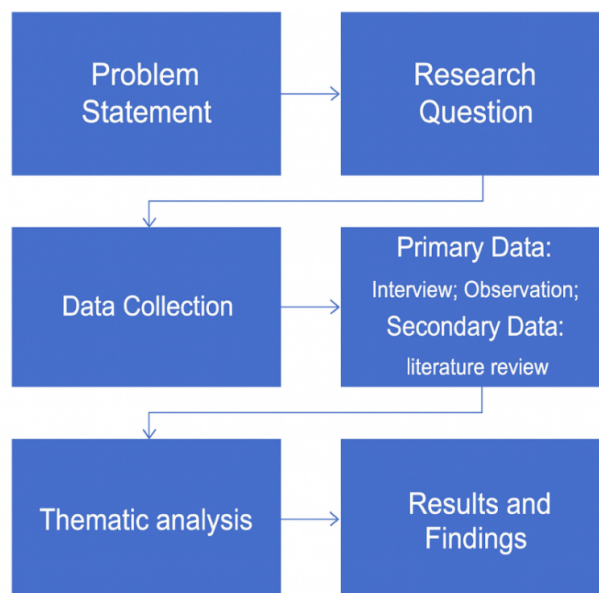
Maxwell (2013) emphasizes the importance of linking research questions to conclusions through the appropriate use of data collection methods. In this study, the data

collection process began with a clear problem statement, followed by an examination of the research questions and objectives to determine the most suitable methods for data collection.

Primary data was collected through interviews with painters, observations at exhibitions and industry meetings, and the gathering of unpublished documents and materials. Secondary data were gathered from materials and documents available on the websites of relevant organizations involved in the HGP industry.

The collected data were then analysed using the thematic analysis method. By extracting key themes from this analysis, the study was able to define the current state of development and the issues and challenges facing the HGP industry. These findings are interpreted in the conclusion chapter, where suggested recommendations are also provided.

Plate 3.3 illustrates the data collection process involved in this research.



**Figure 3.4:** Data collection process

Source: The Researcher

Specifically, the researcher used three instruments: observations, documentation, and interviews. These methods ensure data credibility through triangulation. The specifics of the instruments are as follows:

#### 3.5.1.1 Observation

Observation involves researchers residing in a society for an extended period, learning the local language, participating in daily life, and continuously observing (Hammersley, 1995). In 2023, the researcher participated in and observed several key activities related to Hunan Gong Bi painting, including:

- i. Seminars on HGP: These seminars offered insights into the current issues and challenges facing HGP.
- ii. Hunan Gong Bi Painting Exhibitions: Attending these exhibitions provided a firsthand look at the HGP jobs being produced and showcased current styles.
- iii. Painting Processes of Artists: Observing the actual process of Gong Bi painting enabled the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the real situation.

Through this immersive process, the researcher developed a preliminary understanding of the HGP industry. As a practitioner, the researcher was able to observe the current changes in HGP work directly. This phase of observation, combined with the previous literature review, allowed the researcher to select five painting cases for this study.

#### 3.5.1.2 Documentation

According to Yin (2014), documentation involves gathering both paper-based and electronic information. The researcher's documentation includes all literature related to Gong Bi painting and Hunan Gong Bi painting, such as journals, papers, books, and visual materials like photographs and jobs. However, available materials on HGP are limited.

To address this gap, the researcher conducted extensive field research to gather archival data, beginning with exhibition information related to Hunan Gong Bi painting. This data was primarily obtained from the official websites of the China Artists Association, the Hunan Artists Association, the Hunan Gong Bi Painting Association, and the Hunan Flower and Bird Painters Association. These institutions are key resources for compiling comprehensive data on Chinese painting arts, aiding in the identification of the artistic characteristics of Hunan Gong Bi painting.

#### 3.5.1.3 Interview

According to Weiss (1994), interviews can offer supplementary information that may be overlooked in observation and can be used to validate the accuracy of the observations. In this study, interviews serve as the most critical tool, offering a direct means to hear the artists' voices and gain insight into their perspectives. By engaging directly with artists, the researcher can gain deeper insight into the motivations, inspirations, and challenges that shape their work.

The interview method employed in this study was unstructured. Unlike structured interviews, which rely on a predetermined set of questions, unstructured interviews allow the conversation to flow naturally, enabling interviewees to freely express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. This conversational approach involves posing impromptu questions based on the interviewee's responses to explore deeper insights and information. This method was chosen because it facilitates in-depth responses from key respondents, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand.

i. Criteria for Selecting Participants

To obtain the most relevant data and ensure the representativeness of HGP practitioners, purposive sampling was used to select participants. Five painters were interviewed, selected for their connection to the five case studies analysed in this research, as they are the creators of these jobs

First, they can offer the most direct interpretation of their artwork. Second, they represent different generations of Hunan Gong Bi Painting, each having made significant contributions to the industry. This enables them to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the field. It is important to note that the first painter, Chen Bai-yi, the founder of the HGP industry, passed away on April 2, 2014. Therefore, the researcher interviewed his son, Chen Ming-da, to gain insights.

**Table 3.2:** The case of HGP

| <b>Name</b> | <b>Time</b>                 | <b>Method</b>             |
|-------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Chen 1      | 23. 11. 2023                | Unstructured<br>Interview |
| Wu 2        | 16. 01. 2024                |                           |
| Xiao3       | 27. 11. 2023 & 25. 05. 2024 |                           |
| Chen 4      | 01. 06. 2024                |                           |
| Yan 5       | 14. 01. 2024                |                           |

ii. Planning and Conducting Interviews

In this study, interviews are regarded as the most suitable data collection method to achieve the research objectives. To ensure the relevance and representativeness of the data, the researcher employed semi-structured interviews and selected representative practitioners from the field of Hunan Gong Bi Painting as participants. After identifying the interviewees, the researcher outlined the detailed planning and implementation steps for the interviews as follows:

- a) **Contacting Participants:** The researcher reached out to potential participants via phone or email, explaining the purpose and significance of the study. After obtaining their consent, the researcher scheduled the time and location of the interviewee.
- b) **Technical Preparation:** To ensure the smooth conduct of the interviews, the researcher checked the recording equipment, confirmed the batteries were fully charged, and verified that the equipment was functioning properly. A test recording was made to ensure that the device could clearly capture the conversation.

All interviews were conducted in the painters' studios during this phase. This environment allowed participants to feel more comfortable and relaxed, facilitating the collection of more authentic and detailed information. The researcher ensured that the interview locations were quiet and free from distractions, fostering an environment conducive to open communication.

The opening of the interview included the researcher's self-introduction, an explanation of the interview's purpose, the estimated duration, and the main discussion topics. This ensured that participants clearly understood the interview process. The researcher also established rapport with participants through casual conversation and positive body language.

The main content of the interviews is summarized in Figure 3.5. The main content of the interviews was designed based on research questions. First, the interviews focused on the painters' personal experiences, which helped create a more complete picture of the development of the HGP industry. Second, the interviews explored the specific problems and challenges they face in their practice. The key content of the interviews is summarized:

**Topic 1: Personal experience.**

- i. Could you please describe the creative process behind the painting (the case used in this research)?
- ii. Could you please describe your professional experience?
- iii. Could you please describe the environment of the HGP industry from 1980 to 2000.
- iv. Could you please describe the environment of the HGP industry from 2001 to 2020.

**Topic 2: The issue and challenge faced by HGP industry.**

- i. What do you think are the main issues facing HGP industry after 2000?
- ii. How do you think about the current issue?

During the data processing phase, the researcher meticulously recorded and transcribed all interviews to ensure no details were overlooked. The recordings were transcribed meticulously, capturing nuances such as emphasis, speed, tone, and pauses to ensure accuracy and completeness. For data analysis, the researcher recorded observations

immediately after each interview to preserve the freshness and accuracy of the data. The transcriptions were coded and categorized to organize important information and themes for subsequent analysis and report writing. Additionally, the researcher used observation tools.

### **3.5.2 Data analysis**

Braun & Clarke (2022) define data analysis as "making complex ideas comprehensible by breaking them down into their components." Data analysis typically employs an inductive strategy, where the analyst identifies key points, categories, patterns, and relationships within the data.

Specifically, thematic analysis involves a systematic process of data coding to develop themes, which serve as the ultimate analytic objective. The researcher categorized the collected data into themes to identify the key issues and challenges confronting the HGP industry. Specifically, this research followed the framework outlined by Miles & Huberman (2010), which was implemented in four steps:

#### **3.5.2.1 Becoming Familiar with Data**

The first step involves listening to the recordings and reading the transcribed texts multiple times. The researcher listened to the recording multiple times, taking initial notes while reading the transcripts and highlighting potentially relevant items. Through these practices, the researcher gained a comprehensive understanding of the entire dataset. The researcher personally transcribed the recordings, enhancing familiarity with the data. At this stage, the notes taken were more observational than systematic.

### 3.5.2.2 Generating Initial Coding

In this study, the researcher coded the data according to the research questions. For the first research question, addressing the development status of the Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP) industry, the codes were categorized as Image, Theme, and Ideology, based on the theoretical framework. For the second research question, concerning the issues and challenges faced by the HGP industry, the codes were categorized as Quantity and Quality, derived from the primary data analysis.

### 3.5.2.3 Produce Themes

In this phase, transitioning from codes to themes begins to shape the analysis. A theme is generated when a central aspect of the data related to the research question is captured. To identify areas of similarity and overlap between codes, the researcher reviewed the coded data, initiating the generation of themes, as shown in Table 3.3.

**Table 3.3:** The theme of this research

| <b>The Development of HGP industry</b> | <b>The Issue and challenge face by HGP industry</b> |
|--|---|
| Image                                  | The Quantity of painting                            |
| Theme                                  | The Quality of painting                             |
| Ideology                               |   |

### 3.5.2.4 Refine themes

This phase involves the final refinement of the themes. The bulk of the data is condensed for trend analysis, synthesizing and summarizing recurring opinions, and formulating a precise analysis of the jobs. The objective of this phase is to capture the essence of each theme and its key issues.

In the final phase, the researcher delineated the underlying structure and integrated all information to answer the research questions. The final research report was written, incorporating descriptive theoretical analysis. The researcher went beyond mere descriptive analysis to stimulate debate and identify the evidence and arguments addressing the research questions (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

### **3.5.3 Trustworthiness of the Research**

According to Lincoln & Guba (1985), trustworthiness in qualitative research serves as a comprehensive framework to ensure the rigor and transparency of the research process. Mainly includes four interrelated criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Each criterion contributes to establishing the authenticity, consistency, and neutrality of the research findings, thereby enhancing the overall methodological integrity.

Credibility refers to the degree to which the research findings accurately represent participants' realities and the meanings of the studied phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To enhance credibility, this study employed triangulation, combining data from the literature review, semi-structured interviews, and field observations to cross-verify interpretations. Additionally, the researcher shared the core findings with five interviewees for confirmation and revision.

Transferability concerns whether the findings can be applied to other contexts or similar studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This research provides a detailed description of research settings, participants' professional backgrounds, and artistic environments to allow readers to judge the applicability of the findings in other cultural or artistic contexts.

Dependability reflects the consistency and stability of the research process over time. To ensure dependability, the study maintained a detailed audit trail, documenting each stage of data collection, coding, and analysis. All methodological decisions were logged systematically to ensure transparency and replicability.

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the findings are shaped by participants rather than researcher bias. To strengthen confirmability, the researcher employed reflexive journaling to monitor personal assumptions and maintain neutrality. All interpretations were supported by direct quotations and visual evidence, ensuring that the conclusions derive from the data rather than subjective inference.

#### **3.5.4 Research Ethics**

Ethical considerations are essential to ensure that the research process upholds integrity, respect, and accountability. All participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and potential outcomes through a formal informed consent form. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty.

To ensure confidentiality, all personal identifiers, including names and institutional affiliations, were anonymised. Participants were referred to using pseudonyms (e.g., Chen 1, Xiao 3) in interview transcripts and related tables. The collected data were stored securely in password-protected digital files accessible only to the researcher.

Furthermore, the study took particular care when discussing art jobs and professional activities belonging to living artists. Direct quotations and visual materials were used only with explicit permission. The researcher maintained a neutral stance throughout the analysis

process to minimise interpretive bias and ensure that participants' perspectives were represented accurately and respectfully.

### **3.5.5 Research Scopes and Limitations.**

This study acknowledges both methodological limitations and intentional delimitations that shape its findings. Firstly, the study focuses exclusively on Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP), and although the selected five cases represent different generations and styles, they cannot fully capture the diversity of all Gong Bi painting practices in China. Second, the qualitative nature of this study means that the interpretation of images, texts, and ideologies inevitably involves a degree of subjectivity influenced by the researcher's theoretical stance and professional experience. To minimize this, the researcher applied a triangulation data collection method to enhance the credibility and consistency of interpretation. Third, the research reflects the sociocultural realities of Hunan Province from 2000 to 2024; future developments may bring new dynamics that extend beyond this period. Lastly, the findings are context-dependent, as the Hunan art ecosystem differs from other provinces in terms of institutional structure and policy support, which may limit the generalizability of the results.

The research deliberately confines its focus to the post-2000 period, emphasizing contemporary transformations in the HGP industry. The analysis employs an imagological framework that examines jobs at three levels: Image (visual elements: line, color, composition), Text (themes, content, emotions), and Ideology (social, political, cultural context). Other analytical frameworks, such as heritage economics or policy analysis, fall outside the study's scope. Additionally, the study emphasizes the artistic and socio-cultural dimensions of Gong Bi painting.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

This chapter outlines the research design, formulated based on the research questions, and organized into three phases. The research design was intended to address the three key research questions. First, the current development status of the HGP industry was assessed using three types of data: a historical review of the HGP industry, a case study comparing five representative HGP jobs, and personal accounts from the involved painters. Second, the issues and challenges facing the HGP industry were examined. This phase involved synthesizing the collected data and conducting additional interviews and observations to understand the real challenges these painters face. Third, recommendations for enhancing the sustainability of the HGP industry were proposed by drawing on successful examples from other countries.

The data collection process relied on both primary and secondary sources, including literature reviews, observations, interviews, and documentation. The use of diverse data sources ensured the validity and credibility of the findings. The use of diverse data sources ensured the validity and credibility of the findings. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, with the research questions serving as the foundation for organizing the themes. The detailed research plan is presented in Table 3.4.

**Table 3.4:** Summarize the research plan

| <b>Research Question</b>  | <b>Research Objective</b>   | <b>Strategy</b>   | <b>Methodology</b>   | <b>Findings</b>  |
|---|---|---|--|--|
| What is the entire development process of HGP?                      | To provide a detail description of the development of HGP industry.   | Review the history of HGP industry.   | Literature review.<br><br>Interview.<br><br>Observation.<br><br>Documentation; | The development of HGP painting work and deep social motivation. |
|   |   | Comparative Analysis the development of painting during 1980-2020s; (Imagology) |  |  |
|   |   | Interview the experience of Painter.  |  |  |
| What are the most important issues and challenges faced by the HGP? | To determine the significant issues and challenges those face and influence the development Hunan Gong Bi painting. | Interview the issue and Challenge face by painters.                             | Interview.<br><br>Observation.   | The current issues facing by HGP industry.                       |
|   |   | Observe the issues raised at HGP industry conference.                           |  |  |

**Table 3.4:** continued

|   |   |                     |                    |  |
|---|---|---------------------|--------------------|--|
| How to Enhance the Sustainability of HGP? | To draw recommendations suitable for the development of HGP industry. | Discuss the results | Literature review. | Provide guidance to respond to HGP issues, drawing on successful cases in other countries. |
|---|---|---------------------|--------------------|--|

## CHAPTER 4

### DATA COLLECTION AND DISCUSSION

#### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the analysis of the field research conducted in Changsha, Hunan Province, from February to September 2023, and from February to June 2024. The study involved six practitioners of Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP). The aim of this research is to identify the current state of HGP, along with the issues and challenges faced by its practitioners. Data collection was carried out through documentation, observation, and interviews. This study re-evaluates existing literature and field research findings, providing recommendations for the development of HGP.

#### 4.2 The Imagological Analysis of Painting Case

##### 4.2.1 Case 1-March 3<sup>rd</sup>

The painting “March 3<sup>rd</sup>” is one of the most renowned jobs in HGP. The painter is Chen Bai-Yi (1926-2014), a key figure in the development of Hunan Gong Bi painting, played a pivotal role in its emergence (Sixty Years of Hunan Fine Arts, 2013). Following the Cultural Revolution, a period of uncertainty about China's artistic direction, Chen was among the first to advocate for using traditional techniques to represent modern life. Chen stated, "Traditional Gong Bi figure painting depicts the lives of ancient people. Our Gong Bi figure paintings should reflect the lives of people today. Tradition must be preserved, yet it must evolve. New content and methods of expression must emerge from life, allowing Gong Bi painting to thrive in China." (Wang, 2017). This philosophy became the hallmark of the HGP.

During the 1980s, March 3rd is one of Chen's most renowned jobs, shown in Figure 4.1. It represents not only a regional aesthetic achievement but also an imagological reflection of post-reform China. From an imagological perspective, the painting operates on three interconnected levels: Image, Text, and Ideology (Mitchell, 2012). At the image level, the texture of "March 3rd" is achieved using Gong Bi techniques on silk, measuring 68 cm X 68 cm. The painting emphasises line work, utilising traditional Gong Bi line-drawing techniques to outline the figures, while minimising the use of realistic sketching to create volume. Regarding composition, the artist employs the white drawing technique to outline two parasols that dominate the space. The detailed depictions of two girls, along with the intricate patterns on their clothing, are prominent. A few butterflies in the top-right corner add a sense of movement, preventing the elegant colors of the parasols from appearing monotonous, while also balancing the composition (Yang, 2021). Wang (2005) argues that Chen was one of the first painters after China's economic reforms to move away from the formulaic narrative compositions of the Cultural Revolution era, adopting a style that embraces the traditional philosophy of "leaving space" (Liu Bai).



**Figure 4.1:** March 3rd, Silk-ink, 1981, 68 cm X 68 cm

Source: Courtesy from Artist Chen Ming-da

In terms of color, the painting uses light tones for the faces and solid hues for clothing and accessories, minimizing the light-dark contrasts typical in realistic figure painting. Deng (2020) remarked that Chen Bai Yi's portrayal of figures aligns more with the tradition of Chinese painting, rather than blindly adhering to Western realism. Deng also focused on the lines in "March 3rd," noting that Chen Bai-Yi's lines are simultaneously simple and complex, consisting of just a few strokes, yet capable of conveying a range of expressions and emotions. Therefore, this work exemplifies the Hunan style proposed by Chen, namely, "to express modern life using traditional methods."

At the Text level, March 3rd narrates the story of the Zhuang ethnic minority in Hunan, depicting a festival for unmarried men and women known as a "social gathering" (Wang, 2012). During this celebration, young men sing to young women; if a girl is moved by the song, she responds, leading to mutual acquaintance. Instead of depicting imperial court scenes or heroic socialist laborers, Chen celebrates intimacy, local folklore, and cultural vitality. The artwork embodies human sentiment, moving beyond didactic realism to a poetic reflection of daily life. The song exchanges between men and women act as a textual metaphor for communication, emotion, and social connection — a microcosm of post-Cultural Revolution humanism.

At the ideological level, March 3rd represents a new social consciousness in post-1978 China. The image of joyful, autonomous individuals replaces the collective heroism of Maoist art, signalling a shift from ideological propaganda to cultural pluralism. Following Althusser's (1970) notion of ideological interpellation, the work can be seen as a subtle resistance to the visual rhetoric of propaganda realism that dominated earlier decades. Chen's vision repositions Gong Bi painting not as a tool of political instruction but as a

reflective medium that negotiates between tradition, modernity, and individuality. Overall, March 3rd exemplifies the aesthetic transformation of Chinese art, from symbolic collective to subjective experience, blending traditional line and colour with new cultural meanings shaped by social change.

#### 4.2.2 Case 2- Morning

'Morning' is a notable work by HGP. It received the Bronze Award at the Sixth National Art Exhibition and was acquired by the National Art Museum of China. The artist, Wu Rong Guang (born 1963), was the youngest winner in the exhibition's history when he received this major award. He graduated from the Fine Arts Department at Hunan Normal University in 1985 and subsequently became a Gong Bi professor at the university's School of Fine Arts. He was also the founding president of the Hunan Gong Bi Painting Association (HGBA), the most significant Gong Bi painting organisation in Hunan.



**Figure 4.2:** Morning by Wu Ron-guang, Xuan paper-ink, 1983, 140 cm X 70 cm

Source: Courtesy from Artist Wu Rong Guang

From an imagological perspective, the image is using classical Gong Bi discipline of line and tonal layering. Wu employed only two traditional methods: meticulous line drawing

(Gong bi xian miao) and transparent shading (Xuan ran). Wu himself wrote that he often pondered over a single line for days, striving for the “right rhythm of movement and silence.” For shading, he used extremely light pigments, applying successive translucent layers until the surface revealed a luminous tonality, a process that embodies the Confucian virtue of restraint and the Daoist idea of natural balance.

The composition follows a triangular structure: the vertical line of the girl’s figure, the curved back of the ox, and the gentle diagonal of the fence form a silent harmony between human and animal. In terms of colour, the painting is dominated by muted earthy tones pale ochre, warm sepia, and misty grey and brown, that evoke the humidity and softness of a Hunan dawn. This limited colour enhances the serenity of the scene, reflecting the painter’s preference for spiritual tranquillity. Wu regards the visual logic of “Morning” as not about representation alone but about evoking atmosphere and moral temperament(Interview, Jan 2024).

In terms of text, Morning depicts a typical rural morning in a minority region of Hunan Province. The painting portrays a young Miao girl from western Hunan, standing beside an ox pen with her back to the viewer as she combs her long hair. To her left, an old yellow ox stretches its nose toward the girl's basket, inspecting it for any grass (Qi, 2015). The Miao girl, viewed from behind, becomes a universal symbol of rural femininity and purity, representing the timeless continuity of life amid social change. The ox, a traditional emblem of diligence and patience in Chinese art, functions here as a visual metaphor for endurance and harmony with nature. The absence of frontal gaze or overt expression enhances the viewer’s sense of distance, transforming a personal scene into a collective cultural memory. In this way, Wu’s work reflects what Bal (1991) calls narrative potentiality:

the painting does not tell a story outright but rather invites the viewer to interpret its silent emotional depth.

From an ideological perspective, *Morning* inherits and transforms the aesthetic tendencies of the 1980s Hunan Gong Bi style, continuing its dialogue between tradition and individuality. Rather than glorifying labor or depicting political heroism, Wu reorients attention toward the inner world of the individual, portraying the quiet dignity of ordinary life. This re-humanisation of rural imagery reflects a broader ideological transformation in post-Mao China, from collectivist visual culture to introspective humanism.

#### **4.2.3 Case 3- Monsoon**

*Monsoon* was awarded the Excellence Prize (highest honour) at the Third National Chinese Painting Exhibition in 2008, as shown in Figure 4.3. The artist Xiao Jian (1964-) is a distinguished professional painter and one of the leading figures of post-2000 Hunan Gong Bi painting. He holds a significant position in the Hunan Gong Bi Painting Association. He is a member of the Chinese Gong Bi Painting Society, a presidium member of the Hunan Artists Association, vice president of the Hunan Gong Bi Painting Society, president of the Hunan Province Bird and Flower Painters Association, and vice president of the Hunan Contemporary Chinese Painting Creation.



**Figure 4.3:** Monsoon, Silk-ink, 2008, 180 cm X 120 cm

Source: Courtesy from Artist Xiao Jian

From an imagological perspective, the Monsoon is a light-colored Gong Bi painting on silk, measuring 180 cm X 120 cm. Xiao abandons the rigid contour-line tradition of Gong Bi and instead employs the “Mei Gu” (Boneless) technique, where pigment itself defines form rather than lines (Yu, 2017). "Mei Gu" involves using blocks of colour to depict objects without emphasising their structural framework (Zhao, 2005). In his Gong Bi innovations,

Xiao uses colour to suggest the shape of lines without directly outlining them, while maintaining a clear sense of structure. Li (2013) notes that Xiao often uses the "Mei Gu" technique in his Gong bi jobs to depict withered trees and flowers, effectively conveying decay. Through successive layers of pale mineral pigment, Xiao constructs spatial rhythm by chromatic transparency rather than linear enclosure.

In terms of colour palette is dominated by soft ochres, muted greens, and washed greys. These tones convey a sense of transience and melancholy, evoking the fading vitality of late summer. The delicate modulation between light and air produces what the Hengyang Art Museum (2018) calls "a breathing surface of time." In term of composition, the artist replaces the intimate, small-scale flower-and-bird format with an expansive aerial layout, emphasizing emptiness and diagonal flow. The visual tension between stillness and movement mirrors the unpredictability of nature—a visual metaphor for the impermanence of beauty.

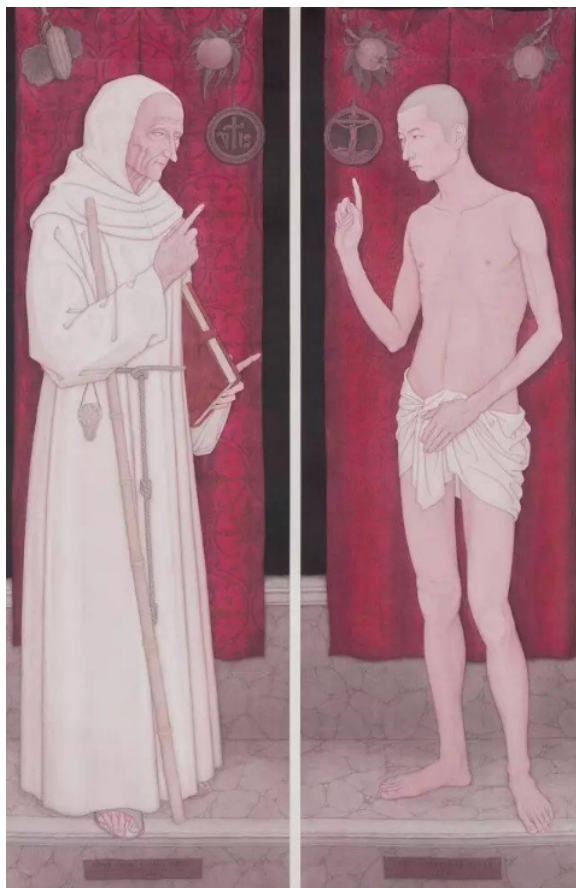
In terms of text, Monsoon departs from the human-centered narratives of earlier Hunan Gong Bi jobs (e.g., March 3rd, Morning). Instead of depicting ethnic festivals or daily labor, Xiao turns to the silent decay of nature, withered sunflowers and fragile dragonflies, transforming them into poetic metaphors of time, memory, and renewal. It is noteworthy that its innovation is significant, as it runs counter to the harmony and perfection traditionally associated with the themes of meticulous brushwork painting. It is entirely an expression of the artist's individuality.

From an ideological perspective, Monsoon more prominently reveals the transformation of the artist's inner spiritual exploration. At both the visual and thematic levels, the work breaks away from the conventional framework of traditional Gong Bi

painting. Furthermore, Xiao's artistic approach departs from the 1980s convention of "representing modern life through traditional techniques" and instead embraces an introspective and existential mode of expression. This transformation reflects the value reconstruction of Chinese contemporary art in the post-reform era, where artistic creation has gradually moved toward globalization, liberalization, and individualized expression. Such an ideological shift not only liberated Gong Bi painting from its political and institutional constraints but also positioned it within a global discourse of modern art and personal creativity.

#### **4.2.4 Case 3-Conversation with Carlo Crivelli**

Conversation with Carlo Crivelli was selected for the 2016 China Gong Bi Painting Exhibition, where it was the only work by a Hunan artist to be featured, as shown in Figure 4.4. The artist Chen Li (1990-) graduated from the Gong Bi Painting Graduate Studio at Hunan Normal University. A student of Wu Rong-Guang, the second interviewee, he completed his studies at Wu's studio in 2016. Chen Li is a member of the Hunan Province Gong Bi Painting Society, serves as the office secretary for the society, and is also a painter at the Youth Academy of the Hunan Provincial Painting Academy.



**Figure 4.4:** Conversation with Carlo Crivelli, Silk-Ink, 2016, 190 cm X 120 cm

Source: Courtesy from Artist Chen Li

From an image perspective, *Conversation with Carlo Crivelli* is a heavy color (Zhong Cai) Gong Bi painting on silk. The work adheres to traditional Gong Bi techniques, using light ink to outline the figures and then filling them in with light colors. In terms of color treatment, the background is painted with dark hues, while the figures themselves are rendered in lighter tones to create a clear spatial separation between them and the background. This technique highlights the figures, ensuring they stand out against the dark backdrop.

The composition of the painting is divided into left and right panels, a technique commonly used in traditional Chinese landscape painting since the Sui and Tang dynasties (around the 7th century). This compositional style is often employed to show different

periods at the same location or to depict separate subjects within a unified framework (Li, 2023).

At the textual level, *Conversation with Carlo Crivelli* portrays an imagined dialogue between figures from the Italian Renaissance master Carlo Crivelli and contemporary characters. Chen Li (2016) explained: “The figures in Crivelli’s jobs embody the visual characteristics of the Western Renaissance, while Gong Bi painting carries deeply rooted Chinese cultural traditions. Combining Western classical elements with Chinese traditional techniques is an attempt to innovate modern Gong Bi painting. My dialogue with the Western master is also a form of homage.”

This narrative construction transforms the artwork into a metaphorical “conversation across time and culture.” Through this intercultural dialogue, the painting becomes a visual text that negotiates difference, translation, and hybridity, revealing how meaning is produced between civilizations rather than within a single cultural frame. Yu (2024) writes that by integrating Western Renaissance elements with Chinese Gong Bi techniques, Chen Li creates a dialogue that honors both traditions while expanding the boundaries of modern Gong Bi painting. This interplay between different cultural and temporal contexts underscores the evolving nature of art and its ongoing quest for innovation and relevance in contemporary artistic expression.

From an ideological perspective, *Conversation with Carlo Crivelli* embodies a heightened sense of artistic self-consciousness and comprehensive innovation. On one hand, Chen Li continues the meticulous and disciplined craftsmanship of traditional Gong Bi techniques; on the other hand, he adopts a Westernized narrative structure, transforming the painting into a mirror reflecting contemporary society. Through his symbolic “dialogue”

with Carlo Crivelli, Chen metaphorically addresses the evolving condition of Chinese culture within a globalized context. This artistic dialogue suggests a broader ideological shift, from collective representation rooted in local tradition to individualized creation within global discourse.

#### **4.2.5 Case 5- Reflection of the Lotus Pond**

Reflection of the Lotus Pond was selected for the prestigious 2020 Baoshi Style - First Chinese Painting Biennale, as shown in Figure 4.5 The artist Yan Qiu-li (1985-) represents the younger generation of Hunan Gong Bi painters who emerged in the post-2000 era. He currently serves as a member of the Chinese Gong Bi Painting Society, Chairman of the Yuhua District Artists Association, and Praesidium Member of the Hunan Bird-and-Flower Painters Association. In 2008, his work Golden Autumn was selected for the “Art Hunan – Fine Art Exhibition” from over 2,000 entries, marking his professional debut. By 2024, his jobs had been featured in five national and twenty-three provincial exhibitions, establishing him as one of the most active young Gong Bi painters in Hunan.



**Figure 4.5:** Reflection of the Lotus Pond, Silk-ink, 2020, 220 cm X 160 cm

Source: Courtesy from Artist Yan Qiuli

Reflection of the Lotus Pond is a silk-based Gong Bi flower-and-bird painting measuring 220 × 160 cm. From an imagological perspective, Yan departs from the conventional linear precision of traditional Gong Bi, employing the “Mei Gu” (Boneless) technique, which omits contour lines and instead builds form through tonal transitions. An fuse the Gong Bi discipline of fine brushwork with the “splash-ink” spontaneity of Xieyi painting. This synthesis produces a delicate balance between control and fluidity, where

brush and ink coexist dynamically. The reflective surface of the pond, subtly distorted by ripples, becomes a metaphor for perception, temporality, and the instability of vision itself.

From a compositional standpoint, *Reflection of the Lotus Pond* adopts a vertical layout that emphasizes the interplay between density and emptiness. The upper two-thirds of the painting are densely layered with withered lotus stems and leaves, rendered in fine, translucent ink washes that cascade diagonally from the top right toward the lower left, creating a dynamic rhythm suggestive of both movement and decay. In contrast, the lower portion of the composition is largely open, featuring a row of egrets standing still at the pond's edge. This contrast between the crowded, textured upper section and the open, tranquil lower area establishes a visual tension between complexity and simplicity. Color and texture play a central role: though rendered in monochrome, the modulation of ink density creates spatial depth and tactile delicacy. The aesthetic restraint of a single-tone palette recalls Song-dynasty literati ideals of purity and inner cultivation, aligning Yan's visual approach with both historical refinement and modern minimalism.

In terms of text, *Reflection of the Lotus Pond* depicts a tranquil yet subtly melancholic scene of lotuses and egrets. Unlike traditional representations, where the lotus symbolizes purity, integrity, and moral perfection, Yan reinterprets the motif through a contemporary lens. In this work, the lotus appears withered, and the egret stands in quiet isolation, breaking away from the idealized aesthetic of harmony and completeness. Rather than conveying auspicious or didactic meanings, the painting transforms the lotus pond into an object of perception and contemplation. The solitary egret becomes a metaphor for the artist's awakened self-consciousness, a reflection on individuality, solitude, and the redefinition of human–nature relationships within an increasingly modernized and urbanized

context (Nie, 2024). Through this shift, Yan moves beyond the collective symbolism that characterized earlier Gong Bi paintings and instead constructs a narrative of existential introspection and emotional stillness.

From an ideological perspective, *Reflection of the Lotus Pond* continues the post-2000 artistic trend that moves beyond collective visual narratives toward individual self-expression. The painting no longer represents the collective aesthetic ideals that once defined Hunan Gong Bi painting but rather becomes a manifestation of the artist's subjective consciousness and spiritual autonomy. This ideological shift signifies a broader transformation in China's post-socialist cultural context—from the collective ideal of cultural inheritance to the free exploration of individual creativity. More broadly, it reflects how Chinese contemporary art in the twenty-first century has evolved toward personal introspection and global dialogue, shifting its focus from national identity to the universal language of artistic self-reflection.

#### **4.2.6 Imagological Analysis of The Painting in HGP**

Based on the analysis of the five cases above, the findings reveal a clear evolutionary pattern in the development of Hunan Gong Bi painting (HGP). The data can be divided into two main phases: 1980–2000 and 2000–2020s, each representing a distinct stage in artistic transformation. In the first stage, the jobs share common characteristics, with a return to natural themes and traditional Chinese techniques.

- i. From an image perspective, they emphasise traditional Gong Bi methods, primarily relying on ink drawing and shading. This marked a departure from the purely Western realist styles that dominated during the Cultural Revolution.

- ii. From theme perspective, these jobs focus on local life in Hunan, particularly rural life. For example, the jobs of Chen and Wu depict the lives of the Zhuang and Miao ethnic groups in Hunan, breaking away from the political propaganda themes prevalent during the Cultural Revolution.
- iii. From Ideology perspective, the rise of the Hunan Gong Bi painting school aligned with the social environment of the time, offering a natural, authentic art style that provided a contrast to the rigid political control that China had experienced over the previous decade.

In the second stage, the jobs exhibit a strong sense of individuality, as artists incorporated new elements into traditional Gong Bi painting, making their styles more distinctive.

- i. From an image perspective, these jobs blend traditional methods with various new techniques. For instance, Xiao integrated the "Mei Gu" technique, while Yan employed the "splash-ink" method. In terms of composition, Xiao innovated within the flower-and-bird genre by using large-scale compositions, departing from the traditional "broken branch" style. Chen revived the Tang Dynasty's "paired" composition style, giving it new significance.
- ii. From a theme perspective, these jobs emphasize a broader range of content. For instance, Chen directly engages in a dialogue with the European Renaissance, breaking away from the traditional Gong Bi painting approach rooted in Confucian philosophy, which emphasizes harmony between humans and nature.
- iii. From an ideological perspective, the current Hunan Gong Bi painting responds to the context of cultural globalization, transcending the boundaries between tradition and modernity, East and West. The jobs become a reflection of the artists'

exploration of their unique identities. As a result, Hunan Gong Bi painting continues to maintain high quality while embracing greater diversity, innovation, and fusion. The specific changes in Hunan Gong Bi painting are outlined in Table 4.1:

**Table 4.1:** Imagological Analysis of The Painting in HGP

| <b>Time</b> | <b>1980s-2000</b>  | <b>2000s-2020s</b>                                     |
|-------------|--|--|
| Phase       | The Rise Period  | The Period of Stagnation                               |
| Theme       | Unify: ‘Using traditional techniques to depict modern life’. | Personally unique themes.                              |
| Images      | Highlight traditional techniques.                            | Innovations based on traditional technologies.         |
| Ideology    | Reflecting society needs after the ‘Cultural Revolution’.    | Reflecting the social need for cultural globalization. |

Overall, the five case studies collectively reveal the evolving trajectory of Hunan Gong Bi painting (HGP) through the lens of imagology. By applying the three analytical dimensions: Image, Text, and Ideology. This study demonstrates how the visual language of HGP has transformed over the past four decades, reflecting not only artistic innovation but also the profound social, cultural, and ideological changes underlying these visual forms. The next section broadens the focus from individual jobs to the larger context, analyzing the structural, institutional, and socio-economic challenges facing the Hunan Gong Bi painting industry today.

### **4.3 The Issue and challenge face by HGP industry**

The second objective of this study is to conduct an in-depth investigation into the current status of practitioners of Hunan Palace murals while identifying challenges encountered in the field's development. The following data represents the results obtained by researchers through interviews with five authoritative interviewees, involving data recording, coding, verification, and recoding. The details are as follows:

#### **4.3.1 Quantity: The Decrease in overall Painting Production**

The collected data from five representative Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP) practitioners reveal a clear and concerning trend: The overall number of Gong Bi paintings has markedly declined since 2000. This decline is not merely numerical but reflects deeper structural and ideological transformations within the HGP ecosystem.

According to Chen 1, the generational shift in artistic life and working conditions has profoundly influenced productivity. During the 1980s–1990s, HGP painters were mostly employed by state-owned institutions, receiving stable salaries and sufficient time for creation. In contrast, today's painters—operating in a market-oriented environment—must balance creation with economic survival. The process of Gong Bi painting, which requires patience, precision, and long-term focus, conflicts with the fast-paced rhythm of contemporary life. As Chen 1 observed, “The central challenge for contemporary painters is not the lack of skill, but the lack of time and patience to produce distinctive, high-quality jobs.” (Interview, Dec 2023)

Wu 2 also acknowledged that the meticulous nature of Gong Bi painting discourages younger practitioners. Many prefer faster, more commercial art forms that promise quicker

economic returns. Wu 2 emphasised that the slow rhythm and demanding techniques of Gong Bi painting make it difficult to sustain large-scale production, especially in an era dominated by digital images and instant consumption. He warned that “the complexity of the process often drains one’s willpower, leading to a gradual decline in the number of Gong Bi painters.” (Interview, Nov 2023).

Xiao 3 attributed this decline partly to external competition and market saturation. As other provinces such as Fujian, Sichuan, and Guangdong have developed strong Gong Bi traditions of their own, Hunan’s relative dominance has weakened. Additionally, the rise of AI-aided and digital painting tools has accelerated production elsewhere, making the slow manual process of Gong Bi painting appear outdated to some audiences. Xiao 3 expressed concern that “without computers, some cannot even begin to create—a sad reflection of how technology is eroding traditional skills.” (Interview, January 2024).

From the perspective of Yan 5, the decreasing number of practitioners is particularly evident in professional associations. He noted that less than 20 percent of members in one major district artists’ association specialise in Gong Bi painting. The combination of high technical difficulty, limited exhibition opportunities, and low market visibility discourages new entrants. As Yan 5 explained, “Many young artists question whether it is worth investing so much time and effort in a single painting when the likelihood of selection or sale remains uncertain.” (Interview, Mar 2024).

In addition, Yan 5 highlighted the hierarchical culture of seniority and respect discourages originality and limits generational renewal. As the chair of a regional artists’ association with over 300 members, he observed that major exhibitions in Hunan Province select over 100 jobs from thousands of submissions each year, but only a few artists from

each city and district are chosen. The selection criteria often prioritize seniority and reputation, making it difficult for emerging artists to gain recognition. Furthermore, most exhibitions do not impose thematic or technical restrictions, leading to a small proportion of Gong Bi jobs being displayed. (Interview, Mar 2024) He further explained that this Many emerging painters consequently abandon Gong Bi painting altogether, widening the gap between generations and weakening creative vitality.

In summary, the HGP industry is experiencing a sharp decline in the number of practitioners, driven by both career changes among seasoned artists and low engagement from younger generations. Young artists are essential for the future vitality of the HGP field, but their decreasing involvement jeopardizes its long-term sustainability. This issue arises from multiple interconnected factors, including economic pressures, cultural shifts, and deeply rooted social hierarchies, all of which collectively led to a decrease in Gong Bi painting production. These structural challenges not only reduce the volume of artistic jobs but also reveal underlying tensions within the creative ecosystem. The next section will address the second major challenge: quality, the lack of innovation in artistic themes, which further hampers the development and modern relevance of Hunan Gong Bi painting.

#### **4.3.2 Quality: The lack of Innovation in Subject Matter**

A major issue repeatedly emphasized by interviewees is the lack of innovation in subject matter within contemporary Hunan Gong Bi painting. Despite the preservation of delicate technique and fine craftsmanship, the thematic evolution of HGP has become stagnant. These practitioners independently pointed out that most Gong Bi painters continue to rely on repetitive subjects, fixed aesthetic formulas, and nostalgic representations of rural life.

Chen 1 observed that many painters remain confined to the traditional motifs established in the 1980s and 1990s. “Most painters still repeat what was popular in my father’s generation, village scenes, ethnic customs, and idealized women. Such subjects once carried social meaning, but today they feel nostalgic rather than relevant.” (Interview, Dec 2023) He further explained that while the technical level remains high, the creative content often lacks individuality and modern resonance: “High technical proficiency does not equal high artistic value. The problem lies in subject choice and stylistic homogeneity. Many jobs differ only in color or format but not in concept.” (Interview, Dec 2023) From his perspective, this stagnation is closely tied to marketization: since 2000, galleries and competitions have rewarded “recognizable” and “safe” subjects that appeal to collectors, resulting in widespread thematic duplication and risk avoidance.

Wu 2, a senior painter active since the 1980s, lamented the disappearance of the humanistic and realistic spirit that once defined Hunan Gong Bi painting. “In the past, we painted real people and real lives, such as farmers, children, daily labor. Now, many artists are detached from life, painting only decorative subjects or abstract patterns.” (Interview, Nov 2023) He argued that a truly meaningful work must integrate thought, taste, and technique; otherwise, it risks becoming “surface-level beauty without soul.” (Interview, Nov 2023) Wu further emphasized that every generation must find its own themes and aesthetic direction rather than repeating the rural realism of earlier decades. “Each era has its own feelings and forms. Young painters should discover their own subjects in today’s urbanized and globalized world.” (Interview, Nov 2023) He warned that the loss of this generational renewal has weakened the emotional foundation of Hunan Gong Bi painting.

Xiao 3 linked the repetition in subject matter to structural and technological factors. “The market is saturated with jobs that rely on the same topics—peonies, egrets, lotus ponds, or women in traditional clothing. It’s hard for any artist to stand out.” (Interview, Jan 2024) He noted that art competitions and galleries often prefer marketable, predictable imagery, creating a system of topic guidance that discourages innovation. Furthermore, Xiao expressed concern about technological dependency: “Some young artists now start painting only after computer rendering. Without computers, they can’t even begin a draft. The result is efficient production but empty ideas.” (Interview, Jan 2024) For Xiao, the overreliance on computer composition and AI-assisted imagery has accelerated stylistic convergence, producing “quality without depth.”

Overall, the second major challenge facing the HGP industry is the lack of innovation in artistic subject matter, which has become a key factor in its declining cultural influence. This thematic stagnation is shaped by multiple forces: market pressures, which favor easily recognizable and saleable motifs; cultural globalization, which encourages stylistic convergence rather than regional differentiation; and institutional hierarchies, which discourage younger artists from experimenting due to limited exhibition and award opportunities. As a result, artistic expression increasingly lacks individuality, depth, and contemporary resonance.

The above data shows that although the Hunan Gong Bi painting (HGP) industry continues to produce a few successful jobs, most pieces face significant challenges. Summarizing the opinions of the interviewees, the main issues confronting the HGP industry are twofold. First, there is a decline in the overall number of works exhibited, of Gong Bi jobs being produced, with mature artists creating fewer Gong Bi pieces and a decreasing

number of young Gong Bi painters entering the field. Second, in terms of quality, many jobs exhibit a sense of repetition and similarity, particularly due to a lack of thematic innovation and the widespread use of digital techniques, which contribute to the homogenization of the art (Table 4.2).

**Table 4.2:** The issue face by HGP industry

| Main Issue                          | Description   |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Decline in Quantity                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mature artists are reducing Gong Bi output or shifting to other media</li> <li>• Young practitioners are scarce (new entrants &lt; 20%). Reason: (High technical difficulty discourages sustained training; Confucian hierarchy limits opportunities for young artists, reducing motivation).</li> </ul> |
| Decline in Quality (Homogenization) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A large number of jobs on similar themes</li> <li>• Repetitive painting jobs, such as identical compositions and color schemes</li> </ul>  |

#### 4.4 Conclusion

This chapter presented the research findings, organizing the data into two main themes: the Imagological Analysis of Painting Cases and the Issues and Challenges Facing the Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP) Industry. Within the imagological framework, five representative cases illustrated the concrete transformations in HGP from the 1980s to the

2020s. Through changes in visual language, these jobs reveal a profound ideological shift from collective cultural inheritance toward individualized interpretation within a globalized context. Furthermore, the second part of the chapter identified two major structural challenges confronting the current HGP industry: first, the continuous decline in painting production, reflecting the constraints of economic pressure, cultural hierarchy, and generational gaps on young artists' creative engagement; and second, the lack of innovation in subject matter, shaped by market orientation, cultural homogenization, and technological dependence that have led to creative stagnation. Together, these findings demonstrate how socioeconomic and ideological transformations have deeply reshaped the creative ecology of HGP industry.

## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to conduct an in-depth discussion of the research findings. The chapter is divided into five main sections: the first section offers a detailed description of the emergence, development, and current situation of Hunan Gong Bi painting. The second section discusses the characteristics of the Hunan Gong Bi painting industry. The third section identifies the issues and challenges facing Hunan Gong Bi painting (HGP). The fourth section explores the social influence factors of HGP, which helps to better understand the societal reasons behind the difficulties faced by Hunan Gong Bi painting. The final section presents the conclusion.

#### 5.2 The Development Process of Hunan Gong Bi painting

This section integrates historical literature and empirical findings to answer the first research question: What is the entire development process of Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP)? According to the research plan proposed in Chapter 3, this question is approached from two complementary perspectives.

First, a comprehensive historical review outlines the evolution of Chinese Gong Bi painting, identifying four major stages: Traditional, Modern, Contemporary, and Regional (Hunan). Within this continuum, the development of HGP is further divided into two internal stages: the Rise Period (1980–2000) and the Period of Stagnation (2000–2024). Second, the imagological analysis of representative jobs demonstrates how these historical

transformations are embodied in visual and ideological terms. Together, these two dimensions illustrate the macro- and micro-level developments of the HGP industry.

## **5.2.1 The Development of Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP)industry**

### **5.2.1.1 The History of Gong Bi Painting**

Gong Bi painting is one of China's oldest and most enduring art forms, renowned for its meticulous brushwork, layered colors, and refined compositional structure (Barnhart, 1997). Throughout its long history, it has served not merely as a mode of visual representation but also as a moral and philosophical discourse through which social values, cosmological beliefs, and aesthetic ideals were communicated.

During the imperial period (Imperial Period – 1918), Gong Bi painting flourished as a court-centered tradition deeply rooted in Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist thought. Artists sought precision of line, delicacy of color, and symbolic balance to embody the harmony between humans and nature. The act of painting was considered a form of moral cultivation, and aesthetic refinement was inseparable from ethical self-discipline. Artistic individuality was secondary to the collective pursuit of order, virtue, and balance. This era laid the technical groundwork of meticulous line drawing and layered colouring, as well as the ideological foundation of moral cultivation and spiritual harmony that would influence subsequent developments (Shang, 2023).

The early twentieth century marked a period of profound change. With the May Fourth and New Culture Movements (1919), Western realism entered Chinese art education, introducing anatomy, perspective, and chiaroscuro. Gong Bi painters began to merge these techniques with traditional brushwork, creating a hybrid visual language that symbolized China's negotiation between tradition and modernity. Further, during 1950s to the 1970s,

Western realism became the dominant aesthetic, transforming painting into a medium of socialist political ideology. Especially during the Cultural Revolution period (1967-1977), Gong Bi's painting was reduced to a propagandistic tool, depicting model workers, soldiers, and peasants. Yet this period also produced a paradoxical outcome: the institutionalization of art academies and professional training consolidated technical rigor and discipline, laying the groundwork for future artistic recovery (Wang, 2024).

After the Reform and Opening Up in 1978, Chinese art entered a new pluralistic phase characterized by creative freedom, market expansion, and cross-cultural dialogue. Gong Bi painting was revitalized as artists began to reinterpret tradition as a living source of experimentation rather than a static heritage. The boundary between fine-brush and freehand styles became increasingly fluid, leading to a more expressive and individualized visual language. Within this broader national transformation, Hunan emerged as a distinctive regional center, blending traditional craftsmanship with the humanistic and emotional depth typical of southern China.

#### 5.2.1.2 The Development of Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP) industry

The origins of Hunan Gong Bi painting (HGP) can be traced back to 1977, following the end of the Cultural Revolution, a pivotal moment when Chinese art shifted from being a “political propaganda tool” towards artistic freedom. Chen Bai-Yi, a painter at the Hunan Provincial Art Museum, trained and led a large group of Hunan artists, pioneering a new style that involved "using traditional techniques to depict modern life." Through numerous jobs, this style broke away from the realist propaganda paintings of the Cultural Revolution, ushering in the rise of HGP, as shown in Figure 5.1.



**Figure 5.1:** The Red Sun's Glory Warms Ten Thousand Generations, 1972, 67 cm × 76 cm

Note. Reprinted from National Art Museum of China, China (1972).

In the 1980s, HGP began to gain widespread attention, reaching its peak in the 1990s. According to literature and historical accounts, during this period, Chen Bai-Yi organized a series of Gong Bi painting workshops that helped train over a hundred artists. These workshops were instrumental in fostering a new generation of Gong Bi painters, creating a vibrant artistic community in Hunan. Furthermore, from 1980 to 2000, 22 HGP jobs were selected for China 'stop national art exhibitions, and HGP organized nine major Gong Bi exhibitions across China, Chen Bai-Yi also served as a director of China's highest-level art association, making HGP one of the most influential Gong Bi painting schools at the time.

After 2000, the development of HGP experienced a noticeable slowdown. Between 2000 and 2024, the number of HGP jobs selected for China's top art exhibitions decreased to nine, and the number of Gong Bi exhibitions held by HGP across China dropped to five. The number of exhibited jobs fell from 120 in 2008 to just 12 in 2011. Li explained that the 2008 exhibition primarily featured painters from the 1980s and 1990s, while currently, only a few young painters from Hunan are selected for major exhibitions in China. As a result,

both the number of works exhibited, and the recognition of HGP jobs have declined during this period.

### **5.2.2 The development of HGP Painting style**

Based on the findings of Chapter 4, the analysis of five representative cases reveals that Hunan HGP evolved from the 1980s to the 2020s. This evolution embodies a complex transformation in image, text, and ideological orientation. These changes can be clearly divided into the Rise Period (1980–2000) and The Period of Stagnation (2000–2020s), each reflecting broader cultural and socio-economic transitions in post-reform China.

During the Rise Period (1980–2000), Hunan Gong Bi painting reverted to traditional Chinese art principles following the Cultural Revolution's political upheaval. From an imagery standpoint, artists revived classical Gong Bi techniques, including fine line drawing, layered ink shading, and measured color application, moving away from the Western realist methods that had been prevalent in previous decades. From a thematic perspective, artists shifted their focus from collective propaganda toward depicting authentic local life. Jobs such as "March 3rd" and "Morning" illustrate the daily lives of Hunan's rural and ethnic communities, particularly the Zhuang and Miao peoples, exemplifying the consistent style of "using traditional techniques to depict modern life" and restoring Chinese traditional art's humanistic and poetic qualities.

From an ideological perspective, this stage represents the cultural self-awareness of the post-Cultural Revolution era. After decades of collective ideology and aesthetic instrumentalization, artists sought to regain control over meaning. Painting once again became a space for reflection, where beauty was reconnected with truth and sincerity, and

the ethical importance of artistic labour was restored. Therefore, this stage can therefore be understood as a period of restoration and reconstruction. Artists were not merely reviving a technical tradition, but also mending the symbolic rupture caused by political trauma. In this sense, HGP painting in the 1980s and 1990s symbolised both traditional revival and China's broader transition from collective dogma to cultural pluralism and from political utility to aesthetic authenticity.

Entering The Period of Stagnation (2000–2020s), HGP entered a stage of diversification and experimentation. From an image perspective, painters began to explore various new approaches grounded in traditional craftsmanship. For instance, Xiao adopted the Mei Gu technique, Yan experimented with splash-ink textures, and Chen revived the Tang-dynasty “paired composition” format. These innovations endowed traditional line-based aesthetics with new spatial tension and visual rhythm.

From a text perspective, the subject matter of HGP has shifted from collective rural narratives to individualized and cross-cultural expressions. Jobs such as *Conversation with Carlo Crivelli* engage in direct visual dialogue with European art history, while *Reflections on the Lotus Pond* incorporates elements of contemporary realism, bridging traditional Chinese symbolic language with modern sensibilities and social reflection.

At the ideological level, artists are no longer confined to traditional techniques but actively pursue diverse forms of innovation, redefining the meaning of Gong Bi painting through individualization and self-reflection. For Hunan Gong Bi painters, this transformation represents more than technical renewal, it signifies a reconstruction of cultural subjectivity. Their artistic practices engage in active dialogue with the global cultural context, bridging tradition and modernity, East and West, and transforming Gong

Bi painting from a regional aesthetic practice into a transcultural medium of communication and interpretation. This shift marks a crucial transformation in Chinese artistic ideology: from the collective construction of national identity to the plural expression of individual consciousness and cultural self-awareness.

Integrating the above two dimensions, this study outlines a comprehensive developmental trajectory of the Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP) industry. During the Rise Period (1980–2000), HGP established a distinctive regional style centered on the concept of “using traditional techniques to depict modern life.” The period witnessed a surge in award-winning jobs, frequent national exhibitions, and growing influence of Hunan artists within the Chinese art community. In this phase, artists emerging from the post Cultural Revolution climate of depoliticization, reclaimed traditional aesthetics as a vehicle for sincerity and moral reflection. This artistic flourishing not only responded to China’s cultural reconstruction in the reform era but also positioned Hunan as one of the leading centers of Gong Bi painting nationwide.

However, during the Period of Stagnation (2000 – present), the overall influence of the HGP began to decline. The number of exhibitions, awards, and national-level selections has decreased, and the pace of collective artistic activity has slowed down. Yet, despite this decrease in number of works exhibited, the quality of leading jobs remains remarkably high, even surpassing the collective aesthetic of the 1990s. Recent outstanding jobs show a stronger sense of individuality, introspection, and a global outlook, indicating a shift from a collective regional style to more innovative, self-reflective artistic expression.

Overall, HGP demonstrates an apparent paradox: fewer jobs, but greater refinement. While HGP's overall visibility and productivity have diminished, its top reations uphold a high artistic standard and international relevance. Meanwhile, a growing disparity between elite and ordinary practitioners has emerged, revealing deeper structural and ideological challenges within the HGP field. These issue and challenges will be examined in the next section, which investigates the current issues and challenges faced by the HGP industry.

### **5.3 Challenges Facing Hunan Gong Bi Paining Industry**

This section describes the current challenges facing the HGP industry. Based on firsthand data collected from practitioners, the key issues include a decline in the number of Gong Bi paintings and a reduction in award-winning pieces. For example, no HGP landscape paintings have received major awards since 2000. Furthermore, existing Gong Bi paintings exhibit a high degree of homogenization.

#### **5.3.1 Decrease in the Number of Gong Bi Paintings**

The decline in Gong Bi paintings can be attributed to two main factors: a reduced number of mature artists creating Gong Bi paintings and a decrease in young practitioners, both of which have contributed to a smaller number of works exhibited. First, mature artists are shifting to freehand painting instead of creating Gong Bi paintings. Xiao (2025) explains that the number of Gong Bi paintings has decreased because they are hard to sell. Gong Bi paintings are often priced too high, discouraging artists from making them. Xiao also states that completing a single piece can take months or even longer, and since these jobs may not sell quickly, artists face financial pressure and lack a steady income. As a result, the total number of Gong Bi paintings has declined, leading to fewer high-quality jobs and a reduced influence of the HGP industry.

Second, Yan (2024) reports that fewer than 20% of new members joining the HGP industry association each year are young Gong Bi painters. He identifies two primary reasons for this decline. First, the technical difficulty of Gong Bi painting discourages young artists' interest. Gong Bi painting demands immense patience, endurance, and technical skill. Artists must remain highly focused and precise throughout the creation process, which often spans several months to complete a single piece. This lengthy and demanding process presents a significant challenge, diminishing younger generations' interest in pursuing Gong Bi painting. Moreover, the limited upward mobility for young Gong Bi painters further diminishes their motivation. In the current Gong Bi field, exhibition opportunities are primarily controlled by senior, well-established artists, limiting chances for younger artists to showcase their work. Without recognition, their jobs often sell for low prices or fail to sell entirely. This lack of visibility and sales opportunities further diminishes their enthusiasm for pursuing Gong Bi painting.

### **5.3.2 Homogenization of HGP Jobs**

The current issue of homogenization in Hunan Gong Bi painting (HGP) stems from two main factors: a lack of individual innovation among artists and the influence of technology. First, according to Chen, many Gong Bi jobs lack thematic innovation. These paintings are often influenced by trending topics, popular styles, and market-driven themes, leading to many similar jobs. For example, many Gong Bi paintings centered on the theme of "Covid-19" feature similar figures and compositions, diminishing their uniqueness, as shown in Figure 5.2.



**Figure 5.2:** Spring, Kang Yue, 2020 (Left); Moving towards covid, An Yanyue, 2020 (Right)

Source: WeChat official account of Hunan Artists Association

Second, the introduction of computer technology has exacerbated this homogenization. Traditionally, creating a Gong Bi painting involves several key steps:

- i. Sketching from life: This foundational step reflects the artist's unique perspective and emotions. During this stage, the artist carefully considers the theme and composition, and the quality of the sketch directly impacts the artistic value of the final work.
- ii. Line drawing: Multiple rounds of line drawing are performed on rice paper to produce a refined and detailed outline.
- iii. Final draft: The final line drawing is transferred to silk, becoming the official draft of the Gong Bi painting.
- iv. Shading: This step involves layering colors and adjusting light and shadow to create depth and dimension. Traditional Gong Bi painting requires several rounds of color application and adjustments.

- v. Final touches and detail work: Before completion, the artist makes final adjustments and refinements to ensure the optimal effect.



**Figure 5.3:** Sketch (Left); Coloring (Right)

Source: Photograph by Researcher at Xiao Jian's studio

These traditional steps offer artists significant freedom to depict diverse figures, flora, fauna, and landscapes through careful observation and original composition. However, some contemporary Gong Bi artists, seeking to save time, bypass essential and time-consuming steps like sketching from life and repeated line drawing. Instead, they use computer-generated compositions, print detailed line sketches, and trace the outlines onto silk for coloring.



**Figure 5.4:** Painter digital hand-drawn sketch demonstration

Source: The Researcher uses AI to generate Gong Bi painting

This simplified process directly contributes to thematic homogenization, as computer-generated compositions are inherently limited. For instance, in popular flower-and-bird motifs, the forms of flora and fauna found online are often similar, as shown in Figure 5.4. Even if slight variations occur during painting, the core structure remains uniform. Consequently, this shift in the creative process moves away from the essence of painting, resulting in thematic and compositional uniformity.

Moreover, the prolonged use of computer-generated compositions negatively impacts the overall quality of the artwork. The lines in Gong Bi painting are its essence, crucial for expressing both emotion and theme. Without sketching from life and repeatedly refining line drawings on rice paper, the artist loses the ability to create vivid, expressive lines. Moreover, this reliance on technology weakens the artist's observational skills and expressive capacity, hindering true innovation. Xiao asserts that when artists abandon these foundational techniques, they move further from creating high-quality jobs that resonate with viewers. Consequently, opportunities to participate in national and international exhibitions become increasingly scarce.

In summary, the Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP) industry is currently facing significant challenges, most notably the decline in production volume and the increasing homogenization of artistic quality. As Bourdieu (1993) emphasized, art serves as a mirror of society and a key to understanding its structure and values. In this light, the transformations observed in HGP are not isolated phenomena but are deeply shaped by the broader interplay of cultural, technological, economic, and political forces that define contemporary China.

## **5.4 Discussion the result**

### **5.4.1 Culture Factor**

HGP faces challenges deeply rooted in the transformation of China's modern cultural landscape. Since the late twentieth century, the Chinese art world has undergone a significant shift from collective ideology toward cultural pluralism and global interconnectedness. Traditional art is no longer the unquestioned mainstream; instead, it now coexists and competes alongside various external art forms. The result has been a profound reorientation of artistic identity from collective inheritance to individual expression.

Following the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), during which Chinese art was dominated by an extreme form of Western realism, artists in the 1980s began a conscious process of cultural return. Within this broader context, Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP) represented a deliberate act of reorientation—a search for spiritual and aesthetic roots after a long period of Westernization-induced fatigue and dislocation. The HGP school's guiding philosophy, “using traditional techniques to depict modern life,” thus emerged as a response to the cultural climate of the time. It reflected not nostalgia, but adaptation an attempt to rebuild cultural confidence through the rediscovery of Chinese visual traditions.

However, after 2000, Western culture became deeply embedded in China's artistic ecosystem, reshaping the values and hierarchies that defined art itself. This period marked a structural transition for HGP, characterized by two major shifts: a decline in practitioners and a fundamental Westernization of artistic style, where originality replaced collectivity as the dominant aesthetic criterion.

Firstly, many Gong Bi painters gradually transitioned from traditional media to oil painting or installation art, leading to a steady decline in the number of Gong Bi practitioners. This shift was mainly driven by the increasing appeal of Western culture, which emphasizes creativity, expressiveness, and modernity. Another key factor contributing to this decline is the persistent influence of Chinese Confucian hierarchy culture. Confucianism values seniority and authority, creating a rigid hierarchy based on age and rank. In the already limited field of Gong Bi painting, such a system left even fewer opportunities for young artists to gain recognition or advancement. As a result, the combination of Western cultural appeal and traditional culture has caused significant attrition among HGP painters, weakening the continuity of artistic inheritance and the cycle of generational renewal.

Secondly, the logic of Gong Bi painting underwent a fundamental transformation to Western. Traditional Gong Bi paintings were grounded in a collective aesthetic logic of “shared themes with subtle individual variations,” emphasizing harmony and completeness. For instance, Classic subjects such as Eight Horses (Figure 5.5), Hundred Birds Paying Homage to the Phoenix, and Gathering of Scholars exemplified this mode. Innovation thus operated within the boundaries of collective narrative, subordinating individuality to the order of communal aesthetics.



**Figure 5.5:** The Eight Horses by Lang Shining (left); by Xu Beihong (right)  
Source: Zhang (2006)

However, in the contemporary era, artistic value has shifted toward distinct individuality, immediacy, and emotional self-narrative. For instance, HGP jobs such as *Conversation with Carlo Crivelli* and *Reflections on the Lotus Pond* embody this transformation; they move beyond the traditional ideal of harmony to engage with reflection, subjectivity, and cross-cultural dialogue. This evolution signifies more than thematic renewal; it marks the replacement of collective consciousness with individual introspection as the guiding principle of creation.

In essence, this transformation fundamentally challenges the philosophical foundation of traditional Chinese painting. This has led to a shift in the criteria for evaluating and the aesthetic principles governing meticulous brushwork paintings. the evaluative criteria for Gong Bi painting have shifted from technical refinement and moral harmony to originality, emotional authenticity, and conceptual innovation.

Overall, cultural globalization has revitalized Chinese art while exposing its traditional forms to unprecedented challenges. Within this context, Gong Bi painting has evolved from a single collective visual language to a more individualized and reflective artistic expression. Although its conventional symbolic systems have gradually declined, this process should not be viewed as regression but rather as a cultural filtration process, through which only jobs aligned with contemporary aesthetics and spiritual depth endure.

#### **5.4.2 Economic Factor**

Beyond cultural influences, economic forces have profoundly shaped the trajectory of Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP) between 1980 and 2020. The transformation of China's economy from a planned to a market-oriented system, redefined the social foundations of artistic production, turning art from a state-supported practice into a commodity governed by market mechanisms. Under this macroeconomic transformation, the structure, logic, and value system of HGP underwent fundamental change, leading to both creative expansion and structural challenges.

During the rise phase of HGP (1980-2000), belongs to early years of Reform and Opening Up. China's art ecosystem began to recover from the ideological constraints of the Cultural Revolution. The state remained the primary source of financial and institutional support through the establishment of art academies, provincial art associations, and public exhibitions. These institutions provided stability and legitimacy for artists, allowing them to focus on technique and subject matter without the immediate pressure of market competition. In this environment, Hunan Gong Bi painters benefited from a balanced combination of state sponsorship and increasing access to public audiences.

This transitional period witnessed the rise of a semi-market art economy, where artistic value was still measured by cultural prestige rather than economic return. Artworks were created with social idealism and collective identity in mind, resonating with the national call to “serve the people” while gradually embracing aesthetic autonomy. Within this supportive system, HGP flourished as a regional school advocating “using traditional techniques to depict modern life.” Its success was not only an artistic achievement but also a reflection of the political and economic balance of the time, combining institutional protection with limited market openness.

After 2000, the Chinese art world gradually entered what may be termed the “commercial era.” The rise of market orientation integrated art production into economic logic, resulting in commercialization and aesthetic uniformity. Under market influence, artistic value increasingly became linked to how sellable and visible it was. Hunan Gong Bi painters gravitated toward “popular themes” like flowers, beauties, and auspicious symbols, subjects seen as safe bets for collectors. While these themes led to quick profits, they weakened conceptual depth and cultural variety. As Bourdieu (1984) argued, when economic capital outweighs cultural capital, the symbolic and spiritual aspects of art are replaced by market value. Thus, Gong Bi painting was transformed into a form of aesthetic commodification, where the worth of art was measured not only by meaning, but also by market return.

Furthermore, marketization intensified polarization within the artistic ecosystem. Economic and cultural resources became increasingly concentrated among established “celebrity artists,” while younger and independent painters were marginalized due to limited access to social capital and institutional visibility. This “Matthew Effect” entrenched a

structural divide within the HGP community: elite artists accumulated symbolic and economic capital through branding and media exposure, while emerging artists engaged in survival-oriented production, prioritizing speed and saleability over exploration and depth. The result was an uneven artistic landscape, vibrant at the top, but fragile at the base.

Indirectly, the transformation of the economic structure has also contributed to the decline in the number of young Gong Bi painters. For emerging artists, even after undergoing long-term and systematic Gong Bi training, the economic viability of their jobs remains highly uncertain. In contrast, digital painting, illustration, and other forms of electronic art requiring lower costs and yielding quicker returns have become more practical career choices for the younger generation. Under these conditions, the high investment but limited financial reward of Gong Bi painting has reduced its appeal, leading to a steady decline in the number of young practitioners.

In summary, the evolution of HGP under economic modernization reflects not an absolute decline but a process of adaptive transformation. The decreasing number of jobs and growing homogenization do not indicate artistic exhaustion; instead, they represent the adjustment of a “slow art” tradition to the accelerated logic of a market society. While it has also stimulated artistic renewal, encouraging painters to integrate traditional craftsmanship with contemporary creativity and personal expression. This dual process exposes both the fragility of conventional art under modern pressures and its enduring capacity for regeneration within a competitive cultural framework.

### 5.4.3 Technology Factor

Technological innovation has fundamentally changed both the process and timing of Gong Bi painting. During the early phase of the Reform and Opening-Up (1980–2000), technological advancement mainly manifested in modernizing painting materials, creative methods, and media dissemination. Introducing new mineral pigments and improvements in xuan paper production enhanced color richness and natural lighting effects, fostering a new level of technical sophistication in HGP. Artists began experimenting with more complex chromatic contrasts and spatial compositions, blending traditional meticulous brushwork with modern design. Overall, the technological progress of this period was an enhancement rather than a disruption—it improved artistic conditions without altering the fundamentally handcrafted nature of Gong Bi painting.

However, after 2000, technology evolved from a supportive tool to a structural force. The rise of digitalization, networking, and AI fundamentally transformed the logic and temporality of artistic creation. Traditionally, creating Gong Bi paintings relied on a slow, meditative process involving detailed line work, repeated layers of color, and subtle tonal shifts. This “slow craft” served not only as technical training but also as a form of spiritual practice and aesthetic reflection. With digital tools and AI-assisted drawing, this process has been transformed by speed, significantly reducing production time and diminishing the need for patience and mindfulness. As sociologist Rosa (2019) argues, modern acceleration leads to a condition of “temporal alienation,” where individuals lose resonance with their own creative and experiential processes.

This shift has redefined the aesthetic foundation of Gong Bi painting. When precision and refinement can be easily achieved through technology, the traditional notion of “craftsmanship” loses its symbolic prestige. For instance, the classic subjects, such as Eight Horses or Hundred Birds Paying Homage to the Phoenix, can now be digitally reproduced in bulk, breaking the historical aesthetic hierarchy of Gong Bi art. In this new context, artistic value is increasingly defined not by manual skill but by creativity and individuality. Hence, a key question emerges: What defines a truly “good” Gong Bi painting in the age of AI and replication?

In twenty-first-century HGP, artistic excellence is no longer measured by skill alone but by the originality of vision and conceptual depth. This shift signals a transformation in aesthetic paradigms, from the traditional model of shared themes with varied techniques to a contemporary orientation toward individual expression and conceptual innovation. Thus, technological progress not only offers new tools for artistic production but also reconfigures the entire value system and aesthetic logic of Gong Bi painting. Once rooted in the handcrafted aesthetics of a “craft society”, it is now being re-coded within the algorithmic logic of a “digital society”, where visual forms are replicable, art is a unique personal exhibition.

In summary, technological innovation has not only transformed the methods of artistic creation but also redefined the ontology and value system of Gong Bi painting. This transformation exposes the dual condition of traditional art under technological modernity, it gains unprecedented visibility and flexibility, yet risks losing its moral and spiritual depth. For HGP, the challenge lies in maintaining humanity and introspection within an algorithmic culture. As this study argues, the future of Gong Bi painting depends on balancing

technological innovation with cultural reflection, allowing technology to serve as a vessel of continuation rather than a force of dissolution.

#### **5.4.4 Politic Factor**

The evolution of China's cultural policies has profoundly impacted the development of Hunan Gong Bi painting (HGP). After the Reform and Opening Up in 1978, art was liberated from its role as a political tool and redefined as a sphere of independent cultural creation. The government gradually loosened ideological control over artistic production, promoting the cultural policy of "letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend." During 1980–2000, China entered an era of intellectual liberation and cultural reconstruction, when state policy encouraged art to return to "humanistic values" and to reflect real life and national sentiment. Against this backdrop, HGP emerged with its defining principle of "using traditional techniques to depict modern life," which resonated both with the state's call for cultural revitalization and with the artists' pursuit of individual expression. This alignment between political climate and artistic aspiration enabled HGP to become one of the most influential regional schools of Gong Bi painting in China.

At this stage, state funding and institutional support were crucial. Provincial art associations, art schools, and local museums in Hunan provided stable platforms for training and exhibition. The establishment of the Hunan Art Festival and the restoration of professional painter positions within state art academies ensured the transmission of Gong Bi techniques and promoted intergenerational learning. Thus, political liberalization and cultural reconstruction collectively nurtured the golden era of HGP's development.

However, after 2000, the converging forces of cultural globalization, digital technology, and market economy, many traditional handcraft-based art forms are facing an unprecedented crisis of survival. Within this global restructuring of culture, policy has emerged as a crucial mechanism for safeguarding traditional arts. In China, both the central and Hunan provincial governments have introduced targeted policies, ranging from the National Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Program to provincial art funds and exhibition initiatives that collectively form a policy ecosystem for cultural revival. These measures have provided institutional stability and creative opportunities for HGP, enabling it to survive and adapt to the transformative pressures of modernity.

In summary, the evolution of HGP has been profoundly shaped by the interplay of cultural, economic, technological, and political forces. Moreover, the current issues and challenges facing the HGP industry are also caused by multiple factors, as shown in Table 5.1. Its apparent decline should not be interpreted as artistic regression, but rather as an adaptive response to the broader transformations of Chinese society in the age of globalization and modernization. The fluctuation in influence reflects not a loss of vitality, but a structural adjustment process, one through which HGP seeks to reconcile tradition with innovation, continuity with change.

**Table 5.1:** Issues Faced by the HGP Industry and Their Influencing Factors

| The issue of HGP |  | Social Reason  |
|------------------|--|--|
| Quantity Decline | Mature artists are reducing Gong Bi output or shifting to other media  | <p><b>Economic Factors</b></p> <p>Gong Bi painting requires long production time and high labor input, while market demand and sales return are uncertain.</p>   |
|                  | <p>•Young practitioners are scarce (new entrants &lt; <b>20%</b>). Reason:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. High technical difficulty discourages sustained training.</li> <li>2. Limits opportunities for young artists, reducing motivation.</li> </ol> | <p><b>Cultural Factors</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Western artistic influence</b> encourages artists to adopt oil painting, digital art, or design-based practices, reducing the number of Gong Bi painters.</li> <li>2. <b>Confucian hierarchical culture</b> limiting young artists' access to exhibitions, awards, and recognition.</li> </ol> |

**Table 5.1** continued

|  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| <p><b>Quality<br/>Homogenization</b></p> | <p>A large number of jobs on similar themes</p>                                   | <p><b>Economic Factors</b></p> <p>Market-oriented production promotes “hot-selling themes” and stylistic repetition, discouraging risk-taking and experimentation.</p>   |
|  |   | <p><b>Cultural Factors</b></p> <p>Global visual convergence under cultural globalization weakens regional identity, leading to aesthetically similar jobs, and reduced cultural distinctiveness.</p>                             |
|  | <p>Repetitive painting jobs, such as identical compositions and color schemes</p> | <p><b>Technological Factors</b></p> <p>Digital tools and AI-assisted composition lower technical thresholds but also result in visually standardized and less personalized jobs, diminishing artistic depth and originality.</p> |

**5.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has summarized and discussed the results of the field analysis, addressing the first and second research questions: (1) the developmental trajectory and current state of Hunan Gong Bi painting (HGP), and (2) the key challenges it currently faces.

The findings demonstrate that the evolution of HGP cannot be understood in isolation, but rather as a reflection of China's broader socio-cultural transformation. The observed decline in production should not be interpreted as an artistic regression, but as a process of adaptive reconfiguration, in which the art form seeks new meaning, structure, and relevance within contemporary society.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter summarizes the key findings of the research in response to the research questions. The chapter is organized into four main sections. First, it reviews the main points discussed in the previous chapters. Second, it discusses how the study's three research objectives were addressed, with a particular focus on the third objective, which provides recommendations for the development of the Hunan Gong Bi painting (HGP) industry. Third, it highlights the contributions and significance of the study. Finally, the chapter presents recommendations for future research.

#### **6.2 Summary of the Research**

The following is a summary of each chapter's content. Chapter 2 reviewed the history of Hunan Gong Bi painting. HGP exemplifies how traditional art can thrive in modern society by preserving its traditional characteristics while incorporating local awareness and culture from Hunan Province. The historical review was divided into two parts: Chinese Gong Bi painting and Hunan Gong Bi painting. The review of Chinese Gong Bi painting was further divided into two periods: traditional Gong Bi (Imperial period to 1911) and modern Gong Bi (1912-1976, and 1977-present). The history of Hunan Gong Bi painting was divided into two phases: the rise of HGP (1977-2000) and The Period of Stagnation (2001-2024). The literature review highlighted a gap in research: although data shows a decline in HGP after 2000, no studies have examined the specific changes in the industry through detailed analysis of individual jobs, thus guiding this study.

Chapter 4 focused on the data collection and analysis that outline the evolution and current challenges of Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP). Through analyzing five representative cases from an imagological perspective, the study traced the transformation of HGP's visual language and ideological expression across different historical contexts. Complementing this, interviews and field observations provided deeper insight into the HGP industry's structural issues. Together, these findings comprehensively understand HGP's current condition and form the empirical foundation for the subsequent discussion and strategic recommendations in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 presented the key findings, providing a comprehensive account of the emergence, development, and current state of Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP). Drawing on both primary and secondary data, the chapter traced the evolution of HGP as an art form and as an industry, highlighting its major phases and stylistic transformations. It also examined the core issues and challenges identified throughout the research, offering an in-depth discussion of the internal and external factors shaping its trajectory. Finally, the chapter contextualized the development of HGP within the broader cultural, economic, technological, and political frameworks that continue to influence its sustainability and future direction.

Chapter 6, presents a comprehensive summary of the research, evaluates the extent to which the study's objectives have been achieved, and outlines the key conclusions drawn from the findings. In addition, it offers practical recommendations for the sustainable development of HGP and proposes directions for future research.

### **6.3 Achieving Research Objectives**

The research objectives were successfully achieved by summarizing and coding primary and secondary data in alignment with the research questions. It primarily consists of three research phases:

- i. Provide a comprehensive description of the HGP industry through a literature review and analyze the painting case covered in Chapters 2, 4, and 5.
- ii. To critically examine the challenges faced by HGP industry covered in Chapters 4, and 5.
- iii. Formulating recommendations for developing HGP, elaborated in the next section. The key achievements are outlined below.

#### **6.3.1 Provide a comprehensive description of the HGP industry**

The first objective was to provide a clear understanding of the Hunan Gong Bi painting (HGP) industry's development. This was achieved through data from two sources. First, the literature review in Chapter 2 outlined the evolution of the HGP industry, from its prosperous beginnings to its current decline. Second, the imagology analysis of five selected paintings in Chapter 4. By integrating macro-level data from the HGP industry with micro-level painting analysis, the researcher mapped the development trajectory of the HGP industry, detailed in Section 5.2.

#### **6.3.2 Examine the Issues and Challenges Facing the HGP Industry**

The second objective aimed to identify the key issues and challenges influencing the sustainable development of the Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP) industry. To achieve this, data were collected through direct interviews with artists, observations of industry meetings,

and reviews of discussion records. The analysis revealed consistent patterns across these sources, including a decline in overall production, a decrease in innovative and high-quality jobs, and the growing homogenization of artistic expression. These challenges, discussed in detail in Section 5.3.

Based on these findings, the study contributes valuable recommendations to promote the sustainable development of the HGP industry. These recommendations are derived from an in-depth analysis of the industry and comparisons with similar art sectors in other developed countries. However, the recommendations are specifically tailored to the unique conditions of the Hunan Gong Bi painting industry. The feasibility of these recommendations has been thoroughly evaluated, as many have been successfully implemented in other countries. Key recommendations include encouraging practitioners to persist in creating Gong Bi paintings and promoting diversity in the themes and styles of their jobs.

#### **6.4 Recommendations for Hunan Gong Bi Painting**

The challenges faced by the Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP) industry are not isolated phenomena but reflect broader issues encountered by many traditional art forms in an era of cultural globalization. This research proposes a two-tiered strategy framework to ensure the HGP industry's sustainable development. On one hand, the inner circle focuses on the principles of artistic and practical innovation among HGP painters. On the other hand, the outer circle addresses the policy underlying the broader cultural ecosystem. As policy remains the only controllable external force, it plays a decisive role in providing institutional stability, financial support, and strategic direction for the long-term development of HGP.

#### **6.4.1 Inner Circle: Recommendations for Practical Innovation**

At the inner circle level, practitioners of HGP must establish their own distinctive visual language, should aligns with contemporary cultural realities while preserving the integrity of traditional craftsmanship. Based on the painting case analysis in Chapter 4, these jobs, share several defining characteristics. At the image level, they retain and simultaneously innovate upon traditional techniques. At the thematic level, these jobs break away from the conventional aesthetic of harmony and completeness, instead embracing a more contemporary, reflective, and individualized mode of expression.

In essence, changes in the contemporary social environment have redefined the logic of artistic creation. As technological innovation simplifies the painting techniques, the intellectual and reflective value behind a painting has become increasingly significant. Thus, the emphasis of Gong Bi art has shifted from the mastery of skill to the articulation of meaning. For HGP painters, innovation now lies not only in the refinement of craft but in the capacity to embed philosophical reflection, emotional authenticity, and personal vision within their work.

#### **6.4.2 Outer Circle: Recommendations for Policy**

As Bourdieu (1984) argues, the state possesses dominant capital within society and holds the authority to regulate the development of all cultural fields. . As a powerful lever for regulating the social environment, it plays a crucial role in ensuring the healthy development of the HGP industry.

#### 6.4.2.1 Recognize and reward outstanding practitioners

Regarding Section 5.3.1, mature artists are shifting to freehand painting instead of creating Gong Bi painting. In fact, mature artists possess strong and consistent painting skills, as evidenced by the fact that 70% of those who have exhibited or won awards in the HGP industry are over 45 years old (with artists under 45 classified as "young" by the art associations). Therefore, supporting their continued creation of Gong Bi paintings is essential for enhancing the industry's competitiveness.

Market forces primarily drive the decline in output of mature artists. Traditional art forms are being increasingly challenged by modern market demands, a trend seen in other countries as well. For example, traditional Japanese art has faced a similar decline. In response, the Japanese government established the "Living National Treasures" system, providing financial support and social recognition to outstanding traditional artists to help preserve and pass on these art forms (Kakiuchi,2016). Hunan could adopt a similar approach by creating special awards or titles to honor artists who have made significant contributions to Gong Bi painting. This might include financial backing, allowing artists to focus on their craft and ensuring the ongoing development of this important traditional art in today's society.

HGP could adopt strategies similar to those in Japan by recognizing and rewarding experienced Gong Bi artists. For example, special awards or titles could be established, along with dedicated financial support, to encourage them to produce Gong Bi painting regularly. This would increase the likelihood of producing high-quality jobs. Furthermore, mature artists could mentor and guide the next generation of painters.

#### 6.4.2.2 Implement a “Master Apprentice” and “Young Artists Exhibitions” to Encourage Young Artists

As discussed in Section 5.3.1, fewer than 20% of new members joining the Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP) association are young painters, revealing a significant generational gap. Two key factors contribute to this decline. First, the high technical threshold of Gong Bi painting makes it difficult for young artists to master essential techniques, restricting their creative confidence and career advancement. Second, the hierarchical structure of the art system grants exhibition and award opportunities primarily to senior artists, leaving young practitioners with limited visibility and market recognition.

To address these challenges, a “Master Apprentice” mentorship system should be established to ensure the stable transmission of skills and promote long-term sustainability. A useful reference is Italy’s Apprenticeship of the Arts program, which successfully pairs experienced artisans with young trainees to preserve craftsmanship through hands-on, immersive learning. This model could be adapted to the HGP context, emphasizing intergenerational knowledge exchange and artistic continuity.

The Hunan provincial government could institutionalize this model by launching a “Gong Bi Master Apprentice Program”, pairing established masters with promising young painters. As Young artists represent the future vitality of the HGP industry. Their innovative capacity must be grounded in technical mastery and historical awareness. Through mentorship, senior artists can provide guidance in both technique and creative philosophy, while apprentices bring fresh ideas and contemporary perspectives, ensuring that tradition evolves rather than stagnates. Such collaboration would foster mutual growth—preserving traditional precision while encouraging modern reflection.

Furthermore, the hierarchical structure of the art system often limits opportunities for young painters. A useful reference can be found in South Korea's policy support for emerging artists. Through the "Emerging Artist Track" and other funding schemes managed by the Korean Artists Welfare Foundation (2023), thousands of young artists receive financial aid, exhibition opportunities, and career development support each year. The Hunan provincial government and the HGP industry association could adopt a similar approach by regularly organizing "Youth Gong Bi Painting Exhibitions" and "New Talent Competitions." These platforms would provide young artists with greater exposure and help discover and nurture promising talent, which is a crucial step toward ensuring the sustainable growth of HGP.

Recommend that the Hunan government increase the number of dedicated Gong Bi painting exhibitions and extend these events to cities and counties across the province. This would provide more platforms for emerging artists, enriching the local cultural and artistic environment, and enhancing public recognition and appreciation of Gong Bi painting. Encouraging regular exhibitions for young artists would also foster steady creative output from the younger generation.

#### 6.4.2.3 Support Artists in Exploring Non-Traditional Theme

According to Section 5.3.2, the jobs of HGP are influenced by market forces, such as trending topics, popular styles, and market-driven themes, leading to a proliferation of homogeneous subject matter. In fact, homogenization is a widespread issue across the global art industry. UNESCO's Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions emphasizes the importance of fostering diverse cultural expressions and encourages governments to implement policies that support diversity in artistic

production. This includes financial support, capacity building, and the protection of artistic freedom to ensure a wide range of cultural narratives are represented.

Several countries have successfully implemented strategies to combat homogenization. The following recommendations are inspired by the experiences of Japan, and UK. Contemporary art trends often involve such fusion. For example, Japanese artist Takashi Murakami's Super flat style combines traditional Japanese art with contemporary Western pop culture, merging elements from Ukiyo-e, anime, and Western pop art to create a unique cross-cultural form. Contemporary art, in essence, is an art of fusion, where boundaries between traditional and modern, Eastern and Western cultures are increasingly blurred. HGP must encourage artists to explore and innovate, producing diverse, contemporary jobs.

To foster artistic exploration, the government could organize exhibitions focused on a wide range of themes. For example, the British Art Show aims to promote diverse artistic themes, addressing social issues such as gender equality, racial diversity, and environmental concerns. These exhibitions inspire artists to break conventions and explore new forms of expression (USA Art News). Similarly, Hunan museums and galleries could curate exhibitions that emphasize thematic and creative diversity, providing a platform for fresh voices and encouraging artists to break away from mainstream, repetitive themes.

In addition, cross-disciplinary collaborations could further invigorate HGP. For example, Hunan's popular tea brand, 'Cha-Yan-Yue-Se', has successfully integrated Gong Bi flower-and-bird paintings into its brand design, using Gong Bi art on cups, postcards, packaging, and more, as shown in Figure 6.1. This approach not only attracted a younger

audience but also created a cultural symbol for Hunan, effectively addressing the issue of theme homogenization in HGP.



**Figure 6.1:** Chinese tea brand Cha Yan Yue Se uses Gong Bi as a design element for its packaging and posters

Source: Brand's WeChat official account

In summary, addressing the market-driven thematic homogenization in HGP requires reinforcing institutional mechanisms that support artistic diversity and protect creative risk-taking. This includes encouraging artists to move beyond conventional subjects, fostering experimentation with contemporary cultural narratives, and expanding cross-disciplinary platforms that connect Gong Bi painting with broader social and aesthetic discourses.

#### 6.4.2.4 Preserve Traditional Gong Bi Painting Techniques

According to Section 5.3.2, regarding the issue: The improper use of modern technology has indirectly caused the spread of similar jobs. While technological advancements have altered handcrafting techniques globally, preserving traditional methods is crucial for maintaining the uniqueness and artistic value of the jobs. For instance, in Japan's Ukiyo-e and woodblock printing industries, despite the widespread use of modern

printing technology, the government actively supports the preservation of traditional techniques by protecting master artisans and ensuring the continuity of hand-carving and hand-printing skills.

In Gong Bi painting, the vitality and variety mainly come from the basic practice of sketching from life. For example, Chen Bai-Yi' s sketches, as shown in Figure 6.2, capture the subtleties of human gestures and expressions through careful observation and interpretation. This process of observing, understanding, and creating is crucial for ensuring the movement and authenticity of the final piece.



**Figure 6.2:** Chen Bai-Yi' s line drawing  
Source: Courtesy from Artist Chen Ming-da

To preserve the traditional techniques of Gong Bi painting, the government can safeguard the purely manual processes of traditional Gong Bi painting: from sketching from life, line drawing, to wash shading.

#### 6.4.2.5 Preserve Traditional Gong Bi Painting Techniques

According to Section 5.3.2, regarding the issue: the improper use of modern technology has indirectly caused the spread of similar jobs. While technological advancements have altered handcrafting techniques globally, preserving traditional methods is crucial for maintaining the uniqueness and artistic value of the jobs. For instance, in Japan's Ukiyo-e and woodblock printing industries, despite the widespread use of modern printing technology, the government actively supports the preservation of traditional techniques by protecting master artisans and ensuring the continuity of hand-carving and hand-printing skills.

In Gong Bi painting technical, the vitality and variety mainly come from the basic practice of sketching from life. For example, Chen Bai-Yi's sketches, as shown in Figure 6.2, capture the subtleties of human gestures and expressions through careful observation and interpretation. This process of observing, understanding, and creating is crucial for ensuring the movement and authenticity of the final piece. To ensure the quality of detailed Gong Bi paintings, we should preserve the traditional techniques.

To support this continuity, the government and art institutions may establish Traditional Technique Preservation Studios, modeled after Japan's Living National Treasure system, in which senior Gong Bi masters receive official recognition and resources to train apprentices. In addition, annual Technique Preservation Exhibitions and Masterclass Workshops could be organized, focusing on demonstrating and teaching fundamental processes such as 线描 (line drawing), 分染 (wash shading), and 工笔设色 (layered coloring). Universities and art academies should include these traditional methods as

compulsory foundation courses rather than elective modules, ensuring that technical heritage is embedded in formal education rather than left to individual interest.

In summary, the researcher has proposed solutions to address the challenges faced by the Hunan Gong Bi painting (HGP) industry, specifically the decline in the the number of works exhibited of Gong Bi paintings and the issue of homogenization in quality. These strategies are based on successful case studies from other countries. To address the reduction in the number of jobs, the researcher recommends encouraging practitioners to actively create, drawing on strategies from South Korea and Italy, with three specific measures proposed. To tackle the issue of homogenization, the researcher suggests promoting diversity in HGP jobs, using strategies from Japan and Italy to effectively maintain variety. The specific strategies are outlined in the accompanying table.

**Table 6.1:** Improvement strategies

| Main Issue          | Description   | Specific Measures   |
|---------------------|---|---|
| Decline in Quantity | Mature artists are producing fewer Gong Bi paintings. | Recognize and reward outstanding practitioners  |
|                     |   | Establish a master-apprentice system to ensure stable creation by young practitioners |
|                     |   | Increase exhibitions for young Gong Bi artists  |

**Table 6.1:** continued

|  |                           |   |
|--|---------------------------|---|
| Decline in Quality<br>(Homogenization) | Promote diversity in jobs | Preserve traditional Gong Bi painting techniques    |
|  |                           | Support artists in exploring non-traditional themes |

### 6.5 Research Outcomes

Hunan Gong Bi painting (HGP), as a representative of traditional art, holds significant potential in preserving local culture, traditions, and the cultural identity of both Hunan Province and China as a whole. Beyond its cultural value, the development of the HGP industry can also contribute positively to the local economy, fostering economic growth through the promotion of cultural heritage and tourism.

The growth of the Hunan Gong Bi painting industry depends on several key factors: government support, practitioners' commitment to preserving traditional techniques, and an increasing awareness of the art's cultural significance. These elements together provide a strong foundation for the preservation and further development of Hunan Gong Bi painting, positioning it as a unique art form that represents the cultural richness of Hunan and China.

This research has identified that the development of Hunan Gong Bi painting is influenced by a variety of factors, including economic, academic, cultural, technological, and political dimensions. The challenges currently facing the HGP industry, such as the decline in the number of practitioners and the homogenization of work, are common to many

traditional art forms in the context of globalization. The role of the government is crucial in this process; without proper support, the HGP industry risks being overtaken by market forces, potentially leading to the erosion of traditional techniques in favor of modern technological practices.

By drawing upon the experiences of other countries that have faced similar challenges, this study proposes several strategies for revitalizing the HGP industry. These recommendations are designed to help ensure the sustainability of the HGP industry, preserving its traditional techniques while encouraging innovation and growth.

The unique contribution of this research lies in its comprehensive understanding of the HGP industry's development, highlighting the specific challenges it faces and the social, economic, and political factors that influence its trajectory. The study not only provides a detailed account of HGP's evolution but also offers valuable insights into the preservation of traditional art forms in a globalized world. In line with UNESCO's advocacy for promoting the diversity of cultural expressions, these recommendations offer pathways for ensuring the sustainable growth and preservation of Hunan Gong Bi painting.

## **6.6 Contribution to New Knowledge**

This study contributes to the field in three keyways. Firstly, existing literature has frequently interpreted the post-2000 reduction in visibility and output of HGP as artistic decline, yet few studies have examined how the jobs, themselves have changed. Using a three-dimensional imagological approach (image, theme, and ideology), this study reveals that the transformation is not a loss of technical skill but a shift in aesthetic logic, from collective narratives of harmony to individualized, reflective, and globally engaged modes of expression. Thus, the current state of HGP is more accurately understood as a cultural and

ideological transformation rather than a decline, offering a new perspective on how traditional art adapts to contemporary contexts.

Secondly, the research clarifies two major structural challenges faced by HGP: a decline in artistic participation and the homogenization of subject matter. The former results from generational discontinuity and the high technical threshold of Gong Bi training, while the latter arises through market-driven aesthetics, cultural globalization, and digital reproducibility. These findings demonstrate that the challenge is systemic rather than individual, rooted in the tension between slow, craft-based creation and the fast-paced aesthetic logic of contemporary society.

Lastly, to address these challenges, the study proposes a dual-circle strategy. The internal circle focuses on artists, encouraging them to build personal visual languages grounded in traditional technique while engaging contemporary cultural reflection. The external circle focuses on institutional support, recommending master-apprentice transmission models, youth exhibition channels, cross-disciplinary collaboration platforms, and cultural funding programs. This framework links research findings to actionable practice, offering a sustainable pathway for the renewal of HGP as a living art form.

## **6.7 Recommendations for future studies**

The results of this study open new avenues for exploring Hunan Gong Bi painting (HGP) and its broader implications within the context of Chinese Gong Bi painting. Several key areas for future research are suggested:

- i. Studying the Changes in Gong Bi Painting Techniques With the rapid development of technology, there are noticeable differences between traditional and modern

Gong Bi painting techniques. Future research could explore how technological advancements have influenced the process of creating Gong Bi paintings. This would provide insights into how modern tools can assist in preserving and enhancing traditional techniques, while maintaining the core values of Gong Bi painting.

- ii. Exploring the Social Changes in Gong Bi Painting Traditionally, Gong Bi painting integrated philosophical, ritualistic, and cultural elements, reflecting a connection with Chinese heritage. In contrast, contemporary Gong Bi painting emphasizes personal expression, with artists focusing more on individual experience and artistic freedom. This shift represents a transformation in the function and philosophy of Gong Bi painting. Future research could examine these social and philosophical changes in greater depth, providing a clearer understanding of how Gong Bi painting has evolved within the broader socio-cultural context.

In addition to these specific areas, this research hopes to contribute to the ongoing development and preservation of Hunan Gong Bi painting. Art has always served as a lens through which to understand society, and the state of HGP reflects broader societal issues in modern China. To safeguard the uniqueness of Chinese culture, it is crucial that practitioners and stakeholders acknowledge the importance of tradition in a balanced and forward-thinking manner. Such recognition is essential for preserving the distinctive cultural identity of China, setting it apart from other global artistic traditions.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Interview Questions

### Appendix A: Interview Questions

#### **Purpose of Interview**

This interview aims to understand the evolution of Hunan Gong Bi Painting (HGP), the artistic characteristics of selected works, and the issues and challenges currently faced by practitioners in the field. There are no right or wrong answers; your personal insight is valuable.

#### **Topic 1: Personal and Professional Background**

1. Could you briefly introduce your artistic training and career background?
2. How did you begin practicing Gong Bi painting? What influenced this decision?
3. How would you describe the environment of the HGP industry during 1980–2000?
4. How did the HGP industry change between 2001 and 2020?

#### **Topic 2: Artwork Case Discussion**

5. Could you describe the creation process of the selected artwork used in this research?
6. What are the main visual and technical characteristics of this work?
7. How does this artwork reflect your personal development or artistic transition?

#### **Topic 3: Issues and Challenges in the HGP Industry**

8. In your view, what does the HGP industry face the key challenges after 2000?
9. How have market forces, cultural trends, and technology influenced Gong Bi painting today?

10. Why do you think fewer young artists are choosing to specialize in Gong Bi painting?

11. How do you interpret the current issue of thematic homogenization?

**Topic 4: Future Prospects and Suggestions**

12. What aspects of Gong Bi painting do you believe are important to preserve?

13. How can Gong Bi painting adapt to remain relevant in contemporary culture?

14. What suggestions would you give young Gong Bi painters entering the field?

15. What types of policy or institutional support are needed to ensure sustainable development of HGP?

## Appendix B



### **TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN**

#### **Ref: LETTER OF CONSENT**

Dear Mr. Yan Qiuli, Xiao Jian, Chen Li, Chen Mingda, Wu RongGuang:

I refer to the above-mentioned matter. I am Xiaokang, a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), a public research university in Malaysia. I respectfully request your consent, cooperation, and support in sharing your professional experience and artistic knowledge for academic research purposes.

My research project focuses on Gong Bi Painting in Hunan Province through the Lens of Issues, Challenges, and Development Strategies. I would like to invite you to participate in a semi-structured interview to discuss your artistic practice, your observations of the development of Hunan Gong Bi painting, and your views on the challenges facing the industry in recent decades.

Please be assured that all information collected will be used solely for academic research, and your privacy and confidentiality will be fully protected. Your participation is voluntary, and you may decline to answer any question or withdraw at any time without negative consequences.

If you agree to participate, kindly sign this consent form below as confirmation.

Thank you sincerely for your time, support, and valuable contribution. I look forward to learning from your insights and working together to support the continuation and development of Gong Bi painting in Hunan.

**Consent Agreement**

I, [Yan Qiuli, Xiao Jian, Chen Li, Chen Mingda, Wu RongGuang], agree to participate in this research study conducted by Daiyu from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). I understand that my responses will be used for academic purposes.

Signature:

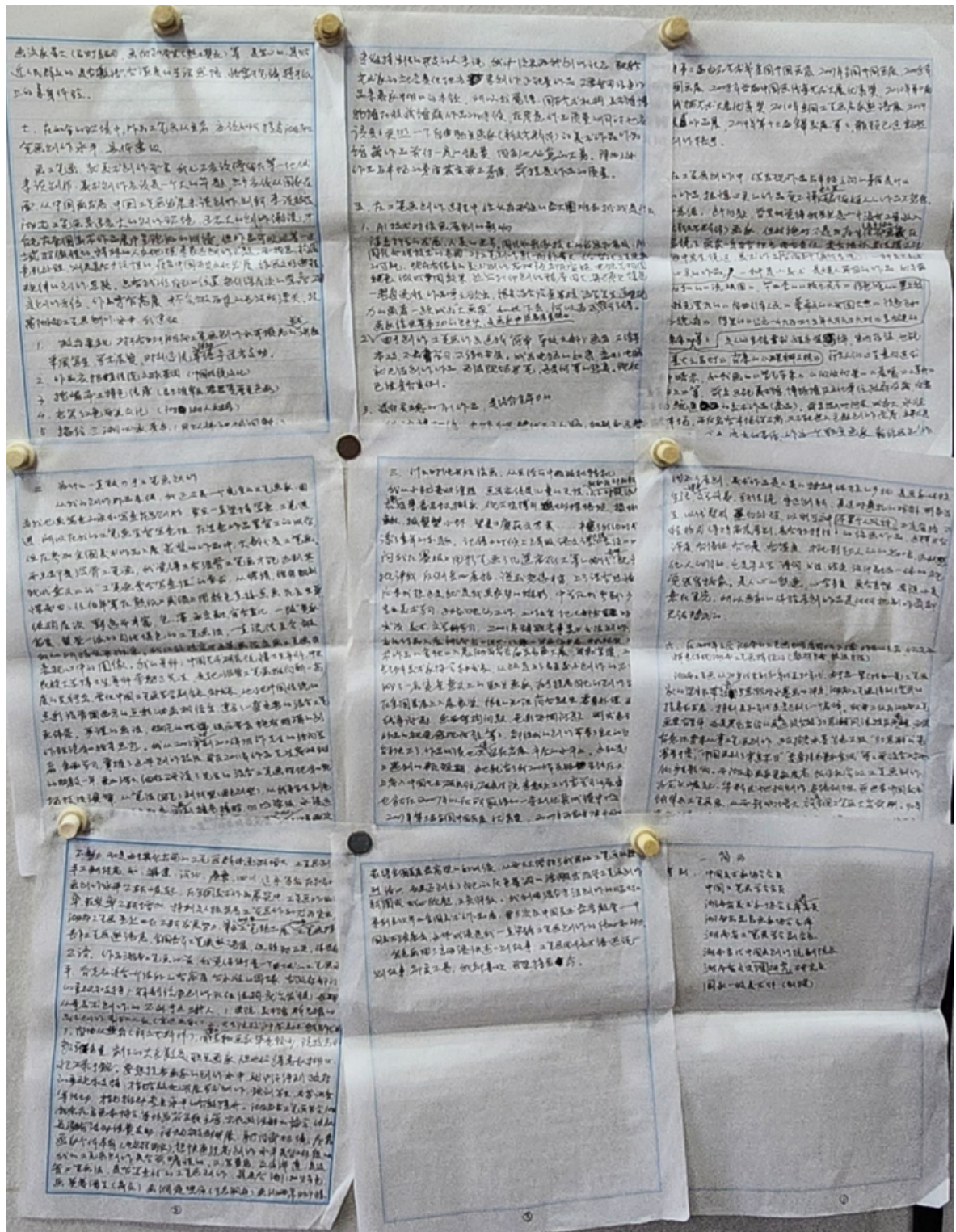


Sincerely,

XiaoKang  
PhD Student

Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts,  
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS)

Appendix C: Transcription of Chinese audio data from the interview



**Appendix D:** List of interviewees and relevant associations

1. Studio: Wu Rongguang Gong Bi Painting Studio

Address: No. 152, Lushan South Road, Yuelu District, Changsha City, Hunan Province

Phone: +86-18163622777

2. Studio: Xiao Jian Studio(Buyun Tower)

Address: No. 200, Section 2, Furong North Road, Kaifu District, Changsha City, Hunan Province

Phone: +86-13807314481

3. Studio: Chen Mingda Art Painting Studio

Address: No. 112, Section 1, District D, Oriental New City Wanjiali Middle Road, Furong District, Changsha City, Hunan Province,

Phone: +86-15387560853

4. Studio: Yan Qiuli Studio

Address: Building 43, Jingwanzi Community, Yuhua District, Changsha City, Hunan Province

Phone: +86-13319588199

5. Studio: Zhang Li Studio

Address: No. 19, Wujialing Road, Grand Hyatt Residences by the River - East District, Kaifu District, Changsha City, Hunan Province,

Phone: +86-13808410348

6. Name: Li Puxing

Address: No. 638, Lushan South Road, Yuelu District, Changsha City, Hunan Province

Phone: +86-1558166620

7. Hunan Artists Association

Address: No. 227, Bayi Road, Wulipai Street, Furong District, Changsha City, Hunan Province

Official website (WeChat): hunanshengmeixie

8. Hunan Flower and Bird Painters Association

Address: No. 126, Qingshuitang Road, Qingshuitang Street, Kaifu District, Changsha City, Hunan Province

Official website (WeChat):

9. Hunan Province Gong Bi Painting Association

Address: No. 355-1, Yuelu Avenue, Yuelu District, Changsha City, Hunan Province

Official website (WeChat): Hunan Gong Bi

## Appendix E: Journal Publications

1. **Kang, X.,** Bin Wan Abdullah, W. J. I. (2024). Innovations in Gong Bi painting by Xu Beihong: An Iconographic Study of Yugongyishan. *Journal of Theory and Practice in Humanities and Social Sciences*, 1(3), 1–6.
2. **Kang, X.,** Bin Wan Abdullah, W. J. I. (2024). The Rise and Development of Hunan Gong Bi Painting from 1980 to 2000: Expressing Life Through Tradition. *Journal of Social Science Humanities and Literature*, 7(4), 87–92.