



TRANSBOUNDARY AND BLENDING: A CASE STUDY OF SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE WATERCOLOR PAINTING

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Abstract

Contemporary Chinese watercolor painting has evolved into a transboundary artistic form that reflects the intersection of traditional Chinese aesthetics and global visual languages. Amid rapid modernization and globalization, these artworks increasingly serve as mediums for expressing cultural hybridity, shifting identities, and socio-political narratives. Semiotics provides a critical framework for understanding how such paintings communicate meaning through visual signs, composition, and metaphor. This study investigates three dimensions: (1) how contemporary Chinese watercolor artists construct a transboundary visual language through the integration of traditional Chinese symbols and global formal techniques; (2) how watercolor paintings reflect and critique evolving socio-political themes such as labor, migration, and generational change; and (3) how ambiguity, symbolic opposition, and polysemy are used to engage viewers in open-ended cultural reflection on identity and continuity. Employing a qualitative semiotic approach grounded in the theories of Barthes and Peirce, this research analyzes five representative watercolor works by contemporary Chinese artists. Each painting was examined through visual analysis of composition, color

schemes, symbolic imagery, and metaphor. The study interprets both denotative and connotative meanings and identifies recurring thematic oppositions across the artworks. **Results:** The findings reveal that contemporary Chinese watercolor artists skillfully fuse traditional techniques with Western formal strategies, using symbolism and metaphor to address themes of labor, migration, identity, and modernity. Visual oppositions—such as softness versus strength, or nature versus machine—reflect deeper cultural negotiations. These artworks operate as polysemous texts that invite multiple interpretations, positioning watercolor painting as a medium of cultural commentary in a globalized China.

Keywords: Contemporary Chinese watercolor; Semiotic analysis; Cultural hybridity; Visual metaphor; Transboundary art

Introduction

Contemporary Chinese watercolor painting occupies a unique position in the global art discourse, functioning as both a continuation of traditional Chinese aesthetics and a site for cultural negotiation in the face of modernization and globalization. Historically rooted in literati traditions and ink-based techniques, Chinese painting has undergone a transformation in the post-20th-century era, embracing new forms, mediums, and ideologies. This transition reflects the broader phenomenon of “transboundary” art, where visual expressions transcend cultural, disciplinary, and stylistic boundaries to reflect hybrid identities and global narratives (Gao, 2012). In recent decades, Chinese artists have increasingly integrated Western visual languages—such as abstraction, photorealism, and surrealism—with traditional Chinese motifs, such as calligraphy, mountain-water symbolism, and ink-wash techniques. These hybrid forms challenge the dichotomy between the traditional and the modern, raising questions about the role of art in articulating cultural memory, identity, and change. Scholars like Sullivan (1996) and Clunas (1997) have noted that the reconfiguration of classical forms in contemporary practices not only revitalizes heritage but also reflects artists' responses to China's socio-political transformation and the rise of global consumer culture.

To decode the layered meanings embedded in such hybrid artworks, this study adopts a semiotic framework rooted in the theories of Roland Barthes and Charles Sanders Peirce. Semiotics enables the analysis of how signs—composed of visual symbols, colors, compositions, and metaphors—construct cultural narratives. Barthes's concept of myth (1972), which reveals how cultural meanings are naturalized through signs, and Peirce's triadic model of the sign (1955), which examines the interplay between sign, object, and interpretant, serve as critical tools for unpacking the symbolic and ideological content of contemporary Chinese watercolor paintings. This study focuses on the semiotic analysis of five representative works by contemporary Chinese watercolor artists, aiming to reveal how these artworks communicate transboundary narratives of identity, labor, modernity, and tradition. By highlighting the blending of visual languages and symbolic meanings, this paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on cultural hybridity and the semiotic potential of visual art. It not only advances scholarly understanding of Chinese watercolor painting but also provides insight into how visual culture reflects and participates in China's evolving cultural identity within a globalized context.

Research Objectives

1. To utilize platforms such as the internet and media to enhance social recognition and influence of intangible cultural heritage skills like the "Eight Unique Skills of Yanjing," thereby better protecting and promoting intangible cultural heritage, while also addressing challenges posed by the transformation of commercial culture to achieve sustainable development.

2. To study the market development situation under the unique and new dissemination methods of the Eight Unique Skills of Yanjing, providing theoretical support and practical guidance for the development of the intangible cultural heritage industry.



3. To unveil the cultural connotation and artistic value of the eight unique skills of Yanjing, and to enhance the status and influence of China's intangible cultural heritage in international cultural exchanges.

Literature Reviews

The academic discourse on contemporary Chinese watercolor painting has increasingly focused on its transboundary characteristics and the blending of traditional and modern artistic languages. Scholars such as Clarke (2010, 2011) and Gao (2008) argue that contemporary Chinese visual art operates within a global framework, where local traditions are continuously renegotiated in response to external cultural and ideological pressures. This “transboundary” approach challenges essentialist understandings of Chinese painting, viewing it instead as a dynamic site of exchange between indigenous techniques and imported aesthetics. As Clarke (2011) observes, contemporary Chinese artists do not merely adopt Western styles but rather integrate them into a uniquely Chinese visual system to express complex cultural narratives shaped by globalization.

Research has also explored the fusion of Chinese and Western visual elements in watercolor painting. Sullivan (2008) and Cahill (1996) trace how traditional symbols—such as mountains, mist, or brushstroke abstraction—retain philosophical significance rooted in Taoist and Confucian traditions. At the same time, contemporary artists incorporate Western formal features such as linear perspective, anatomical precision, or color contrast to build new aesthetic vocabularies. This process of blending is not purely formal; it reflects a deeper negotiation of cultural identity and modernity. Works like Wang’s (2010) on color symbolism and Clunas’s (1997; 2009) analysis of audience reception further contextualize how traditional aesthetic principles evolve under modern socio-political conditions. From a theoretical standpoint, semiotic analysis has emerged as a powerful lens for interpreting visual artworks. Drawing on the work of Barthes (1972, 1977) and Peirce (1955), scholars have examined how visual symbols, metaphors, and compositions serve as sign systems that encode cultural meaning. Barthes’s concept of myth is particularly relevant to Chinese contemporary painting, where traditional motifs—such as the laborer, the mist, or the scholar’s landscape—take on new ideological functions in the context of



national identity and modernization. Peirce's triadic model of signification offers a nuanced view of how symbols in art operate beyond mere representation, mediating between visual form, cultural memory, and audience interpretation.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach based on semiotic theory to analyze the visual strategies employed in contemporary Chinese watercolor painting. The focus is on understanding how artists construct meaning through signs, symbols, and compositional choices that blend traditional Chinese and Western visual cultures. The methodology is designed to interpret both the aesthetic and cultural dimensions of selected artworks. **Research Design and Sample Selection:** The study employs a case study method, selecting five representative watercolor paintings by contemporary Chinese artists. These works were chosen for their thematic richness and their evident integration of transboundary elements—traditional symbols recontextualized within modern visual frameworks. Each painting serves as a site for semiotic investigation, representing broader trends in cultural negotiation and identity expression. **Data Collection and Analytical Procedure:** Primary data consist of visual analysis of the selected artworks, supported by published artist statements, exhibition catalogs, and secondary literature. The analysis draws upon Barthes's model of denotation, connotation, myth, and polysemy as well as Peirce's triadic sign structure to decode both surface-level visuals and embedded cultural meanings. Each painting was analyzed in terms of composition, color scheme, symbolism, and metaphorical resonance. **Data Analysis Integration of Conceptual Framework:** The conceptual lens guiding this analysis combines Western semiotic theory with traditional Chinese aesthetic principles. Core concepts such as *yijing* (poetic atmosphere), *liubai* (empty space), and symbolic dualities (e.g., nature vs. machine, tradition vs. modernity) are used to interpret how visual oppositions generate meaning. These aesthetic principles are mapped onto Barthes's and Peirce's semiotic models to explore how cultural signs function dynamically within hybrid visual contexts. **Analytical Strategy:** The data were coded thematically using categories such as symbolic opposition, metaphor,

hybridity, and identity. This coding process allowed for identifying patterns across the case studies while also preserving the distinctiveness of each artwork. Through cross-case comparison, the study identifies how recurring semiotic strategies reflect broader socio-cultural narratives in contemporary China, particularly regarding globalization, modernization, and cultural memory.

Results

Semiotic Language and the Fusion of Cultural Symbols: The analyzed watercolor works reveal a sophisticated semiotic vocabulary that blends traditional Chinese symbolism with Western visual languages. Chen Chaosheng's *Red Soil People* (Figure 1) exemplify how visual elements such as muscular figures and red earth can signify not only labor and land but also ideological histories. Red, a color rooted in both natural and political contexts, evokes layers of meaning—from agricultural identity to revolutionary ethos. The medium of watercolor—traditionally soft and fluid—is repurposed here to portray grit and physicality, demonstrating the tension between visual softness and thematic weight. From a semiotic perspective, the laborers' exaggerated musculature communicates strength and endurance, traditionally glorified under socialist realism. However, rendered in watercolor, this strength is nuanced—less heroic, more human, caught between struggle and symbolism.

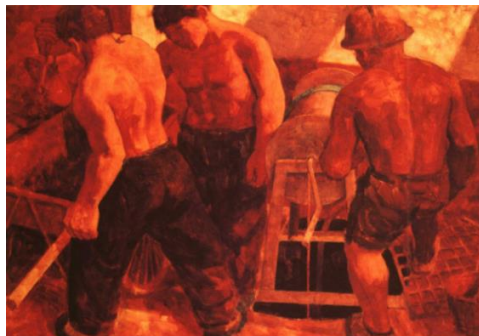


Figure 1: Chen Chaosheng's *Red Soil People*.

Furthermore, the tools and mechanical elements subtly integrated into the composition introduce themes of mechanization and industrial labor. These components act as indexical signs pointing to modern industrial development, yet

their juxtaposition with the human figure raises questions about agency, exploitation, and the increasingly blurred boundaries between man and machine. The use of earthy tones grounds the scene in realism, but the conceptual layering situates the work within a critical discourse on labor, identity, and historical memory in post-reform China. Lin Shaoling's *Shape and Color Rush* (Figure 2) offers a contrasting semiotic strategy. Through fluid brushstrokes and blurred outlines, the painting captures the fleeting, fragmented identity of Chinese youth in transition. Here, motion, anonymity, and color create a metaphor for instability and collective transformation. Traditional ink-wash aesthetics are fused with urban themes and modernist composition, expressing a hybrid cultural identity negotiated between past heritage and contemporary life.



Figure 2: Lin Shaoling's *Shape and Color Rush*.

The central figure in this painting, a young man with a steady gait, lacks expressive features but is rendered with more clarity than others. This selective clarity creates a semiotic hierarchy, directing the viewer's gaze and suggesting symbolic centrality. He becomes a metaphor for resilience and direction within cultural flux. Lin's use of watercolor wet-on-wet technique enhances this ambiguity, creating gradients of meaning where boundaries between subjects dissolve, much like social identities in modern China. The work reveals a tension between nostalgic realism and modern abstraction, serving as a commentary on generational change and urban alienation. Wang Shengsong's *I Want to Go to*

Beijing (Figure 3) further illustrates this symbolic layering. The solitary migrant figure, grounded in liubai (留白) or “blank space,” becomes a metaphor for aspiration and marginalization. The bundle he carries connotes more than physical belongings; it represents socio-economic burdens and personal dreams. The interplay of photorealistic form and classical Chinese calligraphy adds depth, portraying the individual’s narrative as a mythologized symbol of modernization and social mobility.



Figure 3: Wang Shengsong’s I Want to Go to Beijing.

The visual style employs photorealistic detailing contrasted with traditional brush script and seal design, producing a visual code-switching that reflects cultural hybridity. The motif of Beijing in the title is itself semiotic—signifying not just a physical destination but a constructed ideal, the mythologized center of success and political power. Barthes’ notion of myth applies here, where Beijing is reified as the symbol of upward mobility while the actual figure remains distant from it. Through this, Wang critiques the social hierarchies and emotional toll embedded in modernization.

Transboundary Techniques and Artistic Hybridity: Each selected painting demonstrates the ways in which contemporary artists blend stylistic traditions to reflect China's evolving socio-cultural landscape. Dong Xichun’s

Existence NO.36 · Walking (Figure 4) contrasts a white sheep—symbolizing purity and resilience in Chinese visual culture—with a decaying train, emblematic of industrial decline. This opposition between nature and machine embodies yin-yang tension, while the mixed materials (including sand) reinforce tactile realism within a surreal setting. The temporal ambiguity—linking past, present, and future—amplifies the transboundary dialogue between philosophical symbolism and industrial critique.



Figure 4: Dong Xichun's watercolor painting, *Existence NO.36 · Walking*.

The sheep, positioned in the foreground, invites empathy and focus, whereas the train, rendered in rust tones and partial decomposition, looms ominously. This spatial logic—foreground vs. background—mirrors the moral logic of traditional Chinese art, where composition guides ethical interpretation. Dong's technique of embedding actual sand into the medium references both material decay and the tactile texture of traditional landscape painting. Western perspectives—like the realist rendering of metal and shadow—are employed not to celebrate industrialization, but to dramatize its erosion. Zhao Yunlong's *We* (Figure 5) distills these hybrid approaches into an abstract composition that explores identity and collectivity. The blurred human forms reflect both anonymity and unity, evoking Confucian harmony and Taoist ambiguity while critiquing conformity. His minimalist color palette borrows from Chinese ink

painting, yet the abstraction and spatial voids introduce modern existential undertones. The semiotic structure here is polysemous, inviting diverse interpretations and bridging Eastern moral philosophy with global discourses on modernity and identity.



Figure 5: Zhao Yunlong's We.

The lack of facial features renders the subjects archetypal rather than individual. This symbolic generalization allows Zhao to engage myth-making in the Barthesian sense—where the anonymous crowd becomes a mythologized representation of collective identity. However, Zhao also resists closure; the viewers are not told what "we" represents. This ambiguity opens the work to multiple readings—conformity, solidarity, erasure, or even resistance. Through this, Zhao successfully engages with Peirce's triadic model of signification, where the viewer's interpretant dynamically completes the meaning-making process.

Cultural Commentary and Social Identity through Semiotics:

Together, these artworks construct a powerful narrative of contemporary China grappling with heritage, identity, and globalization. They serve as visual commentaries on the socio-political changes facing the nation—urban migration, economic disparity, collective memory, and youth transformation. From Red Soil laborers to railway youth, from the aspiring migrant to the sheep confronting industrial decay, each figure operates not merely as a subject but as a semiotic agent, embodying national dialogues on work, resilience, progress, and alienation.

The visual metaphors are anchored in traditional motifs—mountains, red soil, sheep, blank space—but are strategically repurposed to articulate new meanings. These works showcase how artists mediate tensions between nostalgia and futurity, collectivity and individuality, using formal elements to voice socio-cultural concerns. Their aesthetic choices reflect not only stylistic innovation but also a renewed cultural self-awareness, positioning watercolor painting as a critical lens through which contemporary Chinese identity can be both preserved and reimagined. Moreover, the interweaving of Western techniques—such as linear perspective, anatomical precision, or surrealistic composition—with traditional Chinese modes of expression challenges the binary opposition of East and West. These paintings embody Bhabha’s notion of the “third space,” where cultural negotiation gives rise to new meanings that are neither wholly traditional nor purely modern. This semiotic hybridity is not superficial but is embedded in the very logic of form, metaphor, and meaning-making (Bhabha, 1994).

Through the artists’ strategic deployment of symbol, color, composition, and intertextual references, watercolor painting becomes a site of both aesthetic innovation and ideological engagement. These works collectively demonstrate how contemporary Chinese watercolor art transcends its historical role as a decorative or lyrical form and emerges as a mode of critical visual inquiry—capable of interrogating, documenting, and reimagining the cultural shifts of a globalizing society.

Discussions

The analysis of the selected watercolor artworks confirms the significance of semiotic methods in understanding the evolving narratives within contemporary Chinese art. These paintings embody the central themes of hybridity, cultural negotiation, and socio-political reflection, aligning with the study’s objective to investigate how Chinese watercolor artists blend traditional and Western visual vocabularies to express contemporary realities. Firstly, the use of traditional signs—such as the red soil, sheep, or liubai space—demonstrates continuity with Chinese philosophical and aesthetic values. At the same time,



their reinterpretation in modern contexts aligns with Clarke's (2011) theory that cultural identity in art is a fluid construct shaped by both local roots and global engagement. This study supports Sullivan's (1996) observation that Chinese artists often reinterpret classical symbols in order to engage in contemporary discourse. For instance, Dong Xichun's use of symbolic juxtaposition mirrors this theoretical framework, where decay and vitality co-exist to reflect industrial anxiety.

However, this research also finds tensions that partially diverge from existing literature. While Barthes (1972) emphasizes the role of myth in stabilizing cultural meanings, many works analyzed here—especially Zhao Yunlong's *We*—deliberately disrupt that process. Instead of reinforcing dominant myths, Zhao blurs identity and narrative, making interpretation unstable and context-dependent. This aligns more with Barthes's later work on polysemy (1977), which acknowledges that signs can have multiple, often contradictory meanings. Moreover, the study highlights how watercolor—a medium typically associated with delicacy and nature—is reconfigured to engage with issues of labor, migration, and modernization. This contrasts with the assumptions in earlier studies (e.g., Mitchell, 2005) that associate watercolor primarily with romantic or nostalgic expression. In contemporary Chinese practice, as this study shows, watercolor becomes a tool of critical engagement, capable of conveying ideological tension and cultural transformation.

Finally, the study affirms the value of integrating visual semiotics with cultural studies to examine art as a reflective and constitutive force. By drawing on Barthes, Peirce, and Chinese aesthetic principles, it becomes evident that watercolor artists are not simply aesthetic actors but also cultural mediators, negotiating the interplay between national identity and global discourse.

New Knowledges

This study contributes new insights to the interdisciplinary discourse on contemporary Chinese art by integrating semiotic theory with a focused analysis of watercolor as a transboundary medium. Unlike previous studies that often



examined either traditional Chinese painting or contemporary art practices in isolation, this research bridges the two by demonstrating how watercolor is mobilized as a critical, cross-cultural vehicle for meaning-making in modern China. Firstly, the study introduces a nuanced application of Barthes's theory of polysemy to Chinese visual art, showing that contemporary artists like Zhao Yunlong deliberately destabilize symbolic meaning to challenge fixed interpretations of identity and community. This departs from earlier applications of semiotics in Chinese art that emphasized symbolic permanence and cultural continuity. Secondly, the research reframes watercolor not merely as a medium of lyrical expression, but as a dynamic site of socio-political commentary. Artists such as Wang Shengsong and Chen Chaosheng recontextualize watercolor to address issues of urban migration, labor, and social stratification, thus expanding the medium's critical potential beyond traditional aesthetic boundaries. Thirdly, this study offers a new framework for understanding "transboundary" in Chinese art not just as stylistic fusion, but as a complex semiotic negotiation involving symbolism, spatial composition, and cultural philosophy. The selected works demonstrate how artists actively blend Western and Chinese systems of signification—visually and ideologically—to engage with contemporary transformations in identity, heritage, and modernity. Through this multi-layered inquiry, the research advances a model for interpreting Chinese contemporary watercolor as both a reflective and generative force—one that redefines the cultural role of art in a globalized, hybrid era.

Conclusions

This study investigated the semiotic strategies embedded in contemporary Chinese watercolor painting, revealing how artists actively negotiate tradition and modernity through transboundary visual languages. By analyzing five representative artworks, the research demonstrates that watercolor, traditionally viewed as a medium of restraint and lyricism, is now employed to address complex socio-cultural themes such as labor, migration, industrialization, and collective identity.

The findings confirm that artists like Chen Chaosheng, Lin Shaoling, Wang Shengsong, Dong Xichun, and Zhao Yunlong are not only preserving Chinese aesthetic values—through motifs like liubai, symbolic color, or Taoist composition—but also integrating Western techniques to create hybrid forms of expression. This dual visual vocabulary enables them to articulate the tensions of a rapidly transforming society and contribute to an evolving cultural discourse.

Furthermore, the study expands the theoretical application of semiotics in Chinese art by emphasizing polysemy and visual ambiguity as tools for meaning negotiation. Instead of reinforcing a singular myth or narrative, the works analyzed demonstrate how contemporary Chinese watercolor painting opens interpretive space, inviting viewers to reflect on fragmented identities and shifting cultural norms. Ultimately, this research underscores the critical role of watercolor painting as a reflective medium in post-reform China. These artworks do not merely document cultural change; they participate in it—blending past and present, East and West, symbol and metaphor—to offer a vivid commentary on the complexities of Chinese cultural identity in the 21st century.

Suggestions and Recommendations

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, the following suggestions are proposed for future research and practice:

1. Expand the scope of visual semiotic analysis beyond watercolor to include other contemporary media—such as digital painting, installation, or performance art—that also embody transboundary elements. This would help validate and extend the conceptual framework established here.
2. Encourage interdisciplinary collaboration between art historians, semioticians, and sociologists to deepen the interpretive potential of visual research. Such collaborations can produce richer analyses of how visual culture reflects and shapes national consciousness and globalization.

3. Support contemporary artists through institutional platforms that foster creative experimentation with traditional media. Museums, galleries, and educational institutions can play a crucial role in promoting transboundary practices and ensuring that traditional motifs are continuously reimagined for new cultural contexts.

4. Develop digital archives and semiotic databases of contemporary Chinese artworks that allow for comparative and computational analysis of recurring symbols, metaphors, and compositions. This could support both academic research and public education.

5. Integrate semiotic literacy into art education, enabling emerging artists to consciously employ and reinterpret cultural symbols. Such pedagogical emphasis would empower artists to become more effective cultural communicators in an increasingly globalized art world.

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