

## From Symbols to Psychology: Post-2005 Shift in Chinese Figurative Painting and Modern Chinese Identity

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### ABSTRACT

While focusing on the history of Chinese figurative art, a clear pattern emerges relating to Western influence on traditional art. The socialist revolutionaries embrace Western realism, moving away from the more spiritual style of ink wash painting, to showcase powerful and happy figures as symbolic representations of the Maoist revolution. This style of art dominated for a few decades, only to be supplanted by cynical realists, as China moved away from stringent socialism, embracing many capitalist elements. The semiotic analysis of cynical realist paintings was conducted before, and this study focuses on the shift from symbolic to the psychological in post-2005 Chinese figurative art. Using visual analysis and a comparative case study of two artists, Liu Xiaodong and Yu Hong, this paper establishes that 21st-century Chinese figurative painting moved away from overt sociopolitical critique, instead focusing on issues that create a profound psychological impact. The study revealed that the two representative artists of this era have very different approaches to psychological realism; while Liu prefers a more dispassionate and detached approach, the art of Yu Hong is profoundly rooted in her lived experiences.

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**Contribution/Originality:** The study contributes to the existing literature on Chinese Figurative Art by analysing recent works by active artists. This particular artistic genre and age is seldom studied, making it an important addition to existing academic research; the narratological and psychological explorations also make it one of the very few such works.

## 1. Introduction

From the terracotta army to ink wash painting and modern socialist art, Chinese figurative artistry has a long and colourful history. 20th-century traditional art in China, apart from the traditional art, was dominated by Socialist Realism. To quote Mao, "*life reflected in...art...ought to be on a higher plane, more intense, more concentrated, more typical, nearer the ideal, and therefore more universal*" (Wang, 2011, p. 108). This implied that art became another vehicle for propagating socialism, and artists would have to follow certain rules that are antithetical to artistic liberty. Specifically, the revolutionary workers and soldiers had to be depicted heroically, while opponents of socialism would be put in the background, almost hidden, if not completely absent. While the political success (or failure) of this kind of art is beyond the scope of this paper, it must be noted that since the late 1980s, Chinese artists have gradually moved away from socialist realism, in light of their exposure to Western artistic ideals like Expressionism and Impressionism. These artists, known as Cynical Realists, were thoroughly disenchanted by the gradual move away from socialist China towards a capitalist China. Gao Minlu characterised cynical realism as "*exhibiting a free-floating cynicism unrelated to any dogma and uncommitted to any one belief system; they approach the existential situation with a sense of humour*" (Chiriță, 2015, p. 89). Cynical realists critiqued both their contemporary society and politics and the previous socialist realism movement, earning the name 'Political Pop' artists. Post 2005, another major change happened in the figurative art space, as artists moved away from cynical realism to an impressionistic style applied to the Chinese context. Forswearing sociocultural and political commentary, post-2005 artists are focusing more on the individual in a globalised, hypercapitalist China, and the psychological dimensions of contemporary existential reality.

Maintaining theoretical and chronological continuity, the current study also moves from the semiotic analysis of the previous dissertation and focuses on the introspective and psychological aspects of post-2005 Chinese figurative art. My previous work (doctoral dissertation), titled *The Influence of Image Composition, Forms) and Symbolism on the Development of Contemporary Figurative Painting (1989-2005): Based on Case Studies of Artists from China*, focused chiefly on the cynical realist movement up to 2005 and approached their work from an image composition and symbolism perspective to make the case that Chinese figurative paintings have been turned into a global commodity. This study expands the timeline past 2005 and into recent years, and the approach in research also changes accordingly. From semiotics and image composition analysis, this study moves on to psychological narrative and emotional realism, specifically assessing how the artistic choices in the paintings impact the psyche of the viewers.

### 1.1. Research Problem

The research problem that this study addresses is how psychological narratives in post-2005 Chinese figurative art present a modern Chinese identity. It established the shift from symbolic sociocultural criticism to the psychology of the individual in early 21st-century figurative art. It explores common motifs in selected artwork that incorporate psychological aspects of modern Chinese life through the usage of visual techniques like colour, form, shape, pattern, lighting, texture and so on. It codified these different motifs and the aspects of human experience they portray. While it situates the selected art in its proper historical context, it takes a universalist approach to recognising psychological motifs, avoiding highly specific cultural references for a broader audience.

## 1.2. Research Aim and Questions

The research aims to identify psychological narratives in post-2005 Chinese figurative art with the case study of two notable artists, Liu Xiaodong and Yu Hong.

- i. How do different elements of figurative painting form a cohesive psychological narrative?
- ii. How do the psychological narratives in 21st-century figurative art showcase a modern Chinese identity?

## 1.3. Scope and Significance

The study expands upon prior research work, which concerned figurative art between 1989 and 2005, by discussing artistic outputs after 2005. It focuses on two noteworthy artists from this time period, namely, Liu Xiaodong and Yu Hong. Using selected outputs from these two prominent figures, the study creates a representative collection of figurative painting that establishes the shift from symbolism and socio-political critique to psychological narrative and individual struggle of modern life. Stepping away from the structuralist semiotics of Barthes (1977) used in the previous research, this study scopes to frame the curated paintings in light of later ideas of Barthes (1977), specifically, his conception of psychological impact of an image which is supplemented by Bal's (2017) idea of narrative through images whereby artistic choices function as language to convey a thought, feeling or emotion, and other aspects of human mind.

## 2. Literature Review

The scope of this literature review is academic discourse on Chinese Figurative Paintings in the year 2005 and later, thereby expanding upon my doctoral dissertation. Apart from the key theoretical concepts, the literature review specifically excludes pre-2005 literature to maintain consistency with the artworks that are the subjects of this study. This aims to demonstrate how the contemporary discourse on Chinese figurative art changed from broader social and political criticism to a more introspective and psychology-oriented style and interpretation. This literature review assesses new scholarly works on figurative art and builds a theoretical grounding for the rest of the study.

### 2.1. Theoretical Framework

The visual analysis of psychological motifs in post-2005 Chinese figurative art necessitates an understanding of the influence of artistic choices made during the creation of an artwork on the psyche of the viewers. Oxman (2010, pp. 72-73) points out, Barthes (1977), one of the key figures in the structuralist semiology in the first half of the 20th century, moved away from much of his own theoretical flair later in life, "*the science of semiology, in proceeding according to Method,*" and quotes Barthes (1977) saying semiology follows a "*protocol of operations to obtain a result: to decipher, explain, or describe exhaustively.*" Therefore, his later attachment to the subjective affect of art, and particularly that of image, is an exercise in self-reflection as well as a critique of structuralist thinking. Barthes (1977) critiqued the Nietzschean "*will to truth,*" which is the key to semiotic analysis, saying, "*the 'neutral, transparent' language of science*" [by extension, semiology] possesses an overwhelming desire to ask the question, 'what does it mean?' (Oxman, 2010, p. 78). Therefore, the semiologist legacy of Barthes (1977) folds into the qualitative aspects of art; this subjectivity is not a refutation of semiology but an

embrace of the immediate impact of art on the viewer, thereby extending the scope of visual analysis beyond the symbols. Consequently, this study moves past semiotics and focuses on the psychological impact while analysing the curated Chinese paintings. Barthes (1977) identified two distinct affects of an image, coded and non-coded; the coded message or connotation is the “*cultural message*,” referring to what the artistic choices imply in the cultural context of the image (Barthes, 1977, pp. 36-37). This study identifies the connotations of the selected artworks through visual analysis, specifically, aspects like form, texture, light and shadow, scale, pattern and so on in post-2005 Chinese figurative art, to comprehend how the viewers perceive such artworks. Moving on from the semiotics of Saussure and Barthes, hallmarks of early-20th-century structuralist thought, this study adopts the visual emotion (affect) conceptions of Barthes, one of his later, post-structuralist ideas.

While an image is devoid of language, different aspects of it, like shadows, reflections, form, texture, pattern, colour grading and so on, create a salient narrative through artistic choices alone. “*Narratology as a field of study is the ensemble of theories of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events – of cultural artefacts that tell a story*” (Bal, 2017, p. 3). Thus, images, though not linguistic, can create a comprehensible narrative. While the readers of a book look for narratives in paper and ink, viewers of an image look for it in “*the strokes of paint on a canvas*,” using it “*to establish the structure of the text*” (Bal, 2017, p. 6). Therefore, for this study, the selected artworks from post-2005 figurative Chinese art serve as the text, and this study opts to explore through visual analysis how those artistic pieces create a coherent narrative, forming a distinct modern Chinese cultural identity. Notably, despite being from a different era, the ideas of Barthes (1977) regarding the effects of an image are congruent with the idea that the image itself can deliver a narrative. By situating an image in its proper cultural context, and through visual analysis, a clear understanding emerges of what the image highlights or obscures, realism or lack thereof, specific colours, and artistic techniques used become part of this narrative. Instead of finding sociocultural symbols, this study takes the approach of reading an image like a book. To that end, Barthes (1977) proposed the method of evaluation as a rejection of the “*indifference of science*,” [of semiology] to find a “*third meaning*” in an image, an obtuse meaning emerging from the non-signifying qualities of the image (Oxman, 2010, pp. 73, 81). In this study, the visual analysis facilitates Barthesian evaluation to find this “*third meaning*” that is beyond semiotics, in Chinese figurative paintings post-2005. This study shifts the research approach from symbolism to narratological interpretation (Bal’s, 2017) of the chosen paintings to analyse their psychological impact on the audience.

## 2.2. Psychology and Chinese Figurative Art

While Western artistic styles focus more on the individual and often place him at the centre of the painting, Chinese art presents the individual as a part of a broader natural world. Comparative analysis of Western and East Asian (including Chinese) art shows that East Asian art is more likely to have a greater horizon-to-frame ratio, implying that the environment is predominant in such art (Masuda et al., 2008, p. 1266). While this is true for Chinese traditional artwork, like ink-wash paintings, post-2005 art practitioners also carry this legacy. The study by Masuda et al. (2008, p. 1268) also reveals that present-day art students from East Asia are likely to maintain a similarly high horizon-to-frame ratio, akin to traditional paintings, compared to their Western counterparts. This discrepancy, by induction, is attributable to the cultural differences between Eastern and Western philosophical ideas. Chinese philosophies like Confucianism and

Taoism heavily emphasise situating the individual in his natural, physical context, showcasing the spiritual significance of living in harmony with nature. Psychologically, such approaches exude humility and self-reflection inherent to the presentation; as the individual is a part of the environment and not domineering, it opens up possibilities of deeper existential questions, an effect absent from the individualism-driven Western figurative art. Thus, the cultural context of contemporary Chinese figurative art inspires styles that convey introspection, communal harmony, collective identity and relative insignificance of the individual amidst vast nature.

### 2.3. Responses to Viewing Chinese Figurative Art

From an image psychology standpoint, responses to viewing a painting are directly tied to the content and the context of the painting itself. Different genres of painting, such as landscape painting and figure painting (both part of figurative art), elicit different responses; while both types of painting drive object recognition responses (content words), figure paintings tend to generate more emotional responses in the viewers (Kang & Wang, 2025, p. 11). Thus, the psyche of the viewer is directly affected by the act of viewing itself, highlighting the psychological dimension of artistic choices. At the same time, psychological impact seems to be a function of the temporal dimension of exposure itself, since *“the first thing the individual recognises”* is the objects themselves and *“individuals need to experience a certain amount of time for the emotional output of art”* (Kang & Wang, 2025, p. 11). Therefore, emotional reaction or deep psychological impact on the viewer relies on non-artistic factors, like how much time the viewer dedicates to scrutinising the painting, if it is viewed in passing or in a dedicated manner, such as in an art gallery, and so forth. However, the fact that more emotional reactions were elicited by figure paintings is also significant, as it facilitates a certain degree of self-projection and reflexivity from the viewers.

### 2.4. Colours and Psychology

Different aspects of a painting leave different impacts on the viewer, and colour, being the most apparent visual element, impacts the mind profoundly. Yao et al. (2022, p. 5) argued, quoting Arnheim, *“As a communication tool, shape is more effective than colour, but the expression obtained by using colour cannot be obtained by shape.”* Thus, the colour of a painting is the most obvious and effective way to impact the psyche of the viewer; colours can obscure or highlight certain aspects of the image (such as in the chiaroscuro technique) and also provide concrete information about the subjects in figurative art. The tonal quality of the colour is also relevant in this context, as *“cool tones can also make people feel moist, light, quiet, low, and hard. Conversely, warm tones can feel dry, heavy, warm, soft and so on”* (Yao et al., 2022, p. 7). Therefore, colour can convey meaning by itself, as well as coupled with other aspects of the painting. Colour also serves to showcase realism or lack thereof, as viewers expect specific colours of known objects (like blue for the sky), opening up the artistic possibility to conform to realism or to subvert it. Thus, colour becomes a key source of psychological influence in figurative paintings.

### 2.5. Historical Context

Contemporary Chinese figurative art, after 2005, marks a shift from the cynical realism of the artistic style of the 1990s, as well as from collective socio-cultural critique to a more individualist and introspective focus. Shi (2019, p. 70) argued that *Hotbed* by Liu

Xiaodong incorporates elements of film, especially the passage of time, which enabled Liu to depict the progression of harm and loss experienced by people in proximity to the Three Gorges Dam. Liu organised this artwork like a strip of film, inside an old video camera that rolls the film to progress the picture. Specifically, he organised the progress of the damage caused by the dam to the local population from left to right; grief and loss intensify as the viewer moves their gaze from the first panel to the left to the last panel to the right. The emphasis is clearly on the trauma and pain of the people as his human figures appear dishevelled and distraught, their lack of clothing implying both poverty as well as their identity as working people. [Kharchenkova and Velthuis \(2015\)](#) point out that until the late 1970s, modern Chinese art (apart from traditional paintings) was dominated by socialist realism. The implications of this on the artistic style included presenting a heroic and glorious figure of the revolution and the revolutionaries while relegating its opponents to the background, in the shadows, or omitting them completely. Thus, art, apart from the old traditional continuity, became a tool for state propaganda. However, *“gradually throughout the 1980s, materials on...Impressionism and Expressionism became available in libraries and bookstores”* ([Kharchenkova & Velthuis, 2015, p. 114](#)). This led to the rise of Cynical Realists or Political Pop artists whose art heavily features critiques of previous socialist realism as well as the contradictory nature of the socialist past of China and its gradual embrace of capitalism. Thus, Chinese figurative art post-2005 is a step away from the sociocultural symbols of previous generations of art.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Design: Qualitative Visual Analysis and Comparative Case Studies

This study presents qualitative research that takes up two contemporary Chinese artists working on figurative paintings, namely Liu Xiaodong and Yu Hong, as case studies to analyse the post-2005 shift from dominant sociocultural symbolisms to more nuanced and varied individualist art, with psychological motifs. *“The list of qualitative inquiry strategies has grown more extensive...to include the various forms of case studies, participatory action research, phenomenological research,”* and so on ([Barone, 2006, pp. 217-218](#)). Of all these modes of qualitative inquiry, this study has adopted the case studies of two representative artists from the chosen era. These artists mark yet another transformation in the lineage of modern Chinese figurative art; from socialist realism during the early days of communist China, figurative art became Western-influenced socio-political critique in the late 1980s and 1990s and finally, it changed again to completely move away from sociocultural commentary. *“When reading an article...the author begins by describing previous research to map and assess the research area to motivate the aim of the study and justify the research question and hypotheses”* ([Snyder, 2019, p. 334](#)). The study surveys relevant literature to establish that the aforementioned shift in artistic philosophy did occur. It presents how the predominant motifs and themes in post-2005 figurative art reflect the angst of living in a hyper-consumerist society. Moreover, it argues that such paintings showcase, if not accept, the trials and tribulations of 21st-century Chinese life as part of the contemporary Chinese identity.

#### 3.2. Visual Analysis

Visual analysis is a key part of the current paper, since it explores psychological motifs in contemporary Chinese figurative art. *“A visual analysis addresses an artwork’s formal elements,”* which includes visual attributes such as colour, line, texture, size/scale,

pattern, light and darkness and so on (Duke University, 2020). In this study, a visual analysis of five selected paintings by each of the artists, Liu Xiaodong and Yu Hong, is conducted. This explores the elements of the selected painting that may evoke or trigger a psychological response from the viewer. Such psychological motifs have to be universal and cannot be specific to the native Chinese audience only. Hence, the study moves past the semiotic analysis of sociocultural symbols conducted in the previous work in order to find broader, more general and abstract elements of the selected art. “It is important in visual arts to gain the perspective of looking at an image from various perspectives and understand that it does not only reflect what can be seen on the surface” (Isikoren & Kalkan, 2017, p. 7333). Conducting visual analysis involves closely observing the chosen paintings and evaluating each element, such as brush strokes, shades, form and so forth. By analysing these elements of the paintings, this study reveals how each painting creates a coherent narrative, with psychological appeal being a common element in them. Notably, this analysis is inductive and subjective since different observers may interpret the same elements differently. Inductive inferences allow the study to draw broad conclusions from specific observable and repetitive patterns. At the same time, it only includes psychological motifs that are universal, moving past the specific symbolic appeal to Chinese sociocultural contexts that were covered in the previous research.

### 3.3. Comparative Case Study

The study adopts two key figures in post-2005 Chinese figurative art, namely, Liu Xiaodong and Yu Hong, as case studies and selects 5 works of each artist for analysis, sampled collectively in Figure 1, and Figure 2 and Figure 3. Figure 1 shows *Hotbed* by Liu Xiaodong with its five panels together; Figure 2 shows his other four selected works. In Figure 3, paintings 1, 2, 4 and 5 of Yu Hong are from her *Witness to Growth* series, and Painting 3 is from her *Silk* series of artworks. It takes it to be axiomatic that, despite different artistic styles and expressions, these two artists are emblematic of contemporary Chinese figurative paintings. Consequently, it takes up five selected artworks for each of these artists to establish the prevalence of psychological motifs and themes of self-reflection or deep contemplation in their art. Building on the visual analysis, the case study showcases how psychological motifs in two different artistic approaches converge to reflect a realistic picture of the 21st-century everyman. The comparison between the two artists also showcases how psychological perspectives differ based on gender and embodied experiences, which contributes to artist diversity while conforming to the broader pattern of transformation from social critique to individualism.

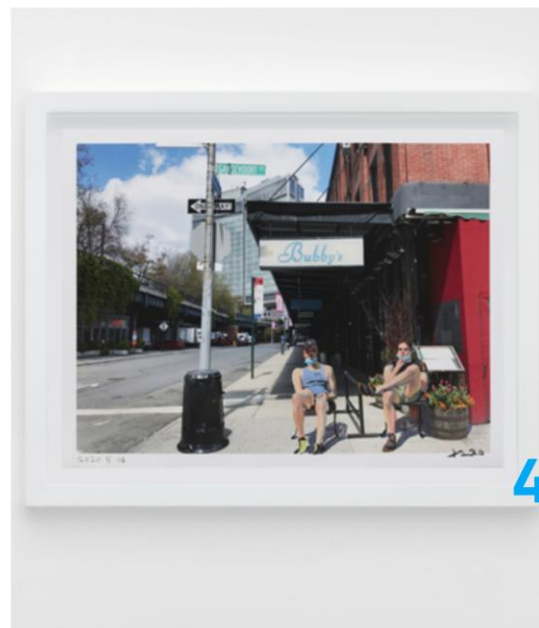
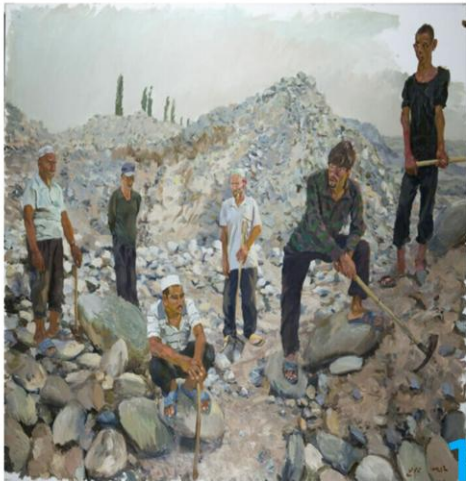
Figure 1: Hotbed by Liu Xiaodong



Note: The painting is complete in five panels, and all of them are sampled here

Source: Xiaodong (2006)

Figure 2: Selected Paintings of Liu Xiaodong



Note: Paintings in numeric order: 1. *East*; 2. *Out of Beichuan*; 3. *Into Taihu*; 4. *Two Men Basking in the Sun* by Xiaodong (2024); Collage: Self-made. Paintings Available in the Public Domain.

Figure 3: Selected Paintings of Yu Hong



Note: Paintings in numeric order: 1. 2017 Yu Hong, fifty-one years old; 2017 Liu Wa, twenty-three years old; 2. 2001 Yu Hong, thirty-five years old; 2001 Liu Wa, seven years old; 3. Carrying in a Sedan Chair; 4. Night Walk; 5. 1985 Yu Hong, nineteen years old

Source: [Hong \(2020, 2022, 2023\)](#)

### 3.4. Data Sources

Lacking direct access to the original artworks, the study relies on high-fidelity online sources, including museum and art gallery catalogues, for the visual analysis. While not ideal, this is a workable solution that serves the purpose of this study. It also draws from published peer-reviewed journal articles to build arguments, find critical information and complement the visual analysis. Theoretical frameworks, including Barthes' (1977) Connotation and Visual Affect as well as Bal's (2017) narratology, were drawn from the online versions (e-book) of the original texts by these authors. These versions are equivalent to original physical copies and should be treated as such. Other data sources include reviews and commentary on the selected artwork, which are in dialogue with the arguments presented here. Such sources bolster the case presented in this study and, at the same time, give different perspectives.

### 3.5. Coding Artworks through Visual Affect and Narratological Frameworks

The coding of selected paintings in this study is based on the affect of the visual as articulated by Barthes and the narratology of image as discussed by Bal (2017). These two ideas converge, as discussed in the Theoretical Frameworks section, which enabled the study to interpret artistic choices in the selected painting to derive their narrative implications. Instead of using qualitative analysis tools like ATLAS.ti, NVivo or MAXQDA, this study exemplifies manual coding of curated paintings in order to derive points of similarity or difference; this approach allows the study to be continued without being constrained by the funding required to purchase the license of such software. This study uses a simple tabular matrix to compare the paintings, which makes it easy to understand without falling into the algorithmic complexities of software. The method is clearly laid out to maintain transparency, lending credibility to this paper.

### 3.6. Limitations and Reflexivity

The study is specifically focused on two selected artists and their works, which limits its scope by excluding a broad range of contemporaneous data. However, the selected 10 artworks (5 from each) provide a representative sample of contemporary Chinese figurative art (shown in Figure 1, Figure 2 and Figure 3). By design, the study excludes artworks and scholarly literature published before 2005 to maintain consistency and continuity from the previous study. Being a qualitative study, the information considered here can be subject to personal bias, and interpretations of art may vary widely. However, this study exclusively focuses on psychological motifs that are universally understood, and specific cultural references (if any) that can be valuable to Chinese people (but not easily understood by non-Chinese audiences) are omitted, which further limits the study. More importantly, certain aspects of paintings can only be judged properly from the proximity of the physical copy itself, such as texture and form. Digitalised versions of artworks can be problematic in terms of a reliable academic analysis due to limitations of electronic resources (such as colour calibration and colour palette of a computer monitor). Notably, the key theoreticians whose works are used in this study are from the West, which can cause a biased understanding of the chosen artworks. However, by properly situating these artworks in their historic and sociocultural context as well as through demonstrated Western influence on such art in the post-2005 period, this bias is mitigated.

#### 4. Findings

In this section of the current study, the selected paintings are analysed and interpreted utilising the aforementioned methodology. [Table 1](#) conducts a formal visual analysis of the key elements of each painting, and [Table 2](#) builds a narrative congruent with the identified elements of each painting. In doing so, the motifs of psychology and introspection in post-2005 Chinese figurative art become evident, which in turn presents a complete picture of the 21st-century Chinese identity.

Table 1: Formal Visual Analysis

Sl. No.	Artist/Painter	Paintings	Key Visual Elements
1.	Liu Xiaodong	<i>Hotbed</i> , 2005, oil on canvas, 102 3/8 x 393 5/8 inches, in five panels (refer to <a href="#">Figure 1</a> ).	Panels 1 and 2 are fragmented. Panel 1 shows lush vegetation, Panel 2 shows urban development in the background. Men are sulking in all panels, gazing away from the viewer. Panels 3 and 4 are also fragmented; Panel 5 shows one man alone.
2.		<i>East</i> , 2012, Oil on canvas, 250 x 300 cm (98 1/2 x 118 in)	Six men, with their tools; stones abound, trees are distant, almost invisible in the background. The men are looking at each other, redirecting the viewer's gaze. Colours are dull, muted, and the sky is covered in the same dull colours. Different religious attire among the men (refer to <a href="#">Figure 2</a> ).
3.		<i>Out of Beichuan</i> , 2010 Oil on canvas, 300 x 400 cm (118 x 157 1/2 in)	7 girls, each with a distinct appearance, such as complexion, facial features, hair colour and clothing. Their faces are grave or sombre. They stand out from the background, which shows misshapen buildings, some almost tumbling onto the others, gradually disappearing into the tall slope. Some animals are nearby, but their features are ambiguous, resembling dogs, wolves or hyenas (refer to <a href="#">Figure 2</a> ).
4.		<i>Into Taihu</i> , 2010 Oil on canvas, 300 x 400 cm (118 x 157 1/2 in)	7 young men, ostensibly of Asian appearance, but still varied in their outward presentation, on a boat, yet no oar. The green water appears still, with no ripple or wave, and the boat is stationary. Some birds are flying over them, some are diving. There is no horizon, no distinct skyline. Some of the boys are looking directly at the audience (refer to <a href="#">Figure 2</a> ).
		<i>Two Men Basking in the Sun</i> , 2020, Acrylic on C-print, 33 x 43.2 cm (13 x	Depicts an almost empty road, with only two men sitting on the pavement. They have face masks, but those are hanging by their chin. The buildings and shops are brightly

5.		17 in)	coloured, but no activity apart from the two men sitting (refer to <a href="#">Figure 2</a> ).
6.	Yu Hong	<i>2017 Yu Hong, fifty-one years old; 2017 Liu Wa, twenty-three years old, 2019; Acrylic on canvas</i> 66 x 100 cm + 100 x 100 cm + 100 x 100 cm	The artist shows her own daughter in a realistic, black and white portrait, graduating from college/university, with the chiaroscuro shading drawing attention to her smile. A solitary figure is presented in the middle of vast icebergs and mountains, and a photograph of refugee children on a boat is presented side by side (refer to <a href="#">Figure 3</a> ).
7.		<i>2001 Yu Hong, thirty-five years old; 2001 Liu Wa, seven years old, 2001, Acrylic on canvas</i> 100 x 76 cm + 100 x 100 cm + 100 x 100 cm	The painter shows her daughter, with another boy of the same age, in vivid colours with bright smiles on their faces. A group of older students in a classroom looking intently at the viewers, meeting their gaze, juxtaposed with a photograph of the 2001 Twin Towers bombing, in the USA (refer to <a href="#">Figure 3</a> ).
8.		<i>Carrying in a Sedan Chair, 2006; Fabric dye on silk</i> 400 x 110 cm	A simple, minimalistic painting with a boy and a girl carrying another girl forward. Their backs are turned to the audience, foreshortening their legs to create an appearance of motion (refer to <a href="#">Figure 3</a> ).
9.		<i>Night Walk, 2023; Acrylic on canvas</i> 3 parts, each: 300 x 250 cm.	A nightmarish hellscape with fiery red illumination on the left and cold blue light to the right. The figures are walking, their faces showing distress, and some baby-like figures are chained to another adult figure. All the figures appear to be struggling and marching without direction (refer to <a href="#">Figure 3</a> ).
10.		<i>1985 Yu Hong, nineteen years old, 2000; Acrylic on canvas</i> 67 x 100 cm + 100 x 100 cm	Two girls are actively playing, presumably another retrospective self-portrait of the artist herself; their joviality is contrasted against the lifeless, bleak, greyish background with hardly any discernible shape or figure. This is presented side by side with a bunch of school yearbook photos and notes showing students engaged with their peers.

Note: This table analyses the selected artwork and identifies the key image psychological aspects in them. The table is self-created.

Table 2: Visual Narrative of the Paintings

Sl. No.	Artist/Painter	Paintings	Narratological Interpretation
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- |    |              |   |   |
|----|--------------|---|---|
| 1. | Liu Xiaodong | <i>Hotbed</i> (Figure 1)                              | The painting shows the disruption of the lives of regular working people due to urbanisation; their sunken, joyless faces bear witness to their hardship. The arrangement of the panels shows the passage of time; Panel 1 shows nature without men, then the number of men increases while nature is relegated to the background; the final panel is one man alone in deep introspection. Psychologically, this painting is deeply evocative, the sombre faces force the viewers to reflect upon their existence, the passage of time with a solitary figure, evokes a sense of inevitability. |
| 2. |              | <i>East</i> (refer to Figure 2)                       | The dull colours instantly suck out all semblance of joy from the viewers, the bleak sky and complete absence of nature, with only rocks abound, presents a harsh reality, not as a metaphor but a realistic depiction of the hardship of labourers. Their diverse clothing represents a varied identity while being united by class struggle. The painting does not welcome the eyes; rather, it forces them to see the bleak livelihood of our fellow humans. It inspires a deep sense of empathy that transcends all boundaries.   |
| 3. |              | <i>Out of Beichuan</i> (refer to Figure 2)            | The vivid colours of the girls' clothing and hair make them stand out, yet their faces show no joy, rather a blank look that is emblematic of monotony or boredom. The racial or ethnic diversity presented in their appearance does not amount to much, as they all seem equally joyless. The gazes of the girls do not meet with that of the viewer, redirecting it and bypassing objectification. The sullen faces invoke a familiar feeling of boredom or monotony from a modern audience, forcing them to reflect on their own lack of happiness.  |
| 4. |              | <i>Into Taihu</i> (refer to Figure 2)                 | The painting, with its visual cues, instantly evokes a sense of stagnancy or motionlessness. The blank gazes of the boys meet the viewer's eyes, but their faces betray neither joy nor sorrow. Their lack of expression fits in with the stagnant water that disappears into a colourless abyss in the background. Birds, here present a sharp contrast with the human world; while the humans are still, the birds convey motion. The viewers are invited to reflect on their own lives as well as civilisation as a whole.   |
| 5. |              | <i>Two Men Basking in the Sun</i> (refer to Figure 2) | The vacant road shows a lack of human presence; the two men with surgical masks instil a sense of dread of a pathogen that might infect humans. The bright colours and realistic  |
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- shapes are ironically juxtaposed with a lack of activity. The viewers are immediately reminded of their experience of a crowded city street on a busy day, which is the diametric opposite of what the painting shows.
6. Yu Hong      *2017 Yu Hong, fifty-one years old; 2017 Liu Wa, twenty-three years old* (refer to [Figure 3](#))      The painting immediately evokes the anxiety of growing old, presented through the vast nature around a small, solitary figure, presented side by side with a young woman in her graduation ceremony. It evokes profound nostalgia for the days long past, a yearning to be young once more. However, the photograph of the refugee youth instantly makes the mind go grave, inviting the viewer to reflect on the privilege of being able to enjoy, while our fellow humans are suffering.
  
  7.                      *2001 Yu Hong, thirty-five years old; 2001 Liu Wa, seven years old* (refer to [Figure 3](#))      At seven years of age, the parent still wishes her child were a baby, while also enjoying seeing her grow up. These two feelings are positioned adjacent to one another by the figures of the young children and older people. The romanticism of the painting is instantly shattered by the photograph of the Twin Towers bombing, which the viewer knows killed over 3000 people. The painting becomes a profound reflection on the transience of our happiness and joy, and the suddenness of meeting a terrible fate.
  
  8.                      *Carrying in a Sedan Chair* (refer to [Figure 3](#))      The minimalistic painting exudes energy through powerful brushstrokes. The painter creates a sense of motion, inviting the viewers to think about their own progress in life and especially of the friends who supported them along the way. The painting is essentially a reflection on the value of friendship and camaraderie.
  
  9.                      *Night Walk* (refer to [Figure 3](#))      The painting is solemn and terrifying at the same time. The blind march seems to be a critique of the human condition in general, and the chains and stick also fit with that notion. The light and shadows of the painting disorient the viewer, and yet the bright illumination at the edges draws attention. The painting can evoke a sense of lacking a purpose or direction in life, and following a path that the individual did not choose.
  
  10.                      *1985 Yu Hong, nineteen years old* (refer to [Figure 3](#))      The playful and joyous girls are juxtaposed with the bleak background. The painting is a reflection on the passing of teenage years, becoming an adult. The grey, colourless background is emblematic of the trials and
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tribulations of adulthood, which is further highlighted by presenting yearbook photos by the side.

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Note: This table builds narratological interpretation based on the Table 1. The table is self-made.

## 5. Discussion

The visual and narrative analysis clearly presents the psychological and introspective bent in post-2005 Chinese figurative art. All the case study paintings reflect a deep understanding of the human mind and how it is affected by different external and internal circumstances. Notably, the curated selection of Liu Xiaodong seems more focused on the corollary motifs of stagnation, monotony, and hardship (see [Figure 1](#) and [2](#)), while the paintings of Yu Hong seem to offer a bit more variety. Nonetheless, both artists evidently aim for prompting the audience to introspect about the reality of present time and of human life in general, thereby shifting from the sociopolitical critique of Cynical realists to a more self-reflective style of art. The presentation of photographs as a part of the painting itself is unique and not present in Liu Xiaodong. While both artists showcase motifs of introspection and solemnity, especially Liu, with his repetitive brooding figures, Yu Hong adds more of a personal touch, which is presented against a widely understood photograph that brings the universality, whereas paintings of Liu are more impersonal in nature (see [Figure 1](#), [Figure 2](#) and [Figure 3](#)). Consequently, Liu depicts more of a general malaise in the lives his contemporary people, but Yu is specific, as her paintings invoke familiar figures like a mother, a daughter, a child, a friend and so on. However, both artists seem to be in broad agreement about the absurdity and depravity of 21st-century human life. Noticeably, Liu presents this depravity through pained and distraught faces with blank looks on them, which is common across multiple paintings, but Yu directly invokes concrete references, like the 9/11 or the refugee crisis in Europe (see [Figure 3](#)). The impact of these artistic choices is clearly psychological; the viewers must reflect deeply, prompted by familiar expressions compounded by a lack of obvious visual beautification (especially in the case of Liu Xiaodong); the impersonal approach of Liu Xiaodong and the personal touch in Yu Hong is significantly different from the social and political symbolism of Zeng Fanzhi and other Cynical realists.

## 6. Conclusion

This study analysed the psychological and introspective dimensions of post-2005 Chinese figurative art, using Barthesian evaluation of connotations, beyond semiotics, and highlighting how, true to [Bal's \(2017\)](#) narratology, these connotations create a visual narrative. Of the two artists analysed as case studies in this paper, both showcased a proclivity towards invoking a psychological response, such as empathy, sorrow, introspection, nostalgia, grief and so forth. They utilise the artistic devices at their disposal to that end, as reflected by the elements of the 10 curated paintings, 5 from each. Instead of focusing on some all-encompassing sociopolitical issues, like previous traditions of socialist and cynical realisms, Liu Xiaodong and Yu Hong focus on capturing specific aspects of contemporary human life that warrant criticism, such as the bleak condition of labourers, in Liu Xiaodong's *East* or the absurd, pointless destruction and violence of 9/11 in Yu Hong's *2001 Yu Hong*, thirty-five years old; *2001 Liu Wa*, seven years old. These paintings, unlike previous generations of Chinese figurative painters, do not make broad, sweeping social commentary, but point out individual

examples of human shortcomings and wrongdoings. Importantly, this approach to painting pushes the audience to not just visually admire the picture in the frame, but to intellectually engage with it. Specifically, some of the paintings of Liu Xiaodong seem to deliberately subvert realism, such as in *Hotbed*, where the human figures and their solemn faces are discernible but not exactly realistic, making them almost like spectres. Conversely, Yu Hong presents her figures with considerable realism (in her figurative paintings), but their presence on the canvas itself evokes psychological reactions like anxiety of growing old, the joy of seeing a child grow up, the grief at the terrible suffering of people and so on. Future research on this may take a quantitative approach to assessing which themes in contemporary Chinese figurative art are most prevalent and what the implications of such discovery may be.

The previous study focused on a semiotic analysis of Chinese figurative artists from 1989 to 2005. It analysed symbolism in selected artworks from different artists at that time in the context of society and culture, situating it in the context of globalisation. The semiotic theory of Barthes (1977) served as the bedrock of that study, while the current study moves away from symbolism and focuses instead on the psychological dimensions of figurative art. Importantly, this study moves beyond the era of cynical realism and delves into the figurative art after 2005, focusing on the last 20 years. Both artistic pieces and relevant literature have been selected accordingly, and concerning the theoretical continuity, this study draws from later ideas of Barthes as his thinking moved from structuralist semiology to post-structuralist critique of much of his earlier work. This study draws from Barthes' later theories regarding image and its psychological impacts, as well as Bal's (2017) Narratology. Moving past symbolism explored in the previous work, this study focuses on the narrative delivered by paintings through artistic choices made in their creation.

While this study established the shift from sociocultural symbols to psychological narrative and representation of modern Chinese identity in post-2005 figurative art, its scope was limited, being qualitative case study-based research. This study focused on selected artworks by two artists only, Liu Xiaodong and Yu Hong; upcoming studies can focus on other artists and explore their artistic styles and how they render psychological motifs on their canvas. At the same time, future research may incorporate quantitative information, including surveys of psychological experiences by the viewers in galleries where figurative art is featured. At the same time, this paper skipped over the hybrid art, combining Chinese and Western techniques, that came after cynical realism; future studies may be interested in exploring that movement as well.

### **Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate**

The researcher(s) have conformed to the ethical implications of their chosen methodology. Being an academic work with no active human participants, the study took care to fairly cite all the sources used to credit prior academics and theorists; artists were also credited for their paintings wherever appropriate.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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