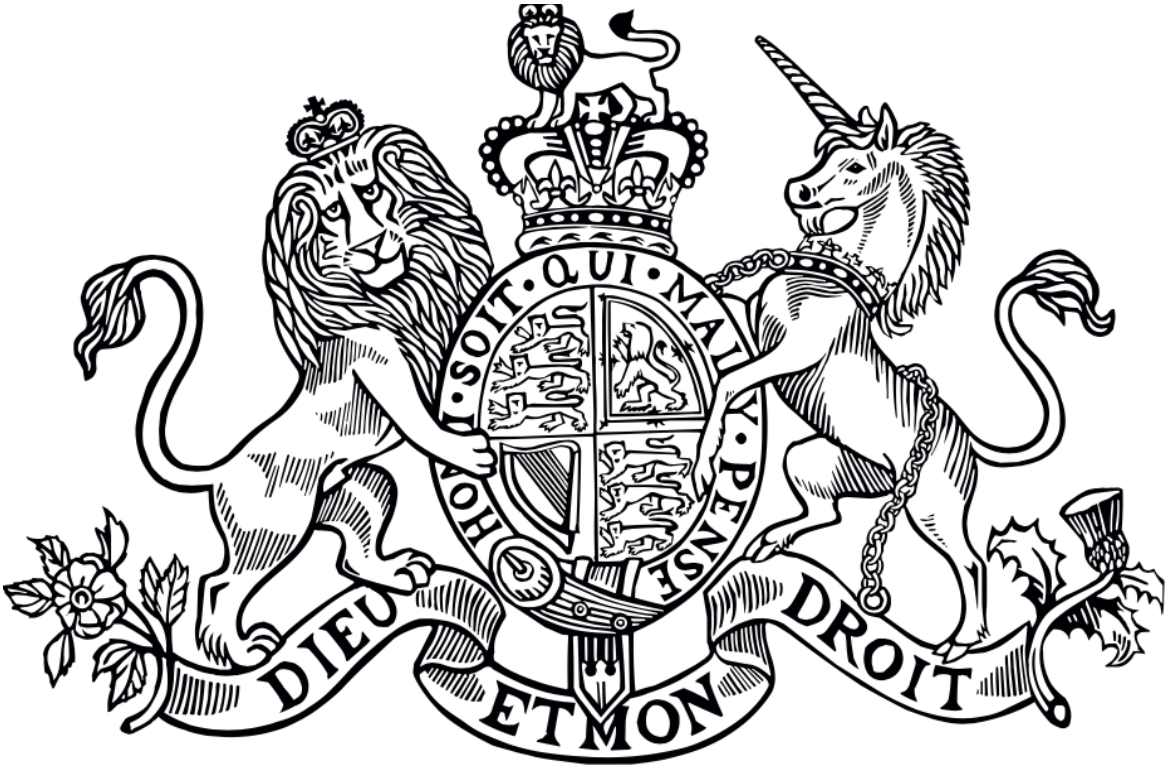

As Another Voice: Hidden Political Expression in Contemporary Chinese Allegorical Painting

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Abstract

Cultural censorship, as well as self-censorship, has been the main means to reign in the criticism of the Chinese government's political systems, policies, and leaders throughout Chinese history. In response, Chinese literati painters started to use implicit speech – an allegorical method originated from traditional Chinese literature and philosophy – to communicate political expressions in their practice as a form of passive resistance. Since the increase of particularly severe cultural censorship dating from 2013, political artists in China have been compelled to express the political dimensions of their work in increasingly subtle ways, grappling with the dual challenges of cultural censorship and self-censorship. Meanwhile, when contemporary Chinese artists make or present political allegorical paintings in the West, their artistic autonomy is always ignored by a Western discourse of simplifying political expressions into a mere political stance.

Although political expression in contemporary Chinese art has been widely discussed in the fields of art history and cultural criticism, to date very little critical attention has been paid to painting, especially through the lens of allegory. In this case, this research identifies and examines art and literature that puts forward theoretical generalisations about Chinese allegorical paintings in the contemporary era in order to reformulate a more comprehensive account of understanding political expression in Chinese allegorical paintings under censorship. My research contributes a vital perspective to art criticism and political science, highlighting the complex dialogue between cultural heritage and contemporary artistic expression in the face of political constraints.

The central question of this project is:
To what extent, or how, can we understand and approach allegorical painting as a critical practice operating under self-censorship and cultural censorship in China?

The supporting questions are:

1. What are the historical and cultural conditions of allegory in Chinese literati painting and post-Cultural Revolution political paintings?
2. How does Bada Shanren's use of allegory and irony, ahead of its time, resonate with contemporary socio-political issues and provide new insights into navigating censorship?
3. Drawing inspiration from Bada Shanren and Jörg Immendorff, how can allegory and irony in my practice navigate and critique the dual constraints of cultural censorship and self-censorship in contemporary China through bridging aesthetics, ethics, and politics together while maintaining its artistic autonomy?

In order to answer these questions, this research will work through practice and writing. In my practice, I will combine the spirit of traditional Chinese painting and the Western form of oil painting, especially Neo-Expressionism, to explore how allegory can serve as a mechanism for cultural critique and resistance under censorship. On a theoretical and methodological level, I will read paintings as literature, using a combined strategy that sits between *close* and *distant* readings, as well as applying critical theory (Benjamin and Jameson), ideological critique (Jameson and Moretti) and colonial

discourse analysis (Tang and Spivak) to examine the current position of Chinese political allegorical painting in the post-modern era, defending its complexity in representation as a cultural product instead of political stance.

Author's Declaration

This thesis represents partial submission for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (by Project) at the Royal College of Art. I confirm that the work presented here is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

During the period of registered study in which this thesis was prepared I have not been registered for any other academic award or qualification. The material included in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted.

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Many thanks for the financial support of my parents, Yang Sha and Gong Shi; without them, I could not survive in London for so many years.

Introduction

The impetus for my research in allegory was sparked not in the contemplative silence of my studio, nor amidst the scholarly stacks of a library, but against an incident in Art021 in 2020, Shanghai's esteemed contemporary art fair, where I confronted the realities of cultural censorship firsthand. My series of paintings, which depicted the lives of ordinary people during the pandemic in a humourous manner, were barred from display, deemed too sensitive for their mere allusion to the pandemic. This confrontation led me to self-censor my work, indicating the precarious nature of artistic freedom and the subtle yet stringent boundaries imposed by China's cultural censorship. Such an experience laid bare the urgent need for a tool to navigate these restrictions. This realisation propelled my quest to explore allegory not merely as an artistic technique or philosophical concept but as a necessary strategy for expression within environments constrained by censorship.

In this dissertation, I regard censorship as a system of control designed not only to suppress dissent but also to shape the cultural narrative to align with the CCP's goals, promoting social harmony and the progress achieved under its rule (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013), which means direct criticism is barely allowed. Self-censorship, on the other hand, has evolved from a strict, overt system of control to a more subtle, internalised form (Hladíková, 2021). It involves artists, writers, and cultural institutions adapting their work preemptively to avoid the potential consequences of external censorship, such as professional repercussions or legal action (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013). This shift reflects a broader societal change where the state no longer explicitly dictates every artistic detail but has instilled a collective sense of responsibility to uphold social and ideological stability. This 'soft' censorship, characterised by self-monitoring and indirect restrictions, is a socially reinforced behaviour where artists internalise state values, often leading to self-censorship even without explicit external pressures. Philosophically, self-censorship in China can be seen as an internalised form of power that not only limits behaviour but also shapes thoughts and constructs frameworks through which individuals interpret reality. It reflects Foucault's concept of productive power (1977) and Butler's idea of productive constraint (1998), where censorship not only restricts expression but also moulds identities.[1]

Driven by the moment at Art021, my research seeks to weave my personal encounters with a broader academic exploration of how allegory functions both within Chinese and Western cultural contexts. This project is rooted in a desire to understand how contemporary Chinese artists, including myself, could utilise allegory to subtly challenge and critique while avoiding the risks associated with direct political commentary.[2] As a practice-led research, this dissertation aims to bridge the gap between

[1] This dissertation does not primarily discuss how censorship shapes contemporary Chinese art, but rather explores how artists seek possibilities for expression under the already existing conditions of censorship.

[2] Political allegorical art in contemporary China spans a diverse array of forms, including painting, installation, moving images, and performance. Artists such as Huang Yongping (b. 1954) and Xu Bing (b. 1955) have notably utilised installation to craft politically allegorical works that have garnered international acclaim. Yet, painting, with its historical lineage and disturbance, occupies a complex position within the Chinese cultural and historical contexts. Unlike newer artistic forms like installation, moving images, or performance, which began to permeate the Chinese art scene predominantly in the 1970s, painting is deeply entrenched in centuries of aesthetic evolution and political connotations. Furthermore, painting, unlike installation and moving images, does not inherently incorporate a dimension of physical temporality; its temporality is more akin to a

artistic practice and theoretical analysis, investigating allegory's dual capacity as a protective veil and a medium of expression in the face of censorship challenges to provide a new mode of painting. Through this exploration, I am committed to articulating the relevance, resilience, and resistance of allegorical painting, drawing on historical precedence and contemporary necessity. The journey from the unexpected incident at Art021 to a systematic exploration of allegorical strategy encapsulates the dual essence of this research: a personal journey of practice with a quest for broader cultural and political understanding.

In traditional Chinese painting, allegory is often articulated through the concept of emptiness, serving as a veiled mechanism of dissent and cultural reflection. This approach is rooted in the literati tradition where artists subtly infused layers of political and philosophical meaning into paintings, poetry, and calligraphy, often to circumvent censorship or to comment on social issues without direct confrontation. The allegorical impulse in Chinese late modern painting after the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) aligns more closely with Craig Owens's (1950-1990) descriptions of postmodern allegory (1980).[3] This allegory reflects a critical re-engagement with historical narratives and cultural identities, often highlighting late modernity's disjunctions and discontinuities. On the other hand, Western interpretations of allegory, particularly through the redefinition by Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), present a more historical and materialist perspective. In his analysis of German tragic drama, Benjamin positions allegory as a reflection on ruin and history's fragmentary nature (2009). Allegory exposes the fissures and discontinuities within the historical process, where objects are stripped of their original meanings and instead signify something entirely new and temporally specific.

In my own artistic practice, which is a live feeling of my self-reflection on the current socio-political environments of China, I synthesise these various strands of allegorical theory, drawing not only on

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philosophical construct rather than time-based media. This attribute often leads paintings to present a singular, instantaneous expression that demands more interpretive engagement from the audience. Consequently, the political expressiveness of painting can be naturally more subdued than that of installation, moving images, or performance art. This subtlety might explain why, in exhibitions that feature a mix of art forms, painting is sometimes assigned a secondary role, as observed in the 2017 exhibition at the Guggenheim, *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World* (Huang, 2017). However, it is precisely this subtle and complex mode of expression that endows painting with a unique advantage, enabling it to convey political and social commentary in a more covert manner. This characteristic allows a painting to navigate censorship more adeptly, providing a layer of protection while still engaging in critical discourse, thus maintaining a crucial space for allegorical expression within the restrictive confines of contemporary Chinese society.

[3] Although some scholars regard this period as contemporary, in this dissertation, I use late modern to describe it due to a philosophical understanding of modernity. I approach modernity as a dynamic and qualitative concept, drawing on Peter Osborne's philosophy, which understands modernity as a self-redefining historical consciousness rather than a fixed chronological period (1992). Modernity, as I frame it, reflects an awareness of the present as discontinuous with the past, creating a space for evolving cultural, social, and political identities. In the context of the People's Republic of China, modernity aligns with attempts at economic and cultural modernisation, which were disrupted by significant historical movements such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. These efforts resulted in what I term 'broken modernity', marked by disillusionment and a fractured legacy. Late modernity, therefore, refers to the period after the Cultural Revolution, beginning with the Reform and Opening-up in 1978. This phase represents China's renewed engagement with modernisation, shaped by the recognition of previous failures and the need to reconcile past ambitions with new aspirations. Unlike the linear trajectory of Western modernity, Chinese late modernity is characterised by discontinuities and complexities, embodying Osborne's view of modernity as a multi-temporal, self-reflective process. By situating late modernity within this context, I explore how it establishes a foundation for the contemporary, engaging with China's unresolved histories and memory systems. For a detailed explanation of modernity and late modernity, see Chapter 2.

Benjamin and Owens but also incorporating Fredric Jameson's (1934-2024) perspective on allegory as a narrative strategy that reveals and engages with the underlying ideological contradictions of late capitalism, presenting it as a tool to critique and interpret the complexities of contemporary society (Jameson, 1991, 2020). My approach to allegory in painting attempts to forge a dialogue that simultaneously reflects and reacts to the pervasive challenges of cultural censorship and late capitalism. By integrating these diverse allegorical frameworks, my work seeks to establish a mode of artistic expression that is both deeply rooted in tradition and acutely responsive to contemporary socio-political realities.

The central question of this project is:
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The supporting questions are:

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2. How does Bada Shanren's use of allegory and irony, ahead of its time, resonate with contemporary socio-political issues and provide new insights into navigating censorship?
3. Drawing inspiration from Bada Shanren and Jörg Immendorff, how can allegory and irony in my practice navigate and critique the dual constraints of cultural censorship and self-censorship in contemporary China through bridging aesthetics, ethics, and politics together while maintaining its artistic autonomy?

This dissertation is grounded not in traditional art historical discipline but in a postmodern cultural criticism approach, which views cultural products—paintings, films, novels, or poems—as manifestations of underlying ideological structures.[4] By embracing a cross-medium analysis, this

[4] Contemporary China can be analysed within the frameworks of postmodernity and late capitalism, as proposed by Fredric Jameson, because it exemplifies key concepts such as cultural fragmentation, commodification, and the dominance of media and technology that resonate with the conditions Jameson describes. According to Jameson, late capitalism is characterised by an intensification of global capitalism, where cultural production is deeply intertwined with commodification and the culture industry, reflecting a globalised yet culturally fragmented world. Since the 1980s, China's rapid economic reforms and integration into global capitalism—compressed into a few decades what took the West centuries—offer a unique lens through which to examine these phenomena (Dirlik, 2019; Wang, 1997). The transformation during the Reform and Opening-up period (1978-1992) accelerated the entry of Chinese society into a phase that resonates with Jameson's descriptions of postmodernity, where traditional cultural and historical sensibilities are disrupted by fast-paced capitalist expansion and technological change. Jameson's lecture at Peking University in the autumn of 1985, which was later transcribed and published exclusively in Chinese in 1987, marks a foundational moment for understanding postmodernity. He discusses the cultural logic of late capitalism, which includes a shift towards image and spectacle in cultural expressions, and a waning of historicity, where cultural productions no longer anchor themselves in historical dialectics but are defined by pastiche and the play of surfaces (1987). Jameson's view on postmodernity resonates with current China. For example, Tiktok (Douyin), which is popular in current China, exemplifies the concepts of fragmentation and the erosion of historical sense in the postmodern culture Jameson described in the 1980s. Its structure encourages the rapid consumption of content that is highly ephemeral, with videos lasting mere seconds that prioritise immediate sensory stimulation over narrative or historical depth. This aligns with the postmodern characteristic of fragmentation, where traditional narratives are supplanted by disjointed and brief media snippets, creating a disjointed user experience that discourages sustained attention and cognitive engagement. Moreover, the content on TikTok often lacks any meaningful connection to historical context or continuity, reflecting a broader postmodern trend towards the waning of historicity. Historical images and events, when featured, are recontextualised as aesthetic elements devoid of their original significance and depth. This approach not only diminishes the user's engagement with history but

research aligns with Fredric Jameson's postmodern approach, which advocates for a comprehensive critique of culture and ideology across various forms of artistic expression.[5] This methodology is essential for contesting the omnipresence of cultural censorship and the pervasive influence of late capitalism, making the theoretical discourse more dialectical and reflective of the complexities of postmodern cultural production. We must engage in a historical dialectical struggle with cultural censorship and postmodernity on the grounds of inclusivity to face history; the critical question arises: Which is more dialectical, my critical theory or the pervasive dialectics of cultural censorship and postmodernity?

In exploring allegory across these diverse media, I do not seek to compare artistic styles or genres directly. Instead, the focus is on philosophical speculations about allegory's evolution from simple symbolisms to complex narratives that challenge and reinterpret historical meanings in Chinese painting. Such an approach allows for re-conceptualising history and modernity, particularly within the Chinese context, where modernity unfolds differently from its Western counterpart. This exploration is crucial for establishing a theoretical foundation for a future yet to come through allegory—a new understanding of modernity that critically engages with China's unique historical and socio-political landscape—that opens up a relationship to my practice.

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also transforms it into just another element of visual culture, contributing to a superficial understanding of the past and a diminished collective historical consciousness. In fact, postmodernity in China is marked by fragmentation, depthlessness, and the dominance of spatialisation over historical continuity. This era abandons the utopian ambitions of modernity and replaces them with a flattened, commodified cultural landscape, where pastiche replaces parody and history dissolves into an eternal present. Despite its complicity with capitalism, postmodernity reveals the fragmented and hyperreal conditions of contemporary society, making it both a reflection of and a tool for critiquing late capitalist structures. The postmodern characteristics of fragmentation, hyperreality, and the loss of historicity (Jameson, 1991) resonate in China's rapidly urbanising landscape, its mediated representation of the past, and its embrace of consumer culture. Situating China within this framework requires recognising the country's unique socio-political and economic trajectory, particularly its transition from a planned economy to socialism with Chinese characteristics since the Reform and Opening-up in 1978. This transition parallels certain aspects of late capitalism, including globalisation, market liberalisation, and the commodification of culture. Moreover, the selective historical memory perpetuated through cultural censorship and urban redevelopment aligns with Jameson's critique of postmodernity's erasure of historical depth. At the same time, China's socio-political context—marked by state intervention and the coexistence of modernist ideologies with late capitalist practices—introduces a hybrid dynamic, suggesting how postmodernity operates not as a universal condition but as an adaptive cultural logic shaped by local contexts. Thus, the specificity of Jameson's theory when applied to China not only corroborates his postulates but also extends them, illustrating how a socialist state's modernisation efforts can coexist with and even accentuate certain dynamics of late capitalism. This exemplifies a significant cultural and economic shift, establishing a critical understanding of the complexities and local adaptations of late capitalist culture within a postmodern global framework through a Chinese context.

[5] This dissertation navigates through two primary timelines. The first timeline traces the evolution of Chinese allegorical painting, categorised into three periods: First, traditional literati painting, rooted deeply in classical Chinese aesthetics and philosophy, historically serving as a subtle medium for social and political commentary; Second, post-Cultural Revolution political allegorical painting, which marked a period of significant artistic and ideological flux influenced by both Eastern and Western thoughts as artists grappled with China's complex modernity. (I refer to this period as 'late modernity' in the dissertation); Third, the contemporary era after Xi Jinping became the president in 2013, characterised by heightened censorship and increasing political constraints that continue to shape and challenge artistic expression and methodologies. The other timeline pertains to the theoretical framework adopted in this research, situated within a postmodern paradigm principally articulated by Fredric Jameson (1991). This framework eschews linear historical progression, instead advocating for a speculative and critical approach to culture and history. It emphasises the interpretation of allegory as a reflective and critical tool, capable of interrogating underlying ideological contradictions and cultural complexities. This dual-timeline approach enables a nuanced exploration of how allegorical painting in China evolves not only in response to artistic traditions and socio-political changes but also through critical theoretical perspectives that challenge and redefine conventional understandings of time, history, and modernity in painting.

By employing a cultural criticism framework, this dissertation engages with the inherent complexities of interpreting cultural texts within a repressive political framework. It asserts the autonomy of art not as a detached aesthetic exercise but as an engaged, critical practice that challenges and redefines the relationships between aesthetics, ethics, and politics through allegory. This perspective not only enhances our understanding of contemporary Chinese art but also contributes to a broader discourse on the role of art in challenging and transforming societal conditions.

Bada Shanren (Zhu Da, 1626-1705) occupies a critical position in this dissertation as a bridge between traditional Chinese and Western modes of allegory, embodying a unique fusion of temporal, cultural, and philosophical dimensions. While Chapter 1 introduces Bada's work in the context of traditional Chinese allegory, it intentionally refrains from looking deeply into his potential as a bridge. This decision reflects the overall trajectory of the dissertation, which begins by establishing foundational understandings of allegory in Chinese tradition and late modernity before building toward the postmodern interpretations central to my practice. Chapter 1 focuses on traditional Chinese painting, exploring allegory through the lens of traditional cultural memory, emptiness, and symbolism, while Chapter 2 shifts to post-Cultural Revolution political allegorical painting to examine how allegory evolves under the pressures of fragmented modernity. These chapters lay the groundwork for understanding allegory's transformations across different temporalities and cultural contexts.

It is in Chapter 3 that Bada's work is revisited, not merely as a traditional Chinese painter but as a window into allegory's transcendence into a postmodern view through irony. By positioning this discussion later in the dissertation, I emphasise the critical role Bada plays in bridging allegory's evolution—from the one-to-one symbolism of traditional allegory to the fragmented, deconstructed forms of Benjamin's allegory and beyond. Bada's irony and layered allegorical techniques resonate with both Chinese and Western approaches, marking a turning point where allegory moves away from linear temporality and becomes a mode of reflection on ruins, fragments, and the impossibility of totality. By deferring a full exploration of Bada's role in allegory until Chapter 3, this dissertation starts to theoretically discuss allegory through a postmodern and Marxist lens within politics and society. This delayed engagement allows Bada's work to serve as the linchpin for transitioning from historical analysis to the philosophical and speculative dimensions that define the latter half of the dissertation as well as my practice. Ultimately, this approach ensures that Bada's allegory is not reduced to a historical artefact but is instead positioned as a dynamic, forward-looking lens through which allegory can be reimagined in the context of contemporary Chinese art and beyond. By using Bada's work as a pivotal moment in the dissertation, I aim to reflect the evolving and recursive nature of allegory itself, bridging traditions, geographies, and temporalities in a manner that aligns with the theoretical underpinnings of this research.

This practice-led research aims to establish a mode of practice that reflects upon and reconfigures the historical narrative. My artistic practice, which I detail in the fourth and fifth chapters, serves as a critical examination of China's memory systems and a reimagining of its temporal and spatial dimensions. [6] Through this practice, I challenge the conventional understanding of realism in the

[6] Given the sensitive nature of political discourse in China, direct interviews or explicit acknowledgements of allegorical intent by artists could pose risks to respondents and may not yield candid insights into the use of allegory in art. Many contemporary Chinese artists, including those whose works might be interpreted as allegorical, often eschew explicit political labelling to navigate the complexities of censorship and surveillance.

Chinese government's discourse, which is associated with socialist realism, opting instead for a mode of realism that combines critical analysis with allegorical expression. This approach not only indicates the false totality and fake optimism often depicted in Socialist Realism but also uses allegory, melancholia and incompleteness to resist Socialism Realism as an exploration of the complexities of contemporary Chinese society.

As for the contribution, this research advances the understanding of allegorical art in contemporary China, exploring the intricate ways in which Chinese artists conduct critical practice as both negotiation and resistance under cultural censorship by tracing the historical evolution of allegory from traditional literati painting to post-Cultural Revolution political allegorical painting. Integrating the theories of allegory put forward by Walter Benjamin, Craig Owens, and Fredric Jameson with a deep analysis of allegorical practices, the study not only enriches theoretical discussions around allegory in art but also offers practical insights for artists working within restrictive regimes by establishing a new model of critical practice. Moreover, my practice advocates a fluid relationship between aesthetics, ethics, and politics, transcending the current Western binary opposition of Chinese political art's function, which is either pro or against the government. It finds an alternative path through allegory, demonstrating the complexity of representation that defends Chinese political art's autonomy. My research, therefore, contributes a vital perspective to aesthetic theory, art criticism and political science, highlighting the complex dialogue between cultural heritage and contemporary artistic expression in the face of political constraints.

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Therefore, this dissertation is framed as a practice-led inquiry that synthesises critical theory, philosophical speculation, and personal artistic practice to explore how allegory can serve as a mechanism for cultural critique and resistance under censorship. This methodological choice is designed to respect the constraints faced by artists in China and to contribute to academic discourse from a position that balances critical analysis with an understanding of the practical realities of art production in a censored environment. The focus on 'my reflection on the current condition' through the lens of allegorical painting allows for a deeper, more reflective engagement with the subject matter, drawing on a wide array of theoretical resources to build an understanding of the role and reception of allegory in contemporary Chinese art for the perspective of an artist.

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Chapter 1
Implicit Nature and Emptiness: Allegorical Methods in Traditional Chinese Painting

This chapter will contribute to research into the origin of the idea of implicit nature and its function as an allegorical method through cultural study approaches by examining Chinese philosophical monographs and works by a number of leftover artists. Through digging into the history of implicit nature, this chapter could provide a clearer understanding of why and how Chinese literati painters preferred to use allegory to express their political feelings within the philosophy of emptiness through cultural approaches, making it easier to analyse contemporary Chinese political practice in the later chapters. To conclude, this chapter will be the foundation of my research. It will not only discuss allegory in traditional Chinese painting through implicit nature and emptiness to fill the theoretical gap in the field, but also examine the practical methods employed by Chinese literati painters, which have the potential to be used in contemporary political practice under the cultural and self-censorship in China.[7]

Implicit Nature: A Traditional Chinese Mode of Allegory

In Chinese art history, the distinction between court and amateur painters started to take shape during the Tang dynasty (618–907), becoming more significant in later periods, particularly during the Song dynasty (960–1279). Court painters, often employed and compensated by the imperial government, were tasked with creating works that suited the tastes and preferences of the ruling elite. In contrast, amateur painters, often referred to as literati painters (or simply the literati), prioritised personal insight and expression over literal representation or instantly captivating surface beauty (Bush, 2012).[8] Their paintings were not intended to depict nature realistically but to use it as a vehicle to express their emotions allegorically. Those artists were always intellectuals who had received an education in literature, which was not only reflected in the inscribed poems on the paintings but also enabled their paintings to contain literary rhetorical devices such as metaphor and irony, illustrating

[7] In my view, the main difference between Chinese and Western allegory is the attitude towards modernity. The Chinese one is against modernity while the Western one is towards it; therefore they establish different forms of postmodernity. This will be discussed in the case study section of landscapes.

[8] Susan Bush's *The Chinese Literati on Painting: Su Shih (1037-1101) to Tung Ch'i-ch'ang (1555-1636)* (2012) offers a comprehensive view of literati painting, emphasising its philosophical motivations and aesthetic principles in contrast to the more formalised nature of court painting and other artistic forms. Unlike the court's emphasis on technical perfection, literati painting, championed by scholar-officials such as Su Shi (1037-1101) and later Dong Qichang (1555-1636), prioritised personal expression, intellectual engagement, and moral character. Bush highlights that literati painters saw their art as a natural extension of scholarly virtues, aligning with Confucian ideals where painting, like poetry and calligraphy, reflected an artist's inner qualities, temperament, and sense of self (p. 12). This approach diverged from court painting, which adhered to imperial preferences and emphasised highly refined and vivid representation. Court painters were often artisans working under formal commissions, producing works valued for their decorative and technical qualities, while literati painting was meant to capture the subjective essence of the artist's thoughts and emotions, even embracing stylistic irregularities or imperfections to convey spontaneity and authenticity. By positioning literati painting as an art of introspection and minimalism, Bush indicates how this tradition valued the symbolic and allegorical over the strictly representational, making it less about aesthetic polish and more about conveying mood, symbolism, and the painter's personal interpretation. This contrast suggests the unique role of literati painting in Chinese culture as an art of moral and intellectual inquiry, where the depth of thought behind a piece held greater value than mere visual refinement.

the close connection between their writing and their painting. In this case, coming back to literature seems to be rather important when studying the practice of the literati, who attached equal importance to poetry, calligraphy, painting, and seal carving (Pan, 2012) as their spiritual extension, which could be regarded as four aspects of a single spirit.

There are two economies of speech in the presentation system of painting: direct and indirect. In paintings made by the literati, indirect speech is always embedded, which allows a tendency towards the allegorical.[9] In *The Mandarin Fish* (Figure 4, 1694), for example, Bada Shanren (1626-1705) implies his sadness at losing his country, the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), as a *yimin* (遗民, leftover subjects) and former prince, along with a nostalgic awareness that his life was approaching its end, expressed through a simple sketch of a mandarin fish and a short allegorical poem.[10] His other works also express tremendous emotions with the fewest elements, as did the work of so many other literati painters. Their works were shaped into puzzles, visually and textually. This common phenomenon in traditional Chinese painting makes me wonder how this indirect speech emerged among the literati in Chinese history and how we might understand it in artistic dimensions such as painting? Furthermore, could this indirect speech be deployed in contemporary painting as a representational strategy of allegory?

Between poetry, calligraphy, painting, and seal carving, painting is perhaps the most privileged medium to directly reflect the nature of the literati because it is a mixture containing images, inscribed poetry mediated by calligraphy and – sometimes – a seal. Therefore, any analysis of a traditional Chinese painting should not only study its imagery but should also research other elements as well. In my opinion, the implicit speech of a traditional Chinese painting mainly manifests in the imagery and poetry because they are full of content and, therefore, full of allegorical emotions. Although calligraphy is another essential means of expression, this chapter will not include a detailed study of it. In this chapter, I will examine the writing and painting of the literati in the same vein, regarding them as the same content with different forms because of the exact nature drawn by the spirit of literati artists, aiming to provide a clearer view of implicit speech in traditional Chinese painting. [11,12]

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[9] This chapter primarily examines literati paintings created by amateur painters, as it seeks to explore how painting has become a subtle vehicle for political expression. This focus establishes the foundation for my own practice. Therefore, unless otherwise specified, 'traditional Chinese painting' in this dissertation refers to literati painting.

[10] *yimin* (遗民), often translated as 'leftover subjects' or 'relic subjects,' refers to loyalist artists and scholars from various periods, such as the Southern Song (1127-1279) and Ming dynasties (1368-1644), who resisted or mourned foreign rule. These individuals are 'leftover from the previous dynasty' (Bai, 2003, p. 209), expressing loyalty to their fallen regimes through art and other forms, embodying a form of cultural resistance. For more on *yimin*, see *Luo Zhenyu, Qing Loyalists and the Formation of Modern Chinese Culture,* edited by Chia-Ling Yang and Roderick Whitfield (2012), which provides a comprehensive view on Luo Zhenye and other *yimin* of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912).

[11] 'Writing' here refers to the inscriptions and colophons alongside literati paintings. In literati painting, inscriptions are written texts—often poetry or philosophical reflections—that artists inscribe on their artworks, often displaying skill in calligraphy or adding personal or contextual meaning. Meanwhile, colophons are comments or reflections typically added by others later, providing context and furthering the dialogue between text and image (Barnhart, 1997, p. 6). These elements establish a dialogue between the visual and textual aspects of the artwork, allowing for a more layered interpretation.

[12] By using the word 'speech,' I want to make the abstract and broad term 'implicit nature' more concrete and precise. Implicit nature is not only a theoretical concept but also affects Chinese people practically in their lives, and one strongly influenced area is their speech. It is known that the ancient Chinese did not speak directly

In *Wei Jin Style and Others* (2020), Lu Xun (1881-1936) summarised two forms of resistance whereby Chinese literati implicitly composed their political expressions.[13] First, it is related to the political environment in a particular historical period, as the autocratic rulers were always unwilling to see negative emotions being expressed in artworks since they might endanger the regime – literary inquisition could be an extreme example of this (Liu, 2019). This chapter will not discuss this in detail because it seems relatively straightforward and has been widely studied in academia. The second is presentational resistance, which is more complicated because it originated from ancient Chinese culture and philosophy. It then became well-accepted among Chinese literati, resulting in their spontaneously avoiding direct speech and expressing their opinions indirectly. This manner formulated an indirect speech embedded in traditional Chinese paintings, introducing expression inside the emptiness of content. When facing the cultural censorship in the later era, it also allowed artists to express their negative emotions allegorically instead of speaking directly, thereby avoiding the risks posed by the Chinese imperial system. As a result, the tradition of passive resistance was established in the history of China against the impossibility of direct speech in political expression.

With a desire for spontaneity, implicit nature has been embedded in Chinese painting, literature, and even culture from the Spring and Autumn period (771-476 BC).[14,15] In the Song Dynasty (960-1279), it was theorised and became a clear and formal concept (Tang, 2003). Such indirect nature is a kind of blandness (Jullien, 2008), hiding in the emptiness (Cheng, 1994) of traditional Chinese painting, to paint 'no longer content merely to reproduce the exterior of things, but also seek to capture inner lines and hold fast the hidden relations between them' (p. 63). It withdraws direct speech from artistic expression, leaving audiences to feel the 'pulsations of the invisible' (p. 87).

However, a problem in this field is that scholars tend to discuss indirect speech as a pre-existing feature in traditional Chinese art, ignoring how this tradition was established. In this case, it is essential to discuss the origin of implicit nature in order to formulate a comprehensive account of Chinese allegory.

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but preferred to make implications during communication, and I believe those habits in the daily life of the literati also influenced their art practice. Therefore, I would use 'implicit speech' in my essay when discussing the practical dimension of implicit nature.

[13] Although Lu Xun's insights primarily address literature, they resonate with the intertwined traditions of Chinese painting and literary culture; as in Chinese history, the painting was often seen as a 'poem without words', reflecting a shared intellectual heritage where literati were expected to master both arts (Liu, 2003, p. 150). The act of painting, like writing, embodied a scholarly spirit, striving to reveal an artist's inner world through subtle forms of expression and resistance shaped by cultural and philosophical contexts. This overlap not only suggests the fluid boundaries between literature and visual art but also affirms that the analytical frameworks applied to literature can enrich the understanding of Chinese painting as a parallel mode of intellectual and political resistance.

[14] In painting, it is reflected in blank space, while in literature, in empty words. Both of them point out a state of emptiness, which will be discussed in the section *Method of Concealing*.

[15] Lytton Strachey (1979), Desmond MacCarthy (1935), Qian Zhongshu (1979) and others have contributed knowledge to this field, indicating that Chinese literature always contains implications and that its meaning lies outside the text.

How Did Implicit Speech Emerge in Chinese History?

How could a manner of implicit nature be formed in Chinese culture? Although this chapter mainly examines traditional Chinese painting, I believe the answer should be found in the ancient monographs and literature because nearly all the Chinese literati received a literary education in their youth before starting to paint (Pan, 2012). The phenomenon of the spontaneous utilisation of implicit speech among the literati might imply that what they studied when they were young made them formulate the spirit of implicit nature in their later works. Therefore, I assert two main reasons stemming from their literary education: the historical influence of Chinese philosophy (Confucianism and Taoism) and *wu* (悟, enlightenment), an ancient Chinese system of self-study used in Buddhist education. Usually, they are not separated and influence each other all the time. To explain this, I will start with an example.

> Confucius said, 'I would prefer not speaking.' Zi Gong said, 'If you, Master, do not speak, what shall we, your disciples, have to record?' Confucius said, 'Does Heaven speak? The four seasons pursue their courses, and all things are continually being produced, but does Heaven say anything?' (p. 187, Yang, 1982)
>
> 子曰予欲无言。子贡曰："子如不言，则小子何述焉?"子曰："天何言哉！四时行焉，百物生焉，天何言哉?"

Confucius' (551-479 BC) opinion is similar to Laozi's (571-? BC) idea: '(The Tao) has nurtured everything without claiming any possession, promoted everything without taking any merit, and raised everything without taking any control. It is called virtue' (Wang, 2011, p. 26).[16] In Confucianism, such an opinion might be an epoché of ontological inquiry. In Taoism, it becomes a question about asking the essence of the cosmos and the possibility of language's limits (Tang, 2003, p. 79). In the *Tao Te Ching*, Laozi wrote, 'The way that can be spoken of, is not the constant way' (Wang, 2011, p. 2).[17] Also, Zhuangzi (369-286 BC) wrote, 'The true Tao could only be understood' (Chen, 2007, p. 91); 'What can be talked about is the object's surface, while what can only be understood is the internality of an object' (Chen, 2007, p. 485).[18]

Because of the idea of wordlessness in ancient Chinese culture, a common view emerged: what could be directly expressed always stays on the surface, while the most profound and essential things cannot be described. Understanding what cannot be said directly is called *wu*, an epiphany that resonates with Chinese Buddhism's idea. In Chan Buddhism, *wu* suggests a unique subjective feeling and intuitive experience. It is neither pursuit nor non-pursuit, neither conscious nor unconscious,

[16] The original text of '(The Tao) has nurtured everything without claiming any possession, promoted everything without taking any merit, and raised everything without taking any control. It is called virtue' is '(道)生而不有，为而不恃，长而不宰，是谓玄德.'

[17] The original text of 'the way that can be spoken of, is not the constant way' is '道可道，非常道.' The English version was translated by D. C. Lau in *Tao Te Ching* (1962), p. 57.

[18] The original text of 'the true Tao could only be understood' is '大道不称.' The original text of 'that can be talked about is the object's surface, while what can only be understood is the internality of an object' is '可以言论者，物之粗也；可以意致者，物之精也.'

neither completely unwilling nor obsessive. It is a way of not paying attention while paying attention, or even not paying attention to paying attention, and then, *wu* arises (Li, 2008).

As a method of wordlessness, *wu* suggests the supreme condition of understanding in the cosmos in *chan*. In *Zhuangzi*, a story has been recorded in which Confucius remained silent when he met another ancient philosopher, Wenbo Xuezi. His student Zilu asked, 'You have been looking forward to meeting Wenbo Xuezi for a long time. Why don't you speak when you finally meet him?' Confucius said, 'He has shown greatness when he looks on the road.[19] In this case, I don't need to say anything' (Chen, 2007, p. 616).[20] This story offers an example of *wu*, which could be understood as an acceptance of implication from the audience's perspective.

Such implication is common in ancient Chinese literature. It might be because the literati (both creator and reader) believed *wu* should be the supreme condition of understanding and should be used as a double-sided method. Creators intended to hide their expressions in the simple subjects of art and literature while readers were keen to find out what was under the wordlessness, and even got a surprise from it. In order to achieve this, some ancient Chinese literature and art became more and more ambiguous. In this case, *wu*, a concept and method from *chan*, drives an implicit speech in Chinese culture. I believe it is such implicit speech that influenced the expression of Chinese art, allowing implication and understanding in cultural expression to be enhanced by theories because when Buddhism was introduced into China, it brought not only a new perspective of understanding but also a whole set of forms and symbol systems for expression and acceptance (Tang, 2003, p. 84), enabling the indirect manner to become more mature and theoretical from an abstract concept.

However, implicit speech is a negative expression in its signifying structure. In order to analyse it, we need to figure out what 'explicit' speech is. As a concept in Buddhism, explicit speech first meant using words to help believers eliminate the confusion in Buddhist scriptures. Then, it refers to explaining Buddhist allegorical words (Tang, 2003, p. 85). The passage on Chan Master Xiang Yan in *Compendium of the Five Lamps* (五灯会元) (Pu, 1997, p. 536) written by Chan Master Pu Ji (1179-1253) serves as a significant example that illustrates the key themes discussed in this thesis.

> When Chan Master Xiang Yan was young, he was intelligent. Whenever facing a question, he could talk a lot. However, he did not understand the core of *chan*. One day, Chan Master Wei Shan asked him, 'I heard you could answer ten when asked one, answer a hundred when asked ten. You should be very clever, but have you thought about the essence of life and death? What had you been before you were born by your parents?' Xiang Yan could not answer this question; therefore, he returned home and searched all the books he had read. However, he failed to find anything. Master Wei Shan said, 'You could not only read.' Xiang Yan came to Wei Shan several times, begging him to answer. Wei Shan refused and said, 'If I tell you, you will blame me in the future.

[19] Because Tao and road share the same Chinese character '道', here Confucius implies that Wenbo Xuezi possessed the Tao.

[20] The original text of this story is '仲尼见之而不言。子路曰："吾子欲见温伯雪子久矣，见之而不言，何邪？"仲尼曰："若夫人者，目击而道存矣，亦不可以容声矣.'

You have to seek the answer yourself.' Xiang Yan felt desperate. He burned all his books and cried, 'I will not learn Buddhism in the future and become an ascetic.' Then he left and settled in the ruins of Huizhong Guoshi's Taoist temple. One day, when Xiang Yan was weeding, he accidentally threw a tile on bamboo, making a crisp sound. He suddenly achieved enlightenment. He immediately returned home, took a shower, and lit the incense to show appreciation for Wei Shan. Xiang Yan said, 'Master Wei Shan is like my parents! If he had told me the answer, I would not have achieved anything today.'

山问："我闻汝在百丈先师处，问一答十，问十答百。此是汝聪明灵利，意解识想，生死根本。父母未生时，试道一句看。"师被一问，直得茫然。归寮将平日看过底文字从头要寻一句酬对，竟不能得，乃自叹曰："画饼不可充饥。"屡乞沩山说破，山曰："我若说似汝，汝以后骂我去。我说底是我底，终不干我事。"师遂将平昔所看文字烧却。曰："此生不学佛法也，且作个行粥饭僧，免役心神。"乃泣辞沩山，直过南阳睹忠国师遗迹。遂憩止焉。一日，芟草木，偶抛瓦砾，击竹作声，忽然省悟。遽归沐浴焚香，遥礼沩山。赞曰："和尚大慈，恩逾父母。当时若为我说破，何有今日之事？"

From this story, we can know *chan* is not only implicit but also an irreplaceable and abstract experience requiring people's self-understanding. It is an asignifying process. Wei Shan refused to make implicit speech explicit to Xiang Yan. When Xiang Yan achieved the state of *chewu* (彻悟, sudden awakening), he appreciated what Wei Shan did. This story also indicates that *chan* is not only implicit but also meaningless in terms of being explicit, which has similarities with the aporia. The allegorical words used in *chan* are seemingly an insoluble impasse, and the way of achieving the state of *wu* is different for everyone, requiring their subjective understanding.

Meanwhile, implicit speech is a negative principle of speaking. If 'speech' remains, being implicit practically means avoiding being explicit. But how? The two expressive methods in Buddhist education might provide the answer: *biaoquan* (表诠, surface interpretation or literal explanation) and *zhequan* (遮诠, hidden interpretation or concealed explanation) (Yao, 2014). Compared to *biaoquan*, *zhequan* is much more used in Buddhism to drive believers to achieve the state of *wu* by themselves through discovering deeper, often underlying meanings that are not immediately visible in *chan*. For example, a monk is 'not heart, not Buddha, not object' (Dao, 2010, p. 492).[21]

zhequan is also an example of implicit speech, which leads *chan* expression into an allegorical level, '*wenzichan*' (文字禅, literary *chan*) (Tang, 2003, p. 87), or Chinese aphorism, which has a charm of paradox attracting the literati to express their feelings in allegory. The literary theorist Zhang Nanxuan (1133-1180) offers that '…the art of composing poetry lies not in speaking directly or revealing all, but rather in crafting verses with subtlety and grace, much like a skilled poet. When one thinks of a person but does not speak of them directly, the depth of that thought becomes profound, transcending the limits of language. If one were to state how and what they think explicitly, the meaning would become

[21] The original text of '…is not heart, not Buddha, not object' is '不是心，不是佛，不是物.'

shallow and lose its richness.' (Hu, 1986, p.234).[22]

Zhang's writing on implicit speech implies the connection between literature and *chan*. Also, we can take from his writings that the reason why implicit speech is well accepted among Chinese literati is that it could formulate an allegorical and endless imaginary space for the audiences, which allows them to understand the expressions of the creator in their own private way; in contrast, if the expression is conducted directly, everything will be clear and straightforward, which limits the space of imagination.

As a result, when analysing a Chinese poem, one might need to focus not only on what the authors wrote but also on what they did not write because an allegorical nature is embedded in it.[23] For paintings, in the same vein, François Jullien offered 'painting tends not only toward making visible, or more visible, but also toward covering over and "concealing"' (2012, p. 12) as poems. In Jullien's case studies, I found that the painters he chose (Shi Tao (1642-1707)), Dong Yuan (932-962) and Zhao Mengfu (1254-1322)) were almost all literati artists who had been well-educated as poets and writers simultaneously instead of court painters. Most literati paintings have a poem inscribed, and I believe it is essential to analyse the poem with the image because the poem seems a little more direct than the painting, which will reduce the complexity of the research. In this case, I will first choose works made by four artists – Zheng Sixiao (1241-1318), Gong Kai (1222-1307), Ren Renfa (1254-1327) and Bada Shanren (1626-1705) – as case studies to provide a direct example of how Chinese literati communicated their allegorical expressions through everyday objects and inscribed poems in their paintings.[24,25]

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[22] The original text of 'The art of composing poetry lies not in speaking directly or revealing all, but rather in crafting verses with subtlety and grace, much like a skilled poet. When one thinks of a person but does not speak of them directly, the depth of that thought becomes profound, transcending the limits of language. If one were to explicitly state how and what they think, the meaning would become shallow and lose its richness.' is '作诗不可直说破，须如诗人婉而成章;思是人也而不言，则思之之意深，而不可以言语形容也。若说破如何思、如何思，则意味浅矣.'

[23] Surprisingly, it resonates with Fredric Jameson's view on understanding allegory in third-world literature (2020), which will be discussed in Chapter 3..

[24] I choose to begin my visual analysis with artists from the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) for three main reasons. First, the transition of amateur artists from the periphery to the centre of the painting world during the Yuan dynasty was a defining moment in Chinese art history, driven by both historical upheaval and evolving artistic philosophies (Cahill, 1976). With the fall of the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279) and the Mongol conquest, professional institutions like the Imperial Academy of Painting collapsed, creating a void in the art world. This allowed scholar-amateur artists, or literati, to rise to prominence, bringing with them a transformative approach to painting. Moreover, the reunification of the North and South not only merged diverse regional styles but also sparked a revival of earlier Northern Song (960-1127) traditions that had been long overlooked or forgotten in the South (Fong, 1992, p. 379). As Cahill observes, painting shifted from being 'the province of professional or "artisan" painters' (1976, p. 5) to an art form practised by literati as 'a vehicle for a subtler kind of communication' and self-expression (p. 4). Unlike professional artists, whose work emphasised technical skill and realism, literati painters embraced an amateur ethos that valued intellectual depth, moral integrity, and the embodiment of the artist's character in their work. This change was also influenced by the socio-political landscape, as the marginalisation of Chinese scholars under Mongol rule prompted them to turn to painting as a means of personal cultivation and subtle resistance. Consequently, painting evolved from a craft for creating 'beautiful and valuable objects' (p. 5) into an expressive art form that revealed the artist's inner world and philosophical reflections, marking a profound transformation in its purpose and practice. Second, although the Mongols recognised the advantages of keeping the main features of the Chinese administrative system and hiring capable Chinese in the government, Kublai Khan, who conquered China and wished to be a civilised monarch, only instituted 'a semblance of Chinese civil rule, overlaid on a government that was in fact totally militarised after the pattern set by Mongol rule in other parts of Asia' (Cahill, 1976, p. 6). The dual-staffed administrative offices 'with Mongols or Central Asians holding military power and Chinese officials under them running the civil government' (Cahill,

Zheng Sixiao 郑思肖 (1241-1318)

After the Mongols defeated the Song, those 'who had held office under the Song or had fought to defend it in its final years or had otherwise formed an emotional commitment that they were now unwilling to break' (Cahill, 1976, p. 14) became *yimin*, refusing to serve the Mongols. In this case, they left public life and chose to become hermits after the Mongols conquered China. Because they had no effective means to protest or change their situation, they used artworks and symbolic acts such as refusing to lie or sit towards the north (where the Mongol capital was located) to express their opposition.

As one of the *yimin* artists, Zheng Sixiao changed his name from Zheng Zhiyin after the Song's demise to imply his loyalty. The character *xiao* (肖) is part of the family name of the Song emperors (趙), while *si* (思) means 'miss' in Chinese. Although Zheng was 'infuriated by the sight of other Chinese cooperating with the invaders and intensely bitter over the downfall of the dynasty (the capital at Hangchow fell early in the following year)' (Cahill, 1976, p. 16), he had to forsake suicide because his old mother needed him to take care of her and suicide would not be a filial act for him. In this vein, he settled in Suzhou as a Taoist priest and hid his anger and hatred towards the Mongols in his poems and paintings.

Zheng's favourite subject was the Chinese orchid. In his painting *Ink Orchid* (Figure 1, 1306), 'two clumps of orchid leaves, deftly brushed onto the paper in dilute ink, and a single unobtrusive flower

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1976, p. 6) made the government career of the Chinese extremely difficult. They were at the bottom of the new social hierarchy that the new government established and suffered severe discrimination. In this vein, very few Chinese literati agreed to serve under the Mongols. They were full of enthusiasm and political passion but could not participate in politics, so they expressed their frustration and anger in poems, calligraphy, and painting. Third, it was a common belief among the Chinese literati that shifting their loyalty to the conquerors from the old government was immoral (Cahill, 1976). Although the Mongols' absolute hold on power kept preventing continued active resistance and large-scale rebellions only occurred until the middle of the 14th century, Chinese literati refused to serve the Mongols and they did not hide their bitterness towards them. Thanks to the relatively loose cultural censorship imposed by the Mongols compared to that in the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing dynasties (1644-1912) and the literati tradition of implicit manners of expression, we could see critical practices in the Yuan were more direct than those in the Ming and the Qing but still embraced an indirect nature, which are the ideal case studies for my research.

[25] The selection of Zheng Sixiao, Gong Kai, Ren Renfa, and Bada Shanren suggests a sequential evolution in the use of allegory within Chinese painting. Zheng Sixiao, Gong Kai, and Ren Renfa, all *yimin* of the Southern Song (1127-1279), represent an early mode where allegory emerges within the framework of symbolism. Zheng Sixiao's work often centres on plants, while Ren Renfa and Gong Kai's paintings feature animals, each embedding symbolic and allegorical meanings, marking the allegorical thought within Chinese literati art. Bada Shanren's work, however, takes this progression further, developing a distinctly contemporary allegorical system that introduces a sense of temporality, resonating with Benjamin's redefinition of allegory, which will be discussed in the later chapters. His work moves beyond traditional symbolism through irony, abstraction, and complex visual language, engaging with themes of time and memory in ways that bridge classical literati practices with postmodern allegorical expression. This progression from symbolic beginnings to a sophisticated allegorical system, especially in Bada Shanren's exploration of temporality, illustrates a deepening of allegory and time in Chinese art history.

that provides the only dark accent make up the whole of it' (Cahill, 1976, p. 16). This painting is painted in bold, dark ink with vigorous brushwork, embodying the unyielding and resilient spirit of the orchid. The strokes are simple and unadorned, exuding a natural elegance. The dense ink and the fluid yet robust depiction of the orchid leaves give the work a sense of strength and upright vitality (Wang, 2009). In fact, this painting does not aim for meticulous detail, yet its imagery is vivid and striking. Although it seems to be a simple depiction of the orchid with an apolitical surface, the political dimension gradually emerges when we look into its subject matters and Zheng's use of them.

First, there is a poem on the right of the painting written by Zheng:

> I have been asking *xihuang* with my head bowed:
> Who were you—and why did you come to this land?
> I opened my nostrils before making the painting,
> And there, floating everywhere in the sky, is the ancient fragrance undying.[26]
>
> 向来俯首问羲皇，汝是何人到此乡。
> 未有画前开鼻孔，满天浮动古馨香。

Figure 1

Ink Orchid

25.7x42.4 cm. By Zheng Sixiao, 1306, painting, ink on paper, located at Osaka City Museum of Fine Arts, Osaka, Japan.

[26] Revised translation from Wai-Kam Ho. See *Chinese Art Under the Mongols: the Yuan Dynasty, 1279-1368* written by Sherman E. Lee and Wai- kam Ho (1968, p. 306).

In this poem, the subject, *xihuang* (羲皇), is an ancient emperor of China who represents virtue. Zheng compared the orchid to *xihuang*, asking him why he would come to the land conquered and ravaged by the new rulers (Mongols). The second sentence described the fragrance of the orchid, which could not be depicted in the painting. The character 古 (ancient) resonates with *xihuang* in meaning and has the same pronunciation as 'hometown' (故) in Chinese, implying the artist's nostalgia for the Song Dynasty (Gao & Yan, 2019).

Second, the orchid had been associated with high-principled gentlemen's virtues in the poetry of Qu Yuan (342-278 BC) and Su Shi (1037-1101) and had carried such reference through the ages.[27] 'Fragile and unassertive, blooming modestly and spreading its delicate fragrance in hidden places' (Cahill, 1976, p. 17), the orchid could be a particularly suitable image for the artist who had withdrawn from the world. Without painting the earth around the orchid's roots, Zheng addressed the fact that 'the earth had been taken by the foreign barbarians' (Yi, 2013, p. 28).[28] In this vein, the orchid becomes an allegory of the artist's integrity and loyalty instead of a simple plant depicted in a painting. It implies that the artist would rather be rootless and vulnerable like the orchid than serve the new rulers. It also indicates the artist's helplessness at losing his homeland and his strong yearning for the Song Dynasty.

Ren Renfa 任仁发 (1254-1327)[29]

Unlike many other *yimin* artists who refused to serve the Mongol government such as Gong Kai, Ren Renfa worked as the *dushuishaojian* (都水少监, Assistant Controller of Irrigation) in the Mongol government.[30] Ren was famous for painting horses, and his works seemed to follow the style of painting horses that had been popularised by Zhao Mengfu (1254-1322).

[27] It was a tradition for Chinese literati to compare themselves to the orchid, which might originate from Confucius. 'When Confucius returned to the Lu from the Wei, he saw many orchids flourishing in a valley. He said: "The orchid's flavour is the flavour of a noble man. Now it is flourishing alone with other rank grass, like a noble man who could not find an admirer for his talent"' (Cai, 1990, p. 4). The original text is '(孔子)自卫返鲁，过隐谷之中，见芗兰独茂，喟然叹曰:'夫兰当为王者香，今乃独茂，与众草为伍，譬犹贤者不逢时，与鄙夫为伦也'.

[28] The original text of 'the earth had been taken by the foreign barbarians' is '土为番人夺去.'

[29] Zheng Sixiao and Ren Renfa represent two contrasting narrative complexities among Southern Song *yimin* in their responses to the Yuan regime. Zheng Sixiao's work embodies a straightforward symbolic narrative, often using singular representations—such as orchids—to express his frustration and helplessness as a loyalist. In contrast, Ren Renfa's work introduces a more layered allegorical narrative that moves beyond single-symbol representation. By depicting animals with subtle expressions and contexts, Ren Renfa creates a more intricate allegorical structure that reflects both his loyalty to the people and his engagement with the Yuan court. Grouping Zheng Sixiao and Ren Renfa together thus not only marks a shift in how *yimin* artists conveyed their complex identities and political stances under the new regime, but also illustrates a progression in narrative complexity, from singular symbolic references to multi-layered allegorical storytelling.

[30] Ren was nearly thirty years younger than Gong Kai, who was also famous for political horse painting. Ren might have had less yearning for the Song dynasty than other *yimin* artists like Gong Kai and Zheng Sixiao because of his age, which allowed him to work in the Yuan government without lots of hatred.

In the painting *Fat and Lean Horses* (Figure 2, 1280), Ren depicted two horses from the perspective of an official working in the government. In this painting, Ren Renfa's mastery of linework is evident, indicating exceptional precision and sophistication. The fat horse is characterised by elastic, flowing curves that emphasise its fullness and vitality, while the lean horse is rendered with more angular, pronounced lines, drawing attention to its ribcage and highlighting its frailty and aged demeanour. Ren's technique draws clear inspiration from Li Gonglin's (1049-1106) *baimiao* (白描, line drawing) style, using meticulous ink lines to expertly capture the forms and essential structures of the two horses (Chen, 2022). As for the colour, this painting primarily utilises ochre tones.

Figure 2

Fat and Lean Horses

28.9x94 cm. By Ren Renfa, 1280, painting, handscroll, in and colours on silk, located at The Palace Museum Beijing, Beijing, China.

On the left of the painting, Ren wrote an inscription comparing two horses he encountered when working to express his dissatisfaction with government corruption:

> In my spare time from official duties, I happened to draw two horses, one fat and the other thin. The fat horse, with a strong and sturdy frame, stands on a steep slope, held by a single rope. Although it enjoys an abundance of fodder, it cannot avoid the hardships of treading along narrow paths. The thin horse, with its coat stripped away, nibbles on dry grass amidst the biting frost. Though it appears abandoned throughout its life, it is spared from the toil of galloping from dawn to dusk. How greatly different the fates of living beings can be! Among the officials in this world, some are honest while others are corrupt, much like the conditions of these two horses. If one is able to suffer for oneself to enrich the nation, he remains worthy of being called upright. But if one enriches oneself at the expense of ten thousand people, does this not bring disgrace? Reflecting upon the allegory within this painting, how could one not feel shame in the heart? Thus, I inscribed this on the scroll, hoping that those with discerning understanding might appreciate its meaning.

> 予吏事之余，偶图肥瘠二马，肥者骨骼权奇，萦一索而立峻坡，虽有厌饫刍豆之荣，宁无羊肠踏跃之患；瘠者皮毛剥落，啮枯草而立霜风，虽有终身摈弃之状，而无晨驰夜秣之劳。甚矣哉，物情之不类如此！世之士大夫，廉滥不同，而肥瘠系焉。能瘠一身而肥一国，不失其为廉；苟肥一己而瘠万民，岂不贻污滥之耻欤！按图索骥，得不愧于心乎？因题卷末，以俊识者。

In his writing, Ren uses horses to refer to two types of officials. The fat one on the right is the official 'enriches oneself at the expense of ten thousand people.' However, it is tied by a halter, which might be 'an ironic reminder that the freedom is only partial, since winning success in this way is apt to require a greater degree of subservience to one's superiors' (Cahill, 1976, p. 155). The lean one, on the other hand, represents the official 'able to suffer for oneself to enrich the nation.' The halter is tying itself, indicating to the fat horse its self-discipline and disappointment. Ren identified himself as the lean horse, which also was his explanation for why he chose to serve the Mongol government when others were still refusing: he wished to use his talent to help people rather than to help any particular government (Fan, 2019).

We could notice that the figure of the lean horse in Ren's painting is similar to the *Emaciated Horse* (Figure 3, 1307) painted by Gong Kai. However, the horse in Gong's painting is walking to the left, whereas the horse is walking towards the right in Ren's painting. In Chinese traditional painting, the order is generally from right to left when the scroll is unrolled. In this vein, we might suppose that Ren adopted Gong's figure of a horse deliberately and then reversed the horse's pose to change the meaning of the figure. Gong's painting depicted a lean *yimin* horse walking away from social life. In Ren's painting, however, the horses are walking towards the viewer, indicating that although he was disappointed at the new government's corruption, he is still committed to helping construct his country.

Figure 3

Emaciated Horse

30x57 cm. By Gong Kai, 1307, painting, handscroll, ink on paper, located at Osaka City Museum of Fine Arts, Osaka, Japan.

Bada Shanren 八大山人 (1626-1705)[31]

As a member of the Zhu imperial clan, Bada Shanren (Zhu Da, 朱耷) was born into a scholar-gentry family, with his early years being influenced by 'the lifestyle and artistic pursuits' (Wang, 1991, p. 23) of his family background. Many people in his family were 'accomplished painters and calligraphers' (Wang, 1991, p. 23). However, he left his ancestral home of Nanchang after 1645 when he was about nineteen to escape from the invasion and occupation undertaken by the Manchu army of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912). He then became a Buddhist monk, living in the mountains northwest of Nanchang (Wang, 2017, p. 71). As a member of one of the noble families of the previous dynasty, Bada Shanren chose to become a monk mostly due to his concern for his personal safety under 'the persecution at the cruel hands of the Manchu conquerors' (Wang, 1991, p. 23) rather than because of his strong religious beliefs. At that time, as Wang Fangyu wrote in his essay *The Life and Art of Bada Shanren* (1991), 'many other Zhu clan members and Ming literati sought to avoid the political and social upheaval occasioned by the fall of the dynasty by joining Buddhist or Taoist temples, or retiring to the privacy of their homes' (p. 23). In around 1680, Bada Shanren ended his self-imposed exile, which had lasted for more than thirty years. He abandoned his life as a Buddhist monk and returned to his hometown, Nanchang.

During his life, Bada Shanren made numerous paintings and calligraphic works. In his early paintings in the monastic period, Bada Shanren 'derived his brush manner in painting from the study and practice of calligraphy' (Wang, 1991, p. 48), like most literati. Although these are very few in number, his early paintings offer a connection between his calligraphy and painting, a factor that must be addressed in any research into his later works.

Bada Shanren's madness in later life is also well-known and documented. However, it still remains unknown whether he was truly mad due to his tragic life or pretended to be mad as a desperate method of avoiding normal expectations of social engagement or suspicion of being involved in anti-government activity. This was a long-established tradition in China (Cahill, 1989).[32] In this case, there is an ambiguity embedded in his works, which is an important feature of allegory. Also, the madness brings an oddness into his late paintings. The subjects he chose and the way he depicted them seem not to be strange; it is the brushstrokes and imagery that are odd. In his late works, Bada Shanren's brushstrokes are charged with a repressed passion, reminding audiences of another artist, Xu Wei. Also, when other artists in the same historical period focused on landscape, he depicted expressive plants and animals that had seldom been treated seriously ever since the Song Dynasty. According to Cahill (1989), these creatures in Bada's paintings convey a strong feeling of alienation

[31] This transition from Ren Renfa to Bada Shanren indicates a shift from a nuanced yet symbolically grounded allegory to a more complex, temporally layered mode. While Ren Renfa's work moves beyond straightforward symbolism to introduce a narrative depth, Bada Shanren's approach, surprisingly resonating with a postmodern sensibility of allegory, embraces a curvature of time that aligns with Walter Benjamin's concept of history as a non-linear, multi-dimensional space. Bada Shanren's work not only deepens the allegorical form but also introduces an interplay of past and present, creating an allegorical system that reflects a cyclical, enduring temporality. This will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

[32] See https://jamescahill.info/the-writings-of-james-cahill/cahill-lectures-and-papers/32-clp-12-1989-qthe-%20madness-in%20-bada-shanrens-paintingsq-published-in-asian-cultural-studies-hard-to-find-journal-no-17-march-%201989, retrieved November 18, 2024.

because ‘they do this in ways we have suggested, through their poses and expressions, through their relationships with their environments, through juxtapositions that violate normal pictorial syntax for an effect of incoherence.’[33] Also, the human features of his non-human subjects – such as the human eyes of mandarin fish – increase the sense of alienation by defamiliarising everyday objects. Therefore, a strangeness emerges from his paintings because the world he illustrates becomes alien to the audience – not fully comprehensible and yet pregnant with meaning, resulting in an audience looking at the familiar images without knowing where they come from. In this way, Bada Shanren’s madness might have enabled his work to gain a reception consonant with the modern era, even perhaps a surrealist feature, resonating with a world containing familiar images but coming to be potentially threatening.

As a *yimin* artist, Bada Shanren conducted his expression in a way similar to that of his ancestors in the Yuan period. However, his expression seems to be more implicit. Perhaps due to his having been a monk for many years, there was less resentment in his paintings and more puzzles waiting to be deciphered. His paintings, especially those in his late years, are ‘the products of a man of extraordinary intelligence, learning and experience who chose to communicate in a deliberately obscure language’ (Lee, 1990, p. 69). In order to conceal ‘fundamental issues that underlie his art,’ Bada Shanren ‘engaged his familiarity with the broad expanse of Chinese cultural history’ (Lee, 1990, p. 69).

In 1694, when Bada Shanren was 69 years old, he finished his twenty-two-leaf album with *anwan* (安晚) on the first leaf, which means ‘to comfort the late years’ (Lee, 1990, p. 69). On the sixth page of this album, Bada Shanren painted a mandarin fish (Figure 4, 1694). In this painting, oddness emerges beneath the calm demeanour of the fish gazing upward, resonating with a strong desire for expression constrained by equally formidable limitations. Meanwhile, Bada compresses the energy of his brushwork into tightly unified and self-contained forms (Cahil, 1989).[34] This sense of restrained energy is palpable even in the individual brushstrokes depicting the fish—strokes that move with deliberate slowness and a subtle twisting motion, yet maintain an unyielding intensity.

A poem is inscribed on the left:

> Left and right, what is this water?
> It is named Qu’e (the Grand Crooked).
> I go on seeking the place where the source enters,
> Perhaps there will be many beautiful clouds at sunset (Lee, 1990, p. 70).

[33] See https://jamescahill.info/the-writings-of-james-cahill/cahill-lectures-and-papers/32-clp-12-1989-qthe-madness-in-bada-shanrens-paintingsq-published-in-asian-cultural-studies-hard-to-find-journal-no-17-march-1989, retrieved November 18, 2024.

[34] See https://jamescahill.info/the-writings-of-james-cahill/cahill-lectures-and-papers/32-clp-12-1989-qthe-%20madness-in%20-bada-shanrens-paintingsq-published-in-asian-cultural-studies-hard-to-find-journal-no-17-march-%201989, retrieved November 18, 2024.

左右此何水？名之曰曲阿。

更求渊注处，料得晚霞多。

Figure 4

The Mandarin Fish

31.7x27.5 cm. By Bada Shanren, 1694, paining, ink on paper, located in Sen-oku Hakuko Kan, Kyoto, Japan.

In the first two sentences, the question and the answer alluded to a story in the book *A New Account of the Tales of the World* (世说新语), which greatly inspired Bada Shanren in his own writings (Lee, 1990, p. 70). The story depicted that when one day Xie Wan (321-361), whose brother was the famous prime minister Xie An (320-385), encountered Lake Qu'e, he asked his retinue the name of the body of water.[35] They replied, 'Lake Qu'e.' Xie Wan then said, 'Unquestionably the river should be accumulated and stored, only being injected by other rivers but not lost' (Liu, 2007, p.162).[36] If we put Xie Wan's answer into the philosophical and social background of the Wei-Jin periods (220-589), we could know Xie was implying Taoist concepts. *qu* (屈) means 'curve' or 'bent' in Chinese, while *e* (阿) refers to 'bent' or 'huge.' In this case, the river seemed to be named by its hugeness and curved bank. Xie Wan seemed familiar with the famous phrase in the twenty-second chapter of the *Tao Te Ching*, 'to be bent is to be whole' (Wang, 2011, p.58).[37] In Chinese, *qu* means both 'bend' and 'yield.' Perhaps what Xie Wan wanted to refer to was that people should be able to learn from this water, eclectic (曲) and profound (全), by playing with Taoist concepts.

Why did Bada Shanren use this reference in his poem? Perhaps not only did he want to express his

[35] Retinue (左右) can also be called left and right in Chinese, which resonates with Bada's poem.

[36] The original text of '…encountered Lake Qu'e, he asked his retinue the name of the body of water. They replied, 'Lake Qu'e.' Xie Wan then said, 'Unquestionably the river should be accumulated and stored, only being injected by other rivers but not lost' is '谢中郎经曲阿后湖，问左右:"此是何水?"答曰:"曲阿湖."谢曰:"故当渊注渟著,纳而不流."'

[37] The original text of 'to be bent is to be whole' is '曲则全.'

current yield to the Qing government, but he also related to another allusion. In *Annotation of a New Account of the Tales of the World* (世说新语笺疏), Liu Xiaobiao (462-521) writes how Qu'e got its name,

> Qu'e was originally named Yunyang. The First Emperor of Qin, believing that it contained the aura of a king, cut through the mountains of Bei Keng to weaken its potential, bending its straight paths and thus naming it Qu'e (2007, p.162).
>
> 曲阿原本名为云阳，秦始皇认为此地有王气，便开凿北坑山以破其势，将其直道截断，使其弯曲，因此得名“曲阿”。

This story behind Qu'e indicated the suppression of a potential new emperor. If we connect it to Bada Shanren's personal experience, we can understand that he was also using this story to suggest the destiny of the Ming – a dead dragon – from the name of Qu'e, or even imply himself as Qu'e because he had been a prince of the Ming Dynasty before it was conquered by the Manchus.

The first half of the poem offers audiences an entrance into the painting. In the painting, the object Bada Shanren chose – a mandarin fish – often appeared in his other paintings. In Chinese, the fish is called *guiyu* (鳜鱼, mandarin fish), while 'fish' has the same pronunciation as 'leftover' (余) in Chinese. In this way, the fish Bada Shanren painted might be understood as a self-portrait. In another dimension, '*gui*' in *guiyu* has the same pronunciation as 桂, which is the name of Emperor Yongli, the Prince of Gui. Connecting it to the lake called Qu'e, we might find that the fish also refers to the lost Emperor Yongli (1623-1662), who was defeated by the Qing Dynasty in 1659 and hanged in Kunming in 1662. In this way, the eye of the fish might imply dying with one's eyes open, a Chinese idiom, to present the miserable death of a former emperor.[38] Also, the fish should be swimming in the water. However, in this painting Bada Shanren only painted the fish, making the background totally blank. It might imply his loneliness during his monastic period. On the other hand, the blank background offers an endless and hopeless space to contain Bada Shanren's anger and sorrow at the demise of his country.

Let's come back to the poem again. In the first half of the poem, Bada Shanren depicted the lake called Qu'e, where the fish was swimming, implying it was a dead dragon, which is an allegory of the lost Ming Dynasty and himself. In the second half, the objects Bada Shanren used reminded audiences of the famous couplet written by the Tang Dynasty poet Wang Wei (701-761):

> I walk to where the water ends,
> Sitting to see the cloud rising (Wang, 2017, p. 128).
>
> 行到水穷处，坐看云起时。

[38] The original text of the idiom 'dying with one's eyes open' is '死不瞑目.'

Although there are some similarities in both poems, the significant difference is that Wang Wei reached 'where the water ends' while Bada Shanren, like a fish, lost his way swimming in the Qu'e, just like failing to answer a question that had little hope of being solved. However, in the last sentence of the poem, Bada Shanren gives his answer by providing a potential future with many beautiful clouds at sunset. In contrast to Wang Wei's poem, which gave a view of the rising of clouds in the morning, Bada Shanren depicted a future illustrating that those clouds would appear during the sunset, which was another critical allegorical object in the poem, as well as Qu'e.

Sunset is a common metaphor in Chinese poetry. An example is *Ascending the Pleasure-Traveling Terrace* (登乐游原), written by the Late Tang poet Li Shangyin (813-858):

> With twilight shadows in my heart,
> I have driven up among the Leyou Tombs.
> To see the sun, for all his glory,
> Buried by the coming night (Hengtangtuishi, 1929, p.73).
>
> 向晚意不适，驱车登古原。
> 夕阳无限好，只是近黄昏。

It was on the Pleasure-Traveling Terrace, a highland near the Tang Dynasty's capital, Chang'an, that Li wrote this poem. For the second half of the poem, there are several interpretations in Chinese academia. Ji Yun (1724-1805) commented on this poem by summarising it as follows: 'thousands of emotions are coming together; the poet is worrying about himself, as well as the fate of his country' (Liu, 2002, p. 324).[39] In this poem, the sadness of looking at the Tang Dynasty's decline is attached to the view of the sunset.

Like Li Shangyin, Bada Shanren seemed to present the same idea in his poem. In the second half of the poem – 'To see the sun, for all his glory; Buried by the coming night' – Bada Shanren depicted a scene when it was late in the day, and he wished to arrive at a place where he had never succeeded. The narrative became an allegory of his melancholy for the collapse of the Ming Dynasty and of his nostalgia (beautiful clouds) because it appeared he was aware that his life was approaching its end.

Remoteness and Concealment in Traditional Chinese Painting[40]

[39] The original text of 'thousands of emotions are coming together; the poet is worrying about himself, as well as the fate of his country' is '百感苍茫，一时交集，谓之怨身世可，谓之忧时事亦可.'

[40] This research takes a postmodern critical approach to time and history, guided by the concept of 'multiple temporalities' (Winders et al., 1993, p. 28). Postmodern temporality challenges the linear, chronological model of time that traditionally underpins historical narratives. Instead, it embraces a layered, non-linear understanding of time, where past, present, and future coexist and influence each other in dynamic and recursive ways. This approach recognises the coexistence of dominant, residual, and emergent cultural narratives, as theorised by

In Zheng's orchids, the absence of soil is not merely a symbol of loyalty but also a gesture to refuse articulating directly. Ren Renfa's lean horse, emaciated and fragile, transcends its visual representation to evoke an entire socio-political landscape in decay. Similarly, Bada Shanren's animals, with their enigmatic expressions and suspended gestures, resist interpretation as static symbols, offering instead a layered, dynamic allegorical field. Their images conceal their critical expressions, creating the remoteness for interpretation. Thus, their works become 'unobjectifiable,' which resonates with François Jullien's opinion on Chinese landscape painting, 'as the Chinese conceived it, everything converged to designate the landscape as the unobjectifiable par excellence, and that is why landscape painting so profoundly transformed Chinese painting, turning it away from the concern for resemblance… In that case, to paint is no longer to reproduce an (external) form, but to grasp the principle of internal organisation' (2012, p. 123).[41]

In fact, for landscape painting, 'in times when the human spirit seems to have burned most brightly the painting of landscape for its own sake did not exist and was unthinkable' (Clark, 1979, p. ix). For example, Wang Meng (1308-1385), painted the Qingbian Mountains, where he lived as a hermit.[42] In the painting *Dwelling in the Qingbian Mountains* (Figure 5, 1366), one can see continuous mountains with very few buildings on the left, where the artist's house seems to be located. Despite the buildings, the whole landscape demonstrates a feeling of remoteness, bringing a sense of the non-human era with few human subjects. This allows Wang Meng's painting to formulate a Chinese allegory different from a Western one. The Western model of allegory deconstructs historical symbols and is pre-eminently a kind of experience from which modernity arises (Benjamin, 1998), while allegory in traditional Chinese painting is a disavowal of modernity. For example, the scenes with little human engagement, such as buildings, but without the appearance of human beings, created pre-human, non-human, and post-human time registers, emphasising the importance of nature and rejecting

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Raymond Williams (1977), and resists the totalising impulse to reduce history to a single, orderly progression. In this context, the comparison of Yuan literati painters and Qing loyalist monk-painters is not organised chronologically or art-historically because the chapter does not aim to trace a linear development of style or influence. Instead, these artists and their practices are viewed as interconnected through allegory, which operates across time as a critical mode of representation. Allegory, in this framework, disrupts temporal hierarchies by allowing artists to engage with ideological, political, and cultural themes that transcend specific historical moments. This non-linear methodology reflects Jameson's view of allegory as a structure that resists closure and incorporates multiple temporalities into its interpretative framework (2020). It also aligns with Winders' argument that postmodern culture undermines the ideology of linear chronology by foregrounding the complexity and multiplicity of lived experiences of time (1993). By adopting this perspective, the chapter positions these artistic traditions as part of an ongoing dialogue, where allegory serves as the bridge that connects their ideological and representational strategies across time, which will still be suitable for the repressive present and my own practice. Meanwhile, this approach also applies to my later chapters.

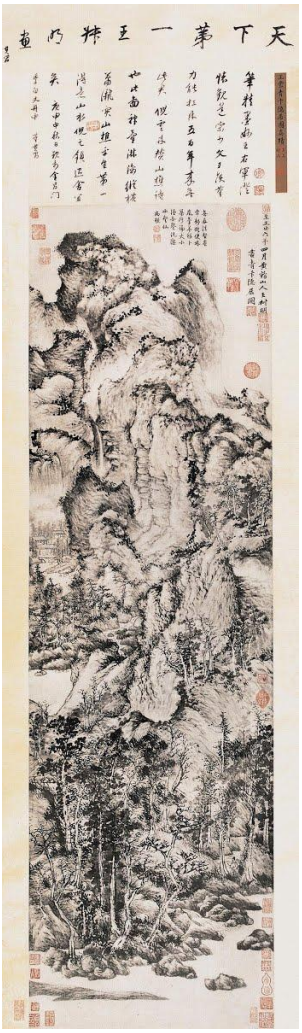
[41] By transitioning to an exploration of landscape painting, the discussion of allegory can gain further theoretical clarity through remoteness and concealment. Landscape painting's emphasis on relationality—where elements exist not in isolation but in dialogue with each other and the viewer—mirrors the allegorical structures in the works of Zheng, Ren, and Bada. In landscape painting, the mountain and water are not objects to be admired but processes to be experienced, much like the fragmented and layered meanings in Zheng, Ren, and Bada's paintings. This relational, non-hierarchical approach challenges a fixed, symbolic system, offering instead a fluid, participatory model of meaning-making. Also, by situating their allegorical works within the concept of landscape, this discussion offers a pathway to integrate these strategies into my own painting practice, where remoteness, concealment, and the interplay of presence and absence become tools for engaging with the complexities of contemporary cultural and political expression.

[42] Richard Ellis Vinograd believes that in the early stage of the landscape of eremitism, the hermit theme was more than the avoiding of turbulent times or dark political environments instead of the attraction of nature or eremitism (Vinograd, 1982).

technology.

Figure 5

Dwelling in the Qingbian Mountains



140.6x42.2 cm. By Wang Meng, 1366, painting, ink on paper, located in Shanghai Museum, Shanghai, China.

This type of remoteness could be found in most of Wang Meng's paintings, where almost no people have been painted. The rocks and mountains will always be there while the humans pass through, reverberating with the presence and giving those landscape paintings a contemporary reference of cosmic time, which makes audiences realise their smallness in the river of time.[43]

In Wang Meng's painting, we can find a sense of temporality and ambiguity, which also resonates with Dong Yuan's practice. When François Jullien was analysing the landscape of Dong Yuan, he wrote:

[43] I use 'presence' here to correspond to the remoteness mentioned in the last paragraph.

> In painting between 'there is' and 'there is not,' he grants access not to what 'things' might be in themselves – the 'in-itself,' the essence – but to the process in constant transition that ceaselessly brings about and at the same time covers over (Jullien, 2012, p. 3).

In this way, expression in Chinese paintings is much more complex than the image itself. In practice, Chinese literati artists had no intention of bringing forth the presence of the picture. In contrast, they tended to hide their expression between 'there is' and 'there is not,' which is why they always concealed. In order to conceal, Chinese literati artists tried to avoid two extremes: presence and absence. Presence will eliminate all the secrets in the painting, while absence gives no clues but lets the image become nothingness. In this way, Chinese literati artists were intrigued by the methods of concealment and also regarded it as an advanced aesthetic taste.[44]

Figure 6

Partial of *Nine Dragons*

46.8x1496.5 cm. By Chen Rong, 1304, painting, ink and colour on paper, located in Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, United States.

Concealment is a core practical method in traditional Chinese painting. It does not only exist in the process of making, such as Bada Shanren's blank background in his mandarin fish painting, but also hides inside the objects chosen before making a painting, such as Ren Renfa's use of horses to represent corrupt officials. Concealment allows audiences to engage by imagining the painter's expression through clues inside paintings. For example, in *Nine Dragons* (Figure 6) by Chen Rong

[44] In *Small Comments on Painting* (绘事微言), Tang Zhiqi (1579-1651) wrote: 'When painting overlapping peaks and layered cliffs, the paths, villages, and temples should be faintly visible. This not only clarifies the sense of distance but also creates endless fascination. If the hidden parts of the painting outnumber the visible ones, the fascination becomes even more boundless. For above one layer lies another, and within each layer, yet another is concealed. Those skilled in hiding do not entirely avoid revealing, and those skilled in revealing do not entirely avoid hiding. When concealment is done masterfully, viewers cannot discern how much space or how many trees lie before or behind, to the left or right of the mountains. Thus, the painting appears even more vast and mysterious.' (1985, p.15). The original text is '画叠嶂层崖，其路径村落寺宇，能分得隐见明白，不但远近之理了然，且趣味无尽矣。更能藏处多于露处，而趣味愈无尽矣。盖一层之上更有一层，层层之中复藏一层。善藏者未始不露，善露者未始不藏。藏得妙时，便使观者不知山前山后，山左山右，有多少地步，许多林木，何尝不显.'

(1200-1206), the dragon, a mysterious creature representing power, when depicted very clearly without any concealment, looks boring because all the information could be captured quickly, while if some parts of it are hidden in the clouds, the remote and ambiguous shape will make the painting more interesting because the absence of information drives audiences to think about the hidden features: what its claw looks like, or how many other dragons are hiding in the shadows, or even why the dragons were painted in this style and what was behind this representation. In this way, the concealment in the painting is a presence without presentation. It accepts the absence and extends it into a more allegorical way of presenting, enabling 'there is' and 'there is not' at the same time in the painting, which becomes an invitation to audiences to think beyond the painting itself, to breathe with the artists and feel the emotions they had when creating the painting.

One important method of concealment is leaving a blank. In Bada's *Mandarin Fish*, the blank background implies his helpless swimming in the endless river, such a method is called 'leaving a blank (留白).' It offers a space for audiences to breathe in the painting and think about it. Meanwhile, the artists could also use blanks to imply the expressions they refuse to make directly. The blank is not only a lack of information, but also a way to offer more information from the audience's thinking and imagination. The blank is the absence, but it still has an allegorical relationship with the presence by – as I wrote before – 'creating a space of engagement for the audiences along with the objects depicted in the painting.'

Also, leaving a blank could be found in the inscribed poems as empty words, which resonates with the idea that image and poetry are two aspects of the extension of literati's spirits. Wang Wei (701-761), a poet of the Tang Dynasty, made paintings through writing because, in his poems, he usually depicted scenes without directly expressing any personal emotion. The poem 'On a Mission to the Frontier' could be an example of leaving both a blank and empty words:

> A single carriage goes to the frontier; An envoy crosses northwest mountains high.
> Like tumbleweed I leave the fortress drear; As wild geese I come under Tartarian sky.
> In boundless desert lonely smoke rises straight; Over the endless river the sun sinks round.
> I meet a cavalier at the camp gate; In northern fort the general will be found (Xu, 2012, p. 34).
>
> 单车欲问边，属国过居延。
> 征蓬出汉塞，归雁入胡天。
> 大漠孤烟直，长河落日圆。
> 萧关逢候骑，都护在燕然。

This poem describes the scenes Wang Wei encountered during his trip to the frontier, and his depictions are like brushstrokes on the canvas. In the fifth and sixth sentences, Wang Wei situated a scene that could be regarded as leaving a blank because of the empty background; an endless river, a round sun, and lonely rising smoke are the only three elements in the desert. Wang Wei seems to

compare himself to these desolate images, as well as to tumbleweed and geese, indicating his loneliness and depression in his career. He appears to be inside the scene, but the objective description without any emotion allows a sense of alienation to emerge, as if he is outside as an observer, which brings an emptiness into his poem. Wang Wei did not take advantage of writing to express his emotions directly through words. Instead, he behaved like a painter, creating an emptiness by simply depicting scenes constituted by images, inviting audiences to resonate with his works and come to their own conclusions. At this moment, writing and painting could be regarded as the double side of a mirror in traditional Chinese culture because of the same mode of representation.

In addition, leaving a blank is not only a practical method but also leads those practices into a spiritual dimension. The blankness refers to the void, whereas painted images refer to the filled. Laozi believes that the void is more real than the filled because the void is the reason for all. Without the existence of the void, nothing can grow, and then there is no vitality of life. The representation of this cosmology in art is to leave a blank (or, in poetry, empty words), which could create a void/emptiness to contain the allegorical objects and poems. Together with allegorical objects and the poem inscribed, they become a model that brings traditional Chinese painting into an allegorical dimension.[45]

Emptiness and Indirect Speech in Chinese Art

By avoiding expressing themselves too clearly, the Chinese literati allowed their works to survive as a form of passive resistance under the political censorship imposed by an autocratic regime. Because of implicit speech, artists created an emptiness through their works, which acted as a container to simultaneously hide and reveal their emotions. Such emptiness brings their paintings into an abstract and spiritual dimension beyond representation.

As for the practice, Chinese literati artists loved to connect the virtues of natural things with human

[45] The objects chosen by literati artists were often allegorical. One reason is that most Chinese artists did not have the habit of drawing from nature. On the contrary, they had viewed mountains and lakes before returning to the studio and then depicting what they had in mind and felt. In this way, it was easier for them to embed a particular spirit in the images they drew, which also allowed them to imply their feelings instead of expressing them directly because of the transformation process from nature to a highly subjective image. This method might originate from a classic expressive model in ancient Chinese literature: *fu* (赋), *bi* (比) and *xing* (兴), translated by Stephen Owen as 'exposition,' 'comparison,' and 'affective image' in his book Readings in Chinese Literary Thought (1996, p. 198). *fu* means describing an object directly, *bi* means comparing it to another object, and *xing* means delivering an inner expression of the artist from an object. In literature, *fu, bi,* and *xing* are methods only the writer can use. However, in painting, they could be regarded as a collaboration between artists and audiences. Let's use a painting in the case studies as an example in order to understand this process. In Ink Orchid, Zheng Sixiao painted an orchid. This process is *fu*, depicting the object directly. Then the orchid without roots reminds audiences of the artist, who had lost his home country, which could be regarded as *bi*. Unlike in literature, *bi* happens in the audience's imagination after reading the painting instead of in the artist's depiction. Gathering all the information together, the audience would understand the artist's emotions: helplessness, anger, and frustration, and this process is *xing*. If 'leaving a blank' establishes a space for the audience and 'allegorical objects' are the clues for the audience, the poem inscribed is the hint and the narrative. Imagine Bada Shanren's mandarin fish without the poem; we would not be able to understand it correctly because of the lack of cultural reference. The poem allows artists to explain their feelings in an abstract literary way as allegorical writing. The poem intends to reveal and be revealed simultaneously: it expresses the urgency to indicate the nature of the painting while also waiting for audiences to uncover its secrets before it starts to function. It bridges the gap between the present and the past, enabling an audience in the distant future to still have access to traditional paintings.

virtues (Cheng, 1994, p. 78). In this case, it could be known that the non-human subjects in paintings might always have an allegorical implication. In literati paintings, plants, animals, and landscapes indicate the current spiritual situation of artists and produce a distance between audiences and creators. Reality is often depicted in the images, while another dimension of reality, the spiritual one, hides in the emptiness through implicit speech. Therefore, Chinese painters did not paint 'there is' or 'there is not' – what they paid attention to was the 'between.' A space emerged in the 'between,' like the balance of yin and yang. The more ambiguous the space is, the more information could be contained inside it with fewer subjects. Every element in the painting is situated in a state of uncertainty.

The only thing Chinese literati artists wanted to depict and show to the audience is, in my view, the process of transformation. The subjects in literati paintings are often without the engagement of human beings. However, the expressions inside them are always about humans. For example, Zheng Sixiao's orchid means the virtue of a moral model, and Wang Meng's landscapes, especially mountains and water, offer a Xanadu in the artist's heart. Although Chinese literati artists did not give a clear definition of their emotions in their paintings, they intended to raise the presence of their feelings allegorically in the process of the continuous oscillation between absence and presence.

In other words, absence and presence lead to the same destination in Chinese painting: the cosmos. The painting is not merely aiming to be an 'aesthetic object' but also wishes to become a 'microcosm that is itself creative in the manner of the macrocosm' (Cheng, 1994, p. 62). The painting provides another world in the artist's imagination, as an escape (or even a utopia) from the unsatisfying current, and a burst for the tremendous expressions of artists. In the cosmos artists created, the emptiness brings the withdrawal of meaning and then fills information into absolute nothingness with allegory.

With regard to emptiness, it contains every emotion, even everything, in a *huntun* (混沌, chaos), which is like the original form of the universe before the Big Bang.[46] After the great explosion, a continuous transformation happens, allowing all the meanings and emotions to come out from the painting and reach the audience. Suppose the painting is the gravitational singularity; all the brushstrokes and colours are embedded in a dot. When the painting is viewed, all the elements emerge and then return to the dot after being looked at.

If the process is connected to Taoism, the emptiness is the cosmos, the beginning of the transformation from absence to presence, then from presence to absence. The transformation, or differentiation, begins and recedes simultaneously as a deconstruction of the complication. In the spiritual world, Chinese literati artists did not depict the spectacular scene of the origin of the cosmos, nor did they believe in a God who created the world. Without the distraction of the visual legends, literati compressed their spirit into the emptiness, the beginning of everything. Therefore, the emptiness is Tao. 'The way (Tao) begets one; One begets two; Two begets three; Three begets the

[46] In Chinese philosophy, *hundun* (混沌) represents a primal, undifferentiated state, embodying both chaos and potentiality. It signifies a form of creative ambiguity, where distinctions between entities are dissolved, echoing Daoist principles of unity beyond binary oppositions. In this sense, *hundun* not only serves as a metaphor for the cosmos before order but also symbolises the generative essence that underlies existence, positioning ambiguity as foundational to understanding. For more on *hundun*, see Norman J. Girardot*, Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism: The Theme of Chaos (hun-tun) (*1992).

myriad creatures' (Laozi, 1963, p. 103).

To conclude, the indirect speech embedded in traditional Chinese painting formulated an emptiness, allowing the literati to embed their expressions inside it and enabling audiences to understand those expressions when analysing them. Emptiness, which could be regarded as a container of allegory, is an essential heritage from the traditional.

I believe that indirect speech and emptiness are still in the blood of Chinese art and that they have been utilised in contemporary Chinese paintings unconsciously by current artists without a clear awareness, definition, or theorisation. They are still the primary methods used when undertaking political expression, helping artists express something that cannot be spoken. In this case, regarding these as allegorical methods and deploying them theoretically in artworks becomes urgent for contemporary Chinese artists, which will be discussed in the later chapters.

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Chapter 2
An Incomplete Modernity and Disavowal of Modernism: Allegory in Chinese Painting After the Cultural Revolution

Unlike traditional Chinese literati painting, which was primarily influenced by ancient Chinese literature and philosophy, contemporary Chinese art embodies a fusion of various cultures, approaches, and ideologies. In fact, a broken modernity exists within it. Due to the political disruption caused by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), China did not embrace Western art until the beginning of the Reform and Opening-up period in 1978, when Western ideologies and cultures inundated China.[47] Young Chinese artists began creating art based on Western theories, such as existentialism, since the Cultural Revolution had all but eradicated traditional Chinese culture and led the Chinese intelligentsia to question its cultural identity.

As a result, many artists rejected traditional Chinese culture and turned to Western cultures and ideologies as substitutes until the 1990s, when debates about Chinese cultural identity re-emerged. This prompted Chinese artists to re-evaluate the relationship between art, history, and identity, which was a necessary precondition for revisiting the catastrophes caused by the Cultural Revolution. Allegorising the post-Revolutionary period allowed artistic representation to become a dual narrative, both revolutionary and anti-revolutionary. In this context, emptiness, implicit speech, and other allegorical techniques employed by the Chinese literati confronted challenges within a more contemporary setting.

This chapter is structured mainly into three sections. By examining the works of three generations of political artists, the chapter aims to ascertain the degree and nature of the Cultural Revolution and Western culture's impact on Chinese allegorical painting in the post-Cultural Revolution period, as well as the allegorical impulse embedded within China's fragmented and discontinuous modernity.

The Transition to Chinese Late Modernity[48]

[47] Before that, Chinese art could be regarded as isolated with the Western (and cultural) world for several decades (Jia, 1997)

[48] Gao Minglu's perspective on modernity, as discussed in *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (2011, pp. 1-29), aligns more with an aesthetic and philosophical concept than merely a time period. He argues that in the Chinese context, modernity is not just a sequential phase following the Euro-American narrative from premodern to modern and then postmodern. Instead, it represents a permanent condition of contemporaneity, defined by a specific time and space and the cultural and societal choices made within that framework. For Gao, Chinese modernity is a consciousness that transcends traditional temporal logic, focusing instead on the specific historical and cultural conditions of China. He suggests that for the Chinese, the term 'modern' has often been associated with the notion of a new nation, rather than a new epoch. This concept of modernity in China is deeply connected to national, cultural, and political identities, forming a unique interpretation of modernity that is closely tied to the experiences and transformations within the nation. Extending this discussion, Kang Liu's examination of the aesthetic dimensions of modernity in the Chinese context further complements Gao's views by indicating the critical role aesthetics plays in interrogating and shaping modernity (2000, pp. 1-36). Liu argues that aesthetics provides an essential critique of the modern condition, exploring how artistic and cultural expressions not only reflect but also challenge and redefine the evolving

In the early 20th century, China's process of modernisation was far behind that of the West, primarily due to its tumultuous circumstances and ongoing conflicts such as the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901), the Warlord Era (1916-1928), and the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). Moreover, the autocratic rule of the Qing Dynasty and the royal family's corruption stifled China's ability to capitalise on the Second Industrial Revolution (1870-1914). It was not until the Reform and Opening-up initiative that China could finally embrace cultural modernity and economic modernisation. However, the progress of artistic modernity in China has been persistently disrupted by political interference.

Even before the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Mao Zedong (1893-1976) urged artists to connect with and educate the masses in his 1942 speech, *Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art*. Mao wrote: 'We should take over the rich legacy and the good tradition in literature and art that have been handed down from past ages in China and foreign countries, but the aim must still be to serve the masses of the people. Nor do we refuse to utilise the literary and artistic forms of the past, but in our hands, these old forms, remoulded and infused with new content, also become something revolutionary in the service of people' (Ryor, 2001, p. 21). This discourse, which

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socio-political landscape. By integrating the aesthetic discourse into the broader narrative of modernity, Liu reinforces the notion that modernity in China is a multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be understood solely through Western paradigms but must be approached through a synthesis of critical theory and cultural analysis. For my research, I approach the concept of modernity as dynamic and qualitative, drawing on Peter Osborne's philosophy, which regards modernity not as a fixed period but as a fluid, self-transcending historical consciousness. Osborne's argument in *Modernity is a Qualitative, Not a Chronological Category* (1992) posits that modernity transcends rigid chronological boundaries, emphasising instead a mode of experience marked by the distinct awareness of the present as discontinuous with the past. This awareness drives an ongoing redefinition of cultural, social, and political identities rather than confining them within a singular historical epoch. I adopt this view in my work, positioning modernity and late modernity as evolving modes rather than time-bound eras. In my research, therefore, the concept of time is not the traditional Western modernist view as the 'present' or 'modern.' For the People's Republic of China (PRC), modernity aligns with attempts at modernisation, initially centred on economic and cultural ambitions. Following Osborne's idea of modernity as encompassing multiple, non-contemporaneous temporalities, Chinese modernity developed uniquely, often later than its Western counterpart, due to its distinct socio-political conditions and encounters with colonial and capitalist forces. After the establishment of the PRC, early efforts toward economic and cultural modernity were embodied in initiatives like the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) and the Cultural Revolution, each aiming to transform the nation's industrial and ideological landscape. However, both movements ultimately failed to realise their modernising goals, resulting in what I refer to in this dissertation as 'broken modernity.' These failures left an enduring impact, suggesting a period of disillusionment and the recognition of the complexities involved in achieving a truly modern nation. Following the Cultural Revolution, this 'broken modernity' set the stage for what I define as 'late modernity' in China, beginning with the Reform and Opening-up in 1978, when artists were still seeking 'modernity' in their works because of the 'broken modernity.' During this period, China embarked on significant economic reforms and cultural shifts, re-engaging with modernisation but from a position that acknowledged the fractured legacy of previous attempts. This shift embodies Osborne's notion of modernity as an open-ended, self-redefining project that carries forward past ambitions and failures, striving to reimagine modernity in light of new social, political, and economic aspirations. By situating late modernity in China within these contexts, I argue for a layered understanding of modernity that respects the unique trajectory of Chinese history, especially the history after the Cultural Revolution. Late modernity here not only reflects a global structure of modern experience but also resonates distinctly within the Chinese context, shaped by internal challenges and external pressures. This exploration is essential in establishing a foundation for a future-oriented 'contemporary.' Unlike Western modernity, which often follows a linear progression, examining Chinese modernity requires an intricate re-examination—a process of coming to terms with a history that resists linear organisation and is marked by complexities and discontinuities. Following Osborne's concept in *Anywhere or Not at All* (2013), where contemporary art emerges through an engagement with unresolved histories, my approach draws on this framework as a foundation. This basis allows for an exploration of recent history that is not merely sequential but resonates with allegorical depth, critically engaging with China's old and new memory systems. This layered approach opens a nuanced pathway within Chinese contemporary art, inviting a reflective engagement within an evolving global landscape.

underscored the political and educational functions of art, influenced China's visual arts until 1978, when Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) initiated the Reform and Opening-up, which facilitated the influx of foreign ideas, people, and cultures into China, as well as global capitalism and the international art market (Ryor, 2001, p. 21). This shift enabled artists who had endured their childhood during the Cultural Revolution to access the means to contemplate and reflect on the political repression they faced, both in their lives and in their art.

In fact, Chinese art – particularly the art created following the establishment of the PRC – inherently bore the responsibility of political propaganda and education, akin to the situation in the Soviet Union. The Cultural Revolution, which lasted from 1966 to 1976, saw this phenomenon reach its climax: modern art was officially prohibited from exhibition and publication, while only propagandistic art was permitted during this period of political fervour (Wu, 2011, p. 36). After the Cultural Revolution, the death of Mao Zedong and the rise of Deng Xiaoping led to economic development and increased openness towards foreign countries, especially the West. Consequently, Chinese artists were able to employ Western painting methods and techniques, as well as to appropriate Cultural Revolution imagery, in order to express a complex sentiment — a blend of a tragic past, represented by the Cultural Revolution, and an uncertain future, marked by the impact of sudden changes from economic reforms and 'the growing dominance of a capitalist economy and foreign influences' (Ryor, 2001, p. 28).

In February 1979, Jiang Feng (1910-1983), Chairman of the Chinese National Artists' Association, encouraged artists to form artists' groups for greater diversity during the opening speech of the New Spring Exhibition in Beijing's Zhongshan Park (Van Dijk, 1991). Subsequently, unofficial art re-emerged, sparking a nationwide avant-garde movement around the mid-1980s called the 85 New Wave, during which 'more than a hundred "avant-garde" art groups and societies emerged all over the country' (Wu, 2011, p. 36). However, the situation shifted after 1990, as the energy of a mass movement dissipated, giving way to 'numerous individual and smaller-scale experiments' (Wu, 2011, p. 37).

In this chapter, I will categorise Chinese painters after the Cultural Revolution into three generations inspired by Li Xianting's research (1991). The first generation comprised the 'educated youth,' who received art education rooted in Socialist Realism during their childhood and experienced psychological trauma during the Cultural Revolution.[49] The second generation, born in the mid and late 1950s, embraced modern currents of Western culture and philosophy, including the works of Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and Nietzsche. They were exposed to Western ideologies and theories during their university education in the early 1980s. The third generation differs from the first two; born in the 1960s, they graduated in the late 1980s, around the time of the Tiananmen Square incident.

It can be argued that an allegorical impulse runs throughout contemporary Chinese art, particularly in works from the second and third generations and beyond. According to Craig Owens, allegory possesses the 'capacity to rescue from historical oblivion that which threatens to disappear' (Owens, 1980, p. 68). Although the objects of the allegorical impulse that Owens examines differ from mine,

[49] 'Educated youth,' also known as 'sent-down youth' or 'rusticated youth' (知识青年), were young people who, from the 1950s through the culmination of the Cultural Revolution, either voluntarily or by force, relocated from urban centres in the People's Republic of China to rural regions. This migration was part of the Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement (Cao, 2023).

there is a similarity between them. During the relentless upheavals in the first 40 years following the establishment of the PRC, Chinese modernity became fragmented or even shattered, leaving behind a challenging context in which to maintain a coherent sense of aesthetic theory. Unlike Western modernity, which has a continuous history dating from the Industrial Revolution, Chinese modernity is perpetually caught in a cycle of destruction and reconstruction, during which the past and old memories are rejected in favour of new ones. However, memory and tradition cannot vanish entirely; they linger deep within individuals' hearts. Consequently, an allegorical impulse emerges in those works that evoke a connection to the past.[50]

By examining these three generations of artists and their works, this chapter explores allegory and the allegorical impulse in modern and contemporary Chinese political painting, thereby addressing the discontinuity of aesthetic theory in Chinese painting after the Cultural Revolution.

Scar Painting: Witnesses of the Cultural Revolution[51]

Between 1979 and 1989, before the Tiananmen protests occurred, the art milieu in China was unprecedentedly free, thanks to the Reform and Opening-up policy. At that time, Chinese painting experienced a global exchange of aesthetic ideas due to the neglect of tradition and the cultural nihilism that emerged after the Cultural Revolution.[52] Tradition was pushed aside and left no room in Chinese traditional art. Simultaneously, a nationalist fear of classical tradition arose, leading to the disappearance of implicit nature in Chinese painting. Although some artists looked back 'beyond

[50] A notable gap in this field arises from the discontinuous nature of modernity in modern Chinese painting. When a new movement began, it was common for it to criticise and reject the preceding one, making it challenging to establish a connection between the three major movements – Scar Painting, Rational Painting, and Cynical Realism – as a continuous progression. However, I argue that an underlying desire for political expression could serve as a unifying factor among these movements, and it is the key for Chinese art to step into a new modernism.

[51] My decision to focus on Scar Painting over The Stars (星星画会) and No Name Group (无名画会) is informed by each movement's political approach and expressive suitability for the present context. As Gao Minglu notes, 'the Stars was a loosely organised collective that was quickly formed to hold exhibitions. The group's artistic concepts and techniques were highly diverse and inconsistent. A few artists, such as Wang Keping, Qu Leilei, Huang Rui, and Ma Desheng, leaned towards socially engaged themes, while the majority of the artists' works tended towards abstract forms and Western modernist styles like expressionism' (2023, p. 66). Also, the direct approach in the Star Art Exhibition, characterised by 'raw emotional expression and the youth's passion' (p. 68), contrasts with the more nuanced, allegorical expression that I aim to explore. Meanwhile, although the No Name Group carried a political undertone because their principle of 'art for art's sake' embodied a depoliticised form of political expression, compared to Scar Painting, their approach lacks the melancholia of history that is crucial for the development of allegory. In contrast, Scar Painting's melancholic reflections on the scars left by the Cultural Revolution provide a foundation for allegory, as defined by Walter Benjamin. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (2009), Benjamin describes melancholia as the 'soil' from which allegory emerges, seeing it not merely as an expression of personal sorrow but as a profound engagement with historical trauma and the fragments left by rupture. For Benjamin, melancholia—a mourning play or Trauerspiel—serves as a reflective, even contemplative, state that allows for the slow emergence of allegory, which he understands as a fragmented, layered form of representation. This notion resonates deeply within Scar Painting, where the artists' grappling with the lingering pain of the Cultural Revolution forms a fertile ground for indirect, layered critique. The melancholic tone in these works thus fosters a reflective distance, essential for an allegorical mode of expression that negotiates memory and loss subtly, exploring the tensions within a cultural context that restricts direct articulation.

[52] There have been two major rejections of tradition in the history of China. The first one is the New Culture Movement in the early 20th century, which cancelled the traditional education system, and the second is the Cultural Revolution, which erased literati nature.

Cultural Revolution art and the officially sanctioned Socialist Realism of the post-1949 period' (Ryor, 2001, p. 28) to traditional Chinese painting and culture, I argue that these painters merely employed the format and skills of traditional Chinese painting while ignoring the core idea of literati painting: emptiness as allegorical nature. Chinese painting during this time was transformed by the continuous influx of Soviet Realism and Western art, theories, and ideologies, ultimately becoming increasingly direct and full.

After the Cultural Revolution ended, mainstream Chinese painting focused on criticising and reflecting upon the tragic years from 1966 to 1976.[53] The emergence of the first generation of painters occurred right after the end of the Cultural Revolution following the reopening of art schools in 1977 and their subsequent expansion (Wu, 2014, p. 39). Due to Socialist Realism art education and the trauma endured during the Cultural Revolution, these artists began questioning the nature of truth and goodness in human beings. Their works, defined as Scar Paintings, often used themes such as 'scars,' 'homelands,' and 'roots' to depict individual destinies with a sense of melancholia rather than the heroic soldiers or workers who predominantly appeared in artworks during the Cultural Revolution. They imbued their realistic paintings with sympathy for those who had suffered and with sensitivity to the darkness of society, marking the beginning of the Chinese avant-garde. Interestingly, in contrast to the Western avant-garde, which radically separated itself from the conservative art academy, these Chinese artists emerged from major art academies such as the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, the Hangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, and the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts in Chongqing (Wu, 2014; Andrews, 1994). Official art institutions 'have nourished generations of young, daring artists who first discovered their artistic individuality,' enabling art students — the first-generation artists after the Cultural Revolution — to 'both critique and reinvent a long academic tradition rooted in realism' (Wu, 2014, p. 40). Their paintings were deliberately political and resonated with the darkest period in Chinese history. They wanted their works to be 'weighty' with 'heart-wrenching pictorial narratives and historical significance' (Wu, 2014, p. 40).

In the early stages of Scar Painting (1976-1979), artists often portrayed the suffering of people during the national movement of the Cultural Revolution through realistic painting (Soviet Realism), influenced by traditional art education in institutions.[54] In Gao Xiaohua's (b. 1955) 1978 piece, *Why?* (Figure 7, 1978) – which might mark the beginning of the Scar Painting Movement – three young male Red Guards are depicted sitting on the ground at the right of the composition while a girl lies with a torn Red Guards flag covering her legs, which may be injured. The scene appears to be set after a battle between Red Guards, as evidenced by the bullet shells on the ground. Regarding the background story, Wu Hung writes,

> As soon as the Cultural Revolution started, different factions in the Red Guards fought for political legitimacy and power, even though they had all vowed to follow Mao's

[53] Francesca Dal Lago writes that there were roughly two art groups that referenced the Cultural Revolution. The first group involved 'quoting directly from the visual culture of the time,' while the second group featured 'art that refers to this period through the legacy of violence and iconoclasm experienced during those chaotic years' (2011, p. 32). The former mode directly utilised images from posters associated with the Cultural Revolution – images of workers, peasants, and soldiers, as well as portrayals of Mao. The latter employed a more complex mode to allegorically discuss the trauma experienced during the Cultural Revolution. Both methods were deeply influenced by Soviet Realism.

[54] In this chapter, I will mainly study artists working at the Sichuan Academy of Arts in Chongqing.

leadership. Their struggle escalated to fully fledged military confrontations in 1967 and 1968, with estimated national casualties of between 300,000 and 500,000. Chongqing suffered one of the most massive outbreaks of violence. Growing up in the southwestern city, Gao Xiaohua was familiar with this historical episode, and his painting resurrects his memory with acute personal intimacy (2014, p. 41).

Figure 7

Why?

108x136cm. By Gao Xiaohua, 1978, painting, oil on canvas, located in The National Art Museum of China, Beijing, China.

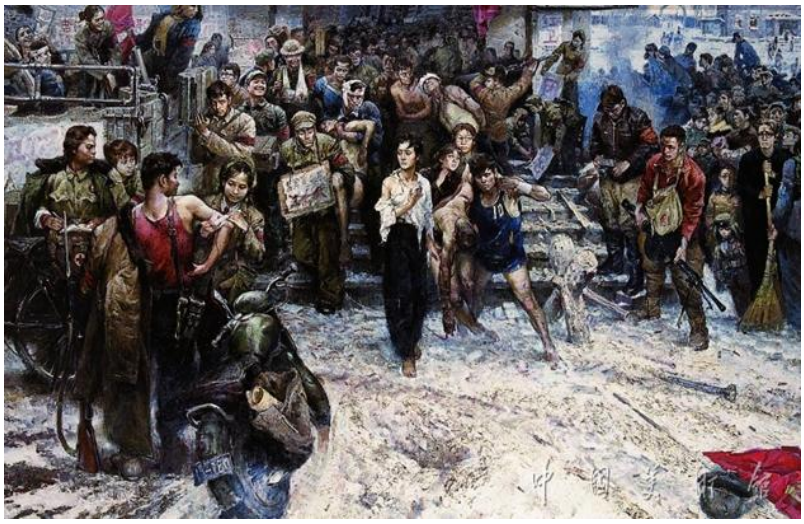
Gao's painting features ambiguous facial expressions for the four individuals, leaving viewers uncertain as to whether they are pensive, lost, numb, or desperate.[55] These facial expressions humanise the Red Guards, presenting them as ordinary people rather than the heroic soldiers portrayed in other paintings and posters during the Cultural Revolution. When *Why?* was created in

[55] During an interview with Yu Ke in 2012, Gao Xiaohua explains his motivation for Scar Painting and his work *Why?*, highlighting the profound impact of his personal experiences and the historical traumas of the Cultural Revolution. Central to his artistic focus is the theme of 'armed conflict' (武斗), which he saw as emblematic of the era's social collapse and moral decay (p. 24). Gao described these conflicts as a manifestation of uncontrolled societal chaos, directly contributing to the post-Cultural Revolution crisis of faith in ideology, morality, and authority. He believed that exposing the brutal realities of these events through his art was essential for critiquing the contradictions of the Cultural Revolution, as the visceral impact of visual imagery often surpassed textual narratives. Through his work, he sought to expose deception, conspiracy, ignorance, and tragedy in a way that provoked reflection and awareness. Gao's personal history, particularly his youth in Chongqing during the Cultural Revolution, served as a significant source of inspiration. He recalled witnessing the violent clashes that turned his city into what he likened to a modern warzone. His family's political background left them vulnerable—his father was under investigation, and his mother worked tirelessly as a military doctor in a hospital caught in the crossfire of opposing factions. Expelled from school as a 'dog's spawn' (狗崽子) (p. 22), Gao faced a precarious existence, shielding his younger siblings while enduring the horrors of war and social ostracism. These experiences haunted him for years, surfacing in nightmares and compelling him to document these memories through his art. His paintings became a form of catharsis and critique, confronting the dehumanising effects of the Cultural Revolution.

1978, both society and the Chinese art world were still in a post-Cultural Revolution state, as Boluan Fanzheng, or 'bringing order out of chaos and returning to the rectitude (of the past)' (Barmé, 1993), occurred in December of that year (Quan, 2019). Gao used his art to question the Cultural Revolution, which had brought immense suffering to China's youth, by depicting the Red Guards as tired and lonely after a fierce battle. Gao aimed to demythologise the sacred role of the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, showing that they were merely humans like everyone else. Through the title of his painting, Gao inquires *why* and expresses helplessness and sadness for the ignorance of the people under the God-creation Movement.[56]

Figure 8

Snow on X Day X Month, 1968



196x296 cm. By Chen Conglin, 1979, painting, oil on canvas, located in The National Art Museum of China, Beijing, China.

As the starting point of the Scar Painting Movement, *Why?* demonstrates that first-generation artists began to shift their focus from the grand narratives popular during the Cultural Revolution (Li, 1992) to individual destinies. They used stories of ordinary people to critique the nation, resonating with Fredric Jameson's famous assertion that 'the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the third-world public culture and society' (Jameson, 1986, p. 69). Since the Scar Painting Movement took place in the late 1970s, before the West significantly influenced Chinese art, it still relied on Soviet Realism for its expressions and techniques. Scar Painting adopted a 'realistic, and sometimes dramatic and romantic style until recently used for propaganda art' (Van Dijk, 1991, p. 30) to depict fights between Red Guard factions and the primitive living conditions they experienced after Mao sent them to the countryside to quell the chaos he had created.

[56] The God-Creation Movement during China's Cultural Revolution involved the extensive promotion of Mao Zedong as an almost divine figure through propaganda, mass mobilisation, and education. This movement aimed to consolidate Mao's power by creating a pervasive cult of personality, which involved daily rituals, widespread dissemination of his writings, and public loyalty demonstrations. While it succeeded in elevating Mao's status, it also caused significant social, cultural, and economic disruptions, leading to widespread persecution and a lasting impact on Chinese society (Brown, 2009).

However, art critic Deng Pingxiang (Wu, 2010) thinks *Why?* 'took the form of political criticism and lacked artistic style and independent artistic value' because it is inappropriate to apply 'current knowledge (after the fall of the Gang of Four) to people then (living within the context of political fanaticism)' (p. 22). In comparison, he believes Cheng Conglin's (b. 1954) *Snow on X Day X Month, 1968* (Figure 8, 1979) takes one step further because Cheng 'accurately portrayed the characteristics of people during the Cultural Revolution, deepening this nation's catastrophe to a "human" level' (p. 23).

Scar Painting emerged as a variant of Socialist Realism in Chinese art academies, with a more direct mode of allegory compared to traditional literati paintings. The double-coded narrative in Scar Paintings focused on the suffering of ordinary people during the Cultural Revolution and expressed criticism towards the Chinese government and its leaders. As a result, Scar Paintings did not provide viewers with the same interpretive space as literati painting but suggested more explicit emotions.

The tragic life during the Cultural Revolution, the influence of Socialist Realism, and Mao's emphasis on the educational function of art contributed to Scar Paintings primarily amplifying the artists' point of view, but that was also the main function of Scar Painting. Furthermore, Scar artists had mixed feelings about the Cultural Revolution. They were not wholly denying the Cultural Revolution but had moods such as 'despair and disillusionment' as Educated Youth because 'Mao had abandoned and betrayed them' (Van Dijk, 1991, p. 30). In this case, the political critiques presented in Scar Painting were not based on rational reflection or enlightenment. Instead, they were a reversal of the passions from the Cultural Revolution, serving as a form of psychological compensation for what had been lost. Consequently, first-generation artists' works were still influenced by the Cultural Revolution mode, resulting in extreme dichotomies between politics and art, realism and abstraction, and individuality and group.

Scar Painting struggled to transcend the artists' own suffering and lacked creativity in forms and styles. As a result, the movement eventually waned, and Scar Painting became the main source of commercial painting in the early 1980s (Gao, 1985). Despite these limitations, Scar Painting played a significant role in the evolution of Chinese art, as it marked the beginning of a more critical approach towards political and social issues within the artistic community.

Also, Scar Painting can be seen as the prelude to modern Chinese allegorical political painting. As the first art movement to allegorically question the decisions of governments and leaders since the Cultural Revolution, it demonstrated that paintings could serve more than just political propaganda. The artists in the Scar Painting movement faced criticism for being 'anti-social' or 'anti-Chinese' (Van Dijk, 1991, p. 32) initially, but their efforts eventually laid the foundation for the artistic prosperity and freedom that emerged in the mid-1980s, when modern Western art began to influence Chinese art.

85 New Wave and Rational Painting: Destroying the Past and Seeking a New Mode

In the early 1980s, the Chinese art world experienced a period of relative quiet as the memory of the Cultural Revolution began to fade and the country underwent rapid economic growth (Wu, 2014),

which prepared Chinese art for the coming new moment: 85 New Wave.[57] In the mid-1980s, a new kind of young artist became the second generation of political painters who rose to prominence during the influx of modern Western thought in China (Wu, 2014). Many of these artists were too young to have experienced the same level of suffering, despair, and disillusionment during the Cultural Revolution as the first generation, and their experiences led them to approach their art differently. They began to incorporate Western modernist styles and ideas into their work, focusing on the meaning of human existence from a metaphysical perspective (Li, 1991). Compared to the Scar Painters, the second-generation artists had greater exposure to Western culture and art, which enabled their works to adopt a more evident Western modernist tendency. Their art, influenced by movements such as Dadaism, Surrealism, and Expressionism, presented a cultural shock to Chinese viewers and artists who were just beginning to understand and accept Impressionism (Gao, 2007)

In 1985, the 85 Art Movement, as described by Gao Minglu, saw a resurgence of the debates that characterised the May Fourth New Culture Movement (2015, p. 129). These debates centred around the advantages and disadvantages, differences and similarities, and cultural trends between East and West, as well as tradition and modernity. This new wave of artistic expression in the mid-1980s represented a significant shift in Chinese art, as it began to incorporate and engage with Western artistic traditions while also reflecting on the country's own history and culture, even though artists were desperately trying to cut themselves off from them.

During this period, many artists engaged in reading about and discussing issues related to thought, philosophy, religion, Eastern and Western cultural comparisons, human nature, and societal psychological problems.[58] As a result, they rejected formalism and embraced a strong conceptual orientation. This characteristic further differentiated 85 New Wave from the Scar Painting movement. While Scar Painting employed a true realism that focused on individuals' smallness and sufferings to illustrate reality, 85 New Wave had an abstract core that shifted the focus away from the individual to philosophically question the abstract real – society and culture. Thus, the 85 New Wave movement started to see art as a part of social and cultural practice and used it to intervene in reality with a transcendent gesture with an appropriation of Western art.[59]

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[57] During this period, subtle changes in ideology in the art world were happening, as written by Wu Hung, 'the formation of a new political environment in which this art would operate for years to come, the increased mobility of Chinese people in pursuing personal goals, an "informational explosion" of Western art and thought through exhibitions and translation, and the coming of age of a new kind of young artist who turned away from realism and started a powerful push to reconnect Chinese art with Western modernist traditions' (Wu, 2014, p. 52).

[58] The 85 New Wave movement in Chinese art was characterised by its avant-garde consciousness, which set it apart from other post-Cultural Revolution new art phenomena. This distinction stemmed from the movement's focus on addressing and critiquing cultural and social issues rather than concentrating solely on artistic matters. As Gao suggests, 85 New Wave was not concerned with establishing or refining a specific artistic school or style (2015); instead, it aimed to synchronise artistic activity with social and cultural progress. This approach linked the critique of art to the critique of the entire Chinese cultural system, giving 85 New Wave a philosophical inclination.

[59] During this period, Chinese paintings indeed appeared reminiscent of modern Western paintings. This can be attributed to several factors. First, Chinese painters had already lost their traditional cultural approaches to paintings during the Cultural Revolution and the 54 New Culture Movement. As a result, they turned to Western modern art as a seemingly straightforward way to create their work. For instance, Ye Yongqing's (b. 1958) *Guishan Landscape* (Figure 9, 1983) echoes Cézanne's (1839-1906) late pieces, while *In the New Era: The Enlightenment of Adam and Eve* (Figure 10, 1985) by Zhang Qun (b. 1962) and Meng Luding (b. 1962) bears similarities to Dalí or Magritte's iconic paintings. Secondly, the second-generation artists were not merely seeking new themes or styles

Figure 9

Guishan Landscape

53x38 cm. By Ye Yongqing, 1983, painting, oil on canvas, located in Yuz Museum, Shanghai, China.

Figure 10

In the New Era: The Enlightenment of Adam and Eve

196 x 164 cm. By Meng Luding & Zhang Qun, 1985, painting, oil on canvas, located in Taikang Collection, Beijing, China.

In 85 New Wave, art transcended its traditional boundaries, extending beyond mere artistic

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but were more interested in introducing new concepts to Chinese art. They aimed to challenge the traditional Chinese discourse that art was only about aesthetics or political propaganda. Instead, they sought to bring complexities to art that were previously considered non-artistic. In this case, they need to seek theoretical foundations from the West. This shift in focus led to the incorporation of philosophical and cultural concepts into their work. As a result, exhibition titles during this period often featured words such as 'enlightenment,' 'life,' or 'land' (Gao, 2015, p. 125). These artists aimed to redefine the boundaries of art, engaging with ideas and themes that transcended traditional aesthetics and direct political messaging, thus opening up new possibilities for artistic expression and exploration.

expression.[60] The scope of works expanded significantly, often beyond political expression. In fact, some paintings' narratives were deliberately crafted as apolitical. One possible explanation is that the second-generation artists sought to dissociate themselves from their first-generation counterparts. These artists refused to capitulate to a reality that reflected the suffering experienced during the Cultural Revolution and opted for more expansive modes of expression beyond the political sphere. However, it is worth noting that the deliberate choice to be apolitical is, in itself, a potent political statement.

Rational Painting was an artistic movement that emerged in northern China during the 85 New Wave period.[61] Artists within this movement believed that the cultures of both East and West were confronted with an unparalleled dilemma, which could be remedied through the creation of art that is rational, sublime in purpose, and imbued with seriousness (Gao, 1993).[62] Through their art, they endeavoured to express the magnificence and timelessness of the universe. Self-consciousness took on a more abstract form, moving away from personal expression or individuality. Instead, self-consciousness evolved into a transcendent rationality that surpassed the confines of singular political themes such as the Red Guards from a moral perspective, and broke free from the Socialist Realism that had dominated Chinese art for over four decades from an aesthetic standpoint. In the

[60] Unlike Scar Painting, which had a core similar to that of Cultural Revolution art, 85 New Wave art is revolutionary (Gao, 2015), leading to a new turn towards cultural modernism. It inherited the spirit of the 54 New Culture Movement and thought about the modernity of art from a cultural perspective. A trinity of 'the ideal of cultural supremacy, the ambition to fuse East and West, art as a life of thought' (Gao, 2015, p. 132) was created and accepted by artists and allowed them to express themselves in different methods. In this case, 85 New Wave was an Enlightenment for Chinese culture and society.

[61] In the 85 New Wave movement, three main styles or 'spirits' of painting emerged, each tied to specific regions. In southern provinces like Sichuan, most artists rejected urban culture and sought to elevate the essence of life, nature, and native culture into art. In central provinces such as Hunan and Hubei, where the culture was more conservative, artists attempted to break conventions and challenge the repression imposed by traditional forces. East China, being richer and more open than central and southern regions, offered more opportunities to engage with Western ideologies and culture. The Northern Art Group, one of the most influential art groups in East China, was founded in Harbin in 1984. This group exhibits a strong inclination towards the pursuit of the sublime and a reverence for rationality. Emphasising the combination of artwork with theoretical writings and effectively using media to convey their ideas, the group achieved significant recognition. Their theoretical foundation is rooted in the concept of 'Northern Culture.' They believe that both Eastern and Western cultures face modern predicaments, with cultural focus shifting northward. Northern Culture, as they perceive it, is a rational, sublime, wholesome, and human-centred culture, which resonates with Kant's sublime and my own practice discussed in Chapter 5. For more information, see Gao Minglu, *History of Chinese Contemporary Art* (2023, pp. 84-96).

[62] In *The Spirit of the Northern Art Group* (1985), Shu Qun (b. 1958), a leader in the Northern Art Group, writes, 'We believe that Eastern and Western cultures have fundamentally disintegrated, to be replaced only by the emergence of a new cultural force—the birth of "Arctic Civilisation," Which is a symbolic concept proposed in light of the historical trend of cultural centres in both East and West continually shifting northward, rather than suggesting the potential for Nordic or northern Asian local cultures to become a global civilisation. From the very inception of human culture, there has been an inherent tendency in its underlying structure to gradually move towards colder regions.' As for the Northern Art Group's understanding of painting, Shu writes 'Our painting is not "art." It is merely a means of conveying our ideas, and it must, and can only, represent one part of our entire thought. We firmly oppose the so-called pure painting that relies on the self-governing expression of material characteristics. We believe that the primary criterion for judging the value of a piece of work lies in whether it demonstrates sincere ideas—whether it reflects the power of human intellect and manifests sublime qualities and ideals.' It can be noticed that Shu's understanding of judging a painting through its sincerity might come from the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's idea of expressing seriousness and sincerity in their works, which can also be found in his other article, *Discussing the Historical Significance of the Raphaelite Brotherhood* (1985). Although the content the Northern Art Group wishes to convey cannot be fully articulated through the abstract and broad concepts of 'rationality' or 'sublime,' we can, at the very least, observe the artists' pressing desire to establish a new culture. This desire is also accompanied by a strong sense of responsibility and an ambition to replace old symbols with new ones (Zhang, 1988).

next paragraphs, I will primarily analyse the works of Wang Guangyi, a representative figure in Rational Painting, to explore the possibilities of reading them allegorically.

Wang Guangyi was born into a working-class family in Harbin in 1957. During the Cultural Revolution, as a teenager, Wang demonstrated an early interest in art by studying painting by replicating propaganda posters. Following the Cultural Revolution, he spent three years working in the countryside and then became a railway worker like his father. He applied to the Luxun Academy of Fine Arts for three consecutive years, finally gaining admission to the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in the fourth year.

While at the academy, Wang exhibited little interest in the exercises and courses provided by the school, instead becoming fascinated with the library, which 'introduced him to a new world of images' (Wu, 2014, p. 102). Western classical art captivated him with its supreme visual order and spiritual power. Throughout his college career, Wang read numerous Western philosophical books, even though his elementary education did not equip him with the necessary understanding. However, he transformed this limitation into an advantage by 'using his fertile imagination to fill in conceptual gaps' (p. 102). This experience enabled Wang to 'discover the power of verbal persuasion, forming his self-identity as a "rational artist" who expressed ideas through both images and words' (p. 102).

Figure 11

Frozen Arctic No.28

100x150 cm. By Wang Guangyi, 1985, painting, oil on canvas, located in Today Art Museum, Beijing, China.

Figure 12

Frozen Arctic No. 29

160x200 cm. By Wang Guangyi, 1985, painting, oil on canvas, located in Today Art Museum, Beijing, China.

Figure 13

Frozen Arctic No. 31

160x200 cm. By Wang Guangyi, 1985, painting, oil on canvas, located in Today Art Museum, Beijing, China.

Wang Guangyi's first major series, *Frozen Arctic* (1984-1985), consistently portrayed a frozen, motionless world with semi-abstract, nearly monochromatic images. Wu Hung (2014) asserts that these paintings undoubtedly relate to the idealised 'arctic civilisation' circulated by Shu Qun, Wang Guangyi, and other northern artists. However, the extreme coldness and stillness of his images appear to contradict his 'passionate invocation of a cultural renaissance' (Wu, 2014, p. 102). This paradox may be better understood when considering the cultural context.

At that time, Soil Painting, a successor of Scar Painting, was still the predominant art form in Southern China. Soil Paintings by artists like Mao Xuhui (b. 1956) were representations of nature and continued to explore the benevolent spirit of humanity, in contrast to Rational Paintings. Wang's *Frozen Arctic* series, on the other hand, directly opposed everything expected from Soil Painting: 'its attachment to Mother Earth, romantic longing for a bygone Golden Age, and exaggerated realism' (Wu, 2014, p. 102). In this series, most figures neither face the viewer nor possess facial features because they no longer represent individuality as depicted in Scar Painting. Instead, they symbolise abstract humanity. Furthermore, the backgrounds are consistently empty, not indicating a specific scene of the present moment, but rather the cosmos. The lack of narrative information – the emptiness – opposes Scar Painting and other institutional art forms heavily influenced by Soviet Realism, which emphasise fullness. In Wang's *Frozen Arctic* series, humans and their surroundings, as well as humans and objects, do not adhere to the same narrative logic. Instead of fostering dialogue, the paintings evoke a state of contemplation (Gao, 2015).

In *Frozen Arctic No. 28*, Wang captures the cold, desolate atmosphere of the northern city of Harbin, his hometown.[63] The painting primarily features two people who appear to clasp their hands together, sitting on two squares and gazing into the distance. On the horizon, three mysterious cloud-like objects move against a lighter background. These figures in the front exhibit identical appearances and look rigid, making them appear more like vessels than humans. It seems they have been motionless for an extended period, becoming monumental. Two other squares beside the figures suggest that additional people may be sitting and observing.

The painting's ambiguous narrative gives the impression that the artist intended to both conceal something and make a statement. Consequently, it is possible to interpret the painting allegorically. In 1985, while the effects of the Cultural Revolution were ostensibly diminishing during the Reform and Opening-up period, the dichotomous thinking that developed during the Cultural Revolution persisted. This mindset was manifested in realist paintings that criticised the Cultural Revolution. Although artists endeavoured to employ new methods in their work, the core focus on reflecting upon the Cultural Revolution remained unchanged.

[63] Upon examining the painting Frozen Arctic No. 28, it is intriguing that, despite being considered representative of Wang's early works, there has been relatively little written about it. The painting's smooth, flat images and enigmatic surrealist narratives can easily evoke comparisons to Magritte's (1898-1967) works, such as *LA MÉMOIRE IV* (Figure 14, 1954) and *Les Fleurs de l'abîme* (Figure 15, 1928). However, Wang's painting leans more towards abstraction while remaining figurative. This approach may stem from Wang's desire to distance himself from Scar/Soil Painting while still retaining the realist and narrative aspects of his academic education, which also manifested in his later explorations of classical painting.

Figure 14

LA MÉMOIRE IV

60x50.2 cm. By René Magritte, 1954, painting, oil on canvas, private collection.

Figure 15

Les Fleurs de l'abîme

54.1x73 cm. By René Magritte, 1928, painting, oil on canvas, private collection.

In his essay *What Kind of Paintings Are Needed in Our Era?* (1986), Wang wrote that a critical examination of the contemporary state of Chinese painting would reveal artists struggling to pursue modern styles while the healthy, noble, and solemn spirit had already departed. At that time, paintings emphasised the suffering of ordinary people; however, Wang believed that this emotion

lacked rationality, as artists tended to sympathise with one another due to shared experiences of suffering.[64] This emotion was subjective: artists cared for ordinary people because they were concerned about themselves. By critiquing the reflections of Educated Youth artists, Wang's painting adopted a more rational perspective with diminished personal emotions, which aligned with his fragmented understanding of Western philosophy.[65]

While Iona Whittaker (2012) writes that the two figures in the painting face the viewers, it seems more plausible that their backs are turned instead. These figures appear to be on a pilgrimage, gazing at the holiest site – rationality – without distraction. In the painting, rationality is symbolised by a distant platform adorned with three cloud-like objects resembling snow. In Wang's hometown of Harbin, winter temperatures can plummet to -25 degrees Celsius, freezing water outdoors. This frozen state allegorises eternity, particularly in cold climates, where forms remain stable. The concept of eternity has provoked continuous political movements since the establishment of the PRC. As an artist growing up amid political upheaval, Wang Guangyi may have sought stillness and eternity – a place without movement. Consequently, his advocacy for rationality could represent a rejection of the volatile political climate. Unlike his Scar Painting predecessors, Wang did not want to focus on individuality and aspired to create something novel. Thus, he employed grand narratives and romanticism in his work, calling for rationality as a new way of thinking about the present.

To return to the painting itself, the two figures may be vessels containing Chinese culture at the time, regardless of whether it had been destroyed, amalgamated, or abandoned. People had been ravaged by politics and political movements and were yearning to re-establish a harmonious existence, which is what the vessels in the painting appear to be contemplating. Thus, the figures gazing into the distance imply the allegorical quest for modernity. Wang did not explicitly communicate this message in his work, nor did he intend to instruct or persuade. Instead, he depicted an allegorical scene to avoid making overt declarations, differing from other artists in the 85 New Wave movement.[66]

This painting can be seen as the beginning of Wang's exploration of cultural integration, a microcosm of rational painting at the time. In Wang's subsequent series, *Post-Classic*, he integrated classic Western narratives, such as *Mona Lisa* or *La Mort de Marat*, into the cold atmosphere reminiscent of the *Frozen Arctic* series. By comparing the two series (*Post-Classic* and *Frozen Arctic*), it becomes apparent that the icy and ambiguous background serves as an allegory for China's predicament: traditional culture was vanishing, leading to a cultural void, while Western culture was rapidly

[64] Wang thinks painting should avoid Scar Painting's search for goodness and kindness in human nature. Instead, rationality is the most important thing.

[65] The broken reading of monographs by Western philosophers indeed had a significant impact on Rational Painters. These artists aimed to use complex Western philosophy to explore and address Chinese social and political issues and showcase rationality in their paintings, setting them apart from previous paintings. However, many of these artists had experienced incomplete education due to the Cultural Revolution, making it difficult for them to fully grasp the intricate ideas presented by Western philosophers. Consequently, they were often compelled to substitute some of the hard-to-read philosophical concepts with their own interpretations and understandings. This process of broken reading and adaptation led to a unique fusion of Western philosophical thought with Chinese artistic sensibilities. Although the artists might not have fully comprehended the original philosophical ideas, their reinterpretations and adaptations provided a fresh perspective and contributed to the development of a distinct artistic style in Rational Painting.

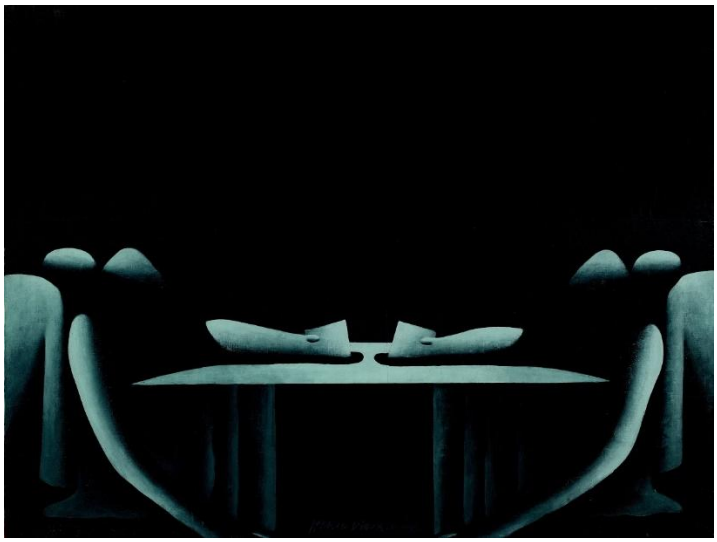
[66] Due to the influence of Western modern art, some artists' work during the 85 New Wave period became increasingly direct. However, these phenomena always happened in the realm of sculpture, moving image, and performance.

permeating the nation.

Therefore, although Wang and other Rational Painters aimed to avoid the political dimension, political desires remained concealed within their works, which is an allegorical system. Allegory in Rational Painting is inherently negative, as painting differs from reading or speaking. For instance, in Wang Guangyi's piece, *Post-Classic: Marat Assassiné* (Figure 16, 1987), Wang borrows the classic composition of Marat's death by Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825). While Wang asserts that he only used the compositions of classic paintings rather than their narratives in the Post-Classic series, the original painting's background still evokes the French Revolution. Wang deliberately obscured political dimensions in his work, attempting to attain a spiritual state; however, the subject matter in the original painting reveals political aspects within this one, imbuing it with the allegorical significance of revolution and suffering.

Figure 16

Post-Classic: Marat Assassiné



160x200 cm. By Wang Guangyi, 1987, painting, oil on canvas, located in Today Art Museum, Beijing, China.

A paradox can be identified among Rational Painters. On the one hand, they were weary of the revolutionary culture established after 1949, leading them to embrace Western culture uncritically; on the other hand, they were also worried that the traditional culture would completely disappear due to their own neglect. This paradox resulted in Rational Painting facing dual cultural resistance against revolutionary tradition and Western culture (particularly classical Western painting). As the resistance to the revolutionary tradition was compounded by opposition to Western culture, the truth sought by Scar Painters became uncertain and ambiguous because they did not know whether what they were looking for was true or not. Therefore, they had to blindly explore to run towards the unreachable truth.

Although most Rational Painters did not intentionally incorporate allegory into their works, it can be

argued that this dual resistance sparked an allegorical impulse: 'a conviction of the remoteness of the past, and a desire to redeem it for the present' (Owens, 1980, p. 68). In essence, Rational Painters sought to distance themselves from the old memory system – the Soviet Realist one and direct representation, which could produce a stable identity. By complicating their works' structures, Rational Painters rejected direct communication and fostered an allegorical economy.

Interestingly, Rational Painting also employed elements from both Western and revolutionary traditions in style or genre. Consequently, Rational Painting embodies the issues that both individually present: a radical rejection of the past and a simplified nature.[67] Regarding the revolutionary tradition, although Rational Painters opposed the Cultural Revolution, although not as much as Scar Painters, their childhood experiences still imbued them with the cultural personality the Revolution left behind. The statement that 'to establish the new, the old must be destroyed' (Law, 2003), announced in the Cultural Revolution, lingered among Rational Painters, motivating them to create a new form by dismantling the styles and content of Soviet Realism, Scar Painting, and political criticism. However, despite their denial of political dimensions in their work, embedded politics persisted. As a result, what artists professed often differed from viewers' interpretations, rendering their works allegorical.

The embedded allegory in their paintings might also stem from the Rational Artists' self-driven sense of responsibility to seek the meaning of art and life. They attempted to do so by establishing a new style and rejecting the old. One issue is that, in immersing themselves in Western culture and philosophy, they risked overlooking the real world and constructing a baseless utopia. They endeavoured to save art, but art did not require their salvation. Consequently, their efforts devolved into self-entertainment and illusion.

Nevertheless, Rational Painting, alongside the 85 New Wave movement, opened new doors for Chinese painting due to its negative allegory and the dual relation of resistance and negotiation towards Western cultures and Chinese tradition. The 85 New Wave movement introduced fresh ideologies and cultures to the Chinese art world, expelling remnants of the Cultural Revolution and setting up an adequate foundation for Chinese contemporary art.

Cynical Realism: Humour as a Means of Allegory

In the 85 New Wave, new movements continuously arose to establish new art modes and engage with society. *China/Avant-Garde* Exhibition in February 1989 marked the climax of the 85 New Wave, where nearly every concept of Western modern art from the past century was mentioned (Li, 1992). However, after June 4, 1989, the process towards modernity in Chinese art, and even in Chinese economy and culture, was halted by the suppression of students during the Tiananmen Incident. China seemed to regress to Mao's era until Deng Xiaoping conducted his tour of Southern China in 1992 when he reasserted that the economic reform policy could not be stopped (Zhao, 1993). Consequently, China returned to its 'reformist track and joined the global economy in the mid-1990s but retained its old political and social systems' (Zhou, 2020, p. 267). However, spiritual brokenness continued to permeate Chinese artists, especially when they realised that modernity in the Chinese

[67] This will be discussed in Chapter 5.

art world was primarily borrowed from the West without substantial Chinese cultural engagement, and Western thinkers such as Freud, Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus could not provide shelter for them to face the current circumstance (Li, 1992). Artists in the early 1990s could no longer find a complete world; they were left helplessly confronting this fragmented and incomplete modernity.[68,69]

The issue of fragmented modernity was overlooked by artists due to the frenzied enthusiasm for Western culture and rapid economic development in the 1980s up until the Tiananmen Incident in 1989, when students, intellectuals, and cultural elites realised that 'market liberalisation and social liberties were not necessarily wedded together' (Ho, 2013, p. 220). The Tiananmen Incident shattered the utopia created by the second-generation artists and left young artists in an art world where the intervention of art in life began to fail, with the influence of Western ideology arriving and departing rapidly. This social atmosphere cultivated third-generation political artists who completed their college education in the late 1980s, leading their perspectives to differ from those of the first and second generations. For instance, the first and second generations tended to work as groups (Yin, 2017). Activities in 85 New Wave could often be regarded as group movements, similar to those during the

[68] The first- and second-generation political artists' ultimate goals were to establish a new mode of Chinese art, but borrowing from Soviet Realism and Western ideology did not make them succeed. One reason was that the lack of sufficient local cultural engagement resulted in an ever-present cultural gap. Modernity in the West had a long and relevant history, while China's had been established over only a few decades. Simultaneously, driven by a sense of responsibility, the two generations of artists were impatient and consistently embedded grand narratives in their artworks. (For Scar Painting, artists did it unconsciously; for Rational Painting, intentionally.) However, grand narratives were not always necessary, because they could make artists overlook reality and construct a baseless utopia. In this context, the modernisation of Chinese art might backfire, leaving incomplete modernity for third-generation political artists.

[69] The concept of incomplete modernity in China, be that fragmented, broken or interrupted, is rooted in its disrupted and non-linear journey towards modernisation. Unlike the relatively cohesive trajectory of Western modernity, which is often characterised by a sense of progression, China's modernisation after 1949 has been interrupted by constant revolutions and ideological shifts (Lu, 2015). These disruptions have created a fragmented cultural memory, where remnants of Chinese traditional painting, Social Realism, Western philosophy, and other influences coexist in a mosaic-like structure. This fragmentation suggests the cultural dimension of broken modernity, where each fragment carries traces of historical memory but resists integration into a unified narrative. Traditional Chinese painting, with its emphasis on poetic ambiguity and emptiness, remains a thread in this tapestry. However, its dialogue with imported ideologies—such as the optimism of Social Realism or the later emotional intensity of German Expressionism—indicates the tension within China's cultural modernisation. This interplay between preservation and disruption not only shapes the contemporary cultural landscape but also provides fertile ground for allegory, which arises from ruins and fragments, without seeking to impose a singular meaning but thrives in the multiplicity and incompleteness of its symbols, reflecting a world that resists cohesion. Chinese late modern painting engages with this fragmented allegorical mode to critique and reflect on modernity's unfulfilled promises. The interplay of ruins and fragments becomes a key strategy for artists who grapple with the cultural residue of China's turbulent past. Peter Osborne's conceptualisation of modernity as a self-redefining project (1995) also provides a theoretical lens to examine China's broken modernity, where modernity is an open and dynamic process that incorporates past failures and ambitions into its ongoing redefinition. This perspective aligns with the fragmented nature of Chinese modernity, which is less a cohesive whole and more a collection of intersecting temporalities and cultural layers. The broken modernity of China functions as a ruin—an assemblage of incomplete aspirations and disrupted trajectories that nevertheless remain fertile ground for creative and philosophical engagement. Therefore, we can understand China's modernisation not as an incomplete replication of Western ideals but as an alternative modernity that negotiates its historical specificity. Its interruptions and discontinuities are not failures but the conditions under which a unique form of modernity evolves, one that opens space for critical reflection and creative reinvention. This interplay between fragments and ruins offers a ground for allegory (Benjamin, 2009), where cultural memory is neither preserved in its entirety nor erased but reinterpreted through the lens of contemporary experience. I do not seek to resolve the tensions of modernity but embrace its contradictions, using allegory to navigate the complexity of cultural memory and the political pressures of contemporary China. This broken modernity, rooted in cultural and historical fragments, becomes a site where the aesthetic, moral, philosophical, and political dimensions of art intersect, offering new ways to understand and engage with China's unique modernity. This discussion provides a foundation for my practice, which seeks to synthesise these complexities into a mode of painting.

Cultural Revolution. Artists in the 85 New Wave movement enjoyed making declarations and cared about theory; they also believed that gathering into groups could demonstrate the legitimacy of their art (Yin, 2017). In contrast, the third-generation artists, who were relatively young during the Cultural Revolution and thus less influenced by it, did not tend to work collectively or in groups; instead, they fought individually, and fragmentation became a characteristic of their work.

The fragments represented not only a state of disunity but also the remnants of the 1980s that persisted into the early 1990s. Society, ideology, and culture underwent rapid transformation. Few social activities, artistic styles, or values could exert a lasting or significant influence on artists' minds. Consequently, artists of that era confronted a formidable challenge to their survival: the reality of existence, as defined by various past cultural and value models, had faded from their consciousness, yet the powerful system that governed them remained unaltered by this loss. Nonetheless, third-generation artists opted for a distinct mode of resistance, as they neither subscribed to the prevailing ideology in China nor indulged in fanciful efforts to forge a new modernity through opposition to the past, which is still Cultural Revolutionary discourse (Li, 1992). Instead, they deconstructed the heroism of first-generation artists in Socialist Realism and the sublime, rational artistic practices of the second generation. Gradually, they shifted their focus from imitating the artistic language of Western modern art to centring their themes on ordinary people and everyday life. Their works thus became ruins of the contemporary moment when reality could no longer offer spiritual sustenance or support. In an almost paradoxical manner, they ascribed meaning to their practice through meaninglessness: the fragmented, the mundane, the lost. Consequently, the 'aura' within their works became obscured, resulting in artworks that could no longer convey their intended meaning directly but were compelled to do so through allegorical devices.[70] In this context, representations in paintings by third-generation artists ceased to be unified and holistic wholes, and instead became fragmented and dispersed, mirroring the fractured and scattered nature of 1990s society.

In his *The Boredom of Current Chinese Art: An Analysis of the Cynical Realism* (1992), critic Li Xianting writes that boredom serves as the optimal solution for third-generation artists to deconstruct the notion of 'meaning' as a means of imbuing their otherwise meaningless lives with new spiritual significance – the meaning of meaninglessness – and ultimately achieving self-salvation. If the world becomes devoid of meaning, there is no need to confront it earnestly. Consequently, the paintings of third-generation artists took on a 'frivolous,' 'cynical,' and 'humorous' tone (p. 71), which markedly contrasted with the weighty and poignant works of the first and second generations, who bore immense responsibility.[71] For example, in Wang Shuo's (b. 1958) novel, *It's All About the Excitement* (1989), protagonist Fang Yan embarks on an exhilarating journey to exonerate himself of murder charges only to discover it was a prank orchestrated by his bored friends. The novel serves as an allegory for how all significant societal events ultimately culminate in a joke.

[70] Allegory tends to create distance, while 'aura' (Benjamin, 2008) produces a sense of closeness and authenticity. The disappearance of aura contributes to the sense of fragmentation and loss of meaning that allegory embodies.

[71] Some second-generation artists' belief that they had the responsibility to save China through their art (Fei, 2007), of course, led to their art. However, I believe this sense of mission and grand narrative has also limited their art, resulting in a lack of personal expression.

During the 1990s, the rapid pace of change meant that nothing was taken seriously. Artists incorporated humour and jokes into their paintings, even poking fun at the artwork itself.[72] Roughly, there are two methods of representing humour and lack of seriousness: the first is to directly select absurd, mundane, and meaningless fragments from daily life, and the second is to comically transform serious and meaningful subjects (Li, 1992, p. 71). The second method warrants further discussion as it represents a more allegorical device compared to the first one.[73] In these works, happiness is pervasive. People depicted in the paintings are either joyful or, at the very least, feigning positivity, even in the gravest situations, such as *Taking a Photo before Tiananmen Square* (Figure 17, Wang, 1992) or *Xiehe Hospital* (Figure 18, Zeng, 1992). Such conflicts between serious moments and the light-hearted attitudes of the subjects reflect the experiences of artists in the post-1989 era, with Yue Minjun (b. 1962) being a prime example.

Figure 17

Taking a Photo before Tiananmen Square

128x185 cm. By Wang Jinson, 1992, painting, oil on canvas, private collection.

[72] Jokes are integral to the paintings of third-generation artists. They represent irony, contradiction, and self-mockery, reflecting the artists' helplessness and confusion during the 1990s. Regarding irony in third-generation artists' paintings, I expand upon Paul de Man's insights (1979, 2013), asserting that it is not merely a device or form of expression but rather a fundamental and pervasive framework for reading and interpreting paintings. De Man characterises irony as the tropological figure that emerges when a text implies its own negation and contends that it constitutes a crucial element of literary language. This also applies to irony in paintings, particularly those created during the Cynical Realism movement. Irony destabilises and challenges traditional concepts of meaning and interpretation, thereby functioning as a form of negative dialectics in which the imagery subverts and contradicts its own meaning, generating a dynamic tension between what is stated and what is intended.

[73] The first method, in my view, is still realistic practice instead of allegorical.

Figure 18

Xiehe Hospital

150x345 cm. By Zeng Fanzhi, 1992, painting, oil on canvas, private collection.

Yue Minjun enrolled in the oil painting department at Hebei Normal University in 1985. Before the 1989 Tiananmen Square Incident, he graduated and left Beijing. Like many other students, he was disillusioned by the events of 1989 (Ho, 2013). Two years later, he returned to Beijing and established a studio in the Painter Village near Yuanmingyuan with peers such as Fang Lijun and Liu Wei. After viewing a painting, *Second State* (Figure 19, 1987) by Geng Jianyi (b. 1962), which featured four large smiling faces symbolising deviant psychologies following the heroic figures and propagandistic exemplars of Maoist ideology during the Cultural Revolution under the guise of grimacing (Jiang, 2007), Yue discovered that Geng Jianyi's laughing faces conveyed a message contrary to their intended meaning – an assurance that things would improve and that a fulfilling and meaningful future awaited, as promised by the Buddha.[74] He suddenly realised smiling faces and happiness were illusions, concealing deeper societal and personal struggles.[75] In this instance, the utopia envisioned by the 85

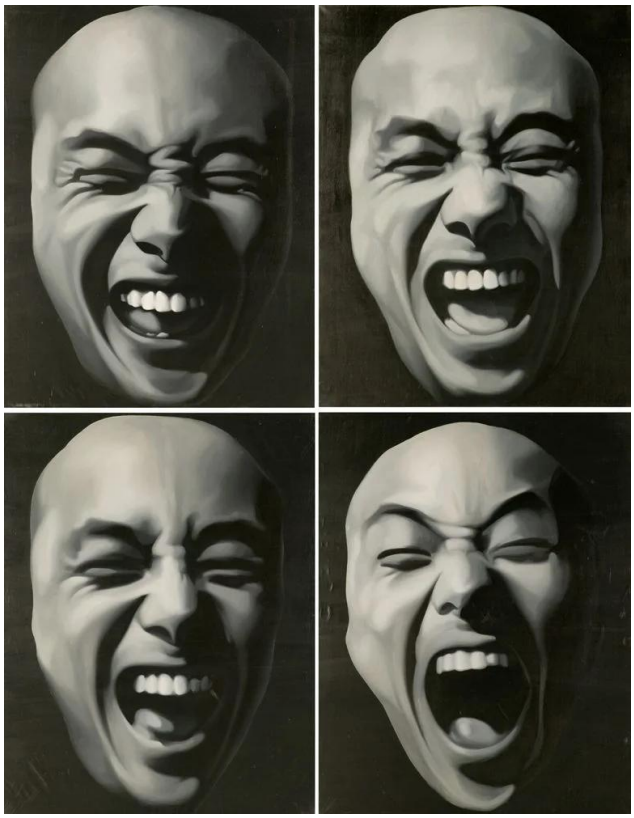
[74] See Yue's Catalogue Note on the Sotheby's website. https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2015/modern-contemporary-asian-art-evening-sale-hk0562/lot.1049.html, retrieved November 18, 2024.

[75] Yue stated in an interview with Karen Smith (2008): 'At first, it made me think of the Maitreya Buddha, which is a smiling, pot-bellied Buddha… Geng Jianyi's painting was the antithesis of all that is positive about the Maitreya Buddha's expression and symbolism. The four smiles in Second State spoke of a world where things were not right, in which meaning had been inverted, and expressions turned upside down. Clearly, Geng intended to remind us that nothing is as it appears. For according to a clinical definition of a smile, his faces were smiling, but that's not how it appears to the human heart and mind. So, this "second" state is not the first state, meaning the familiar form of the smile, but an inversion of it, a distortion, which makes it about as far from being a real smile like the one the Buddha wears, as it is possible to imagine. For my generation, the expression itself was not entirely alien. We were born into a bitterly frustrating era, infested with contradictions and complexities. Every one of us had a private sense that our existence was not entirely happy—yet we could not say exactly what happiness might be like, or how we'd know when we found it. We also instinctively felt that despite being given an opportunity to assert our independence (in being able to move to the Yuanmingyuan Artists' Village of their own free will), as long as we were marginalised by society for our choice of lifestyle, our desire to explore individual creative impulses, and our inability to conform to social convention, then we could never be entirely happy... Tomorrow will be better. But against the reality of the times, which was so entirely chaotic and strange, it was hard to hold onto that faith' (p. 26).

New Wave movement reached its conclusion in Yue's mind, with sentiments of happiness, collectivism, and idealism gradually dissipating. This realisation led him to recognise the duality and allegorical nature of laughter: a happy face does not always signify happiness. Consequently, he incorporated this duality into his artwork, allowing his laughing-face images to serve as a personal reflection on his own circumstances and those of his fellow Chinese citizens who had learned to laugh, as any other response seemed futile.

Figure 19

Second State



170x130 cm. By Geng Jianyi, 1987, painting, oil on canvas, located in M+ Sigg Collection, Hong Kong, China.

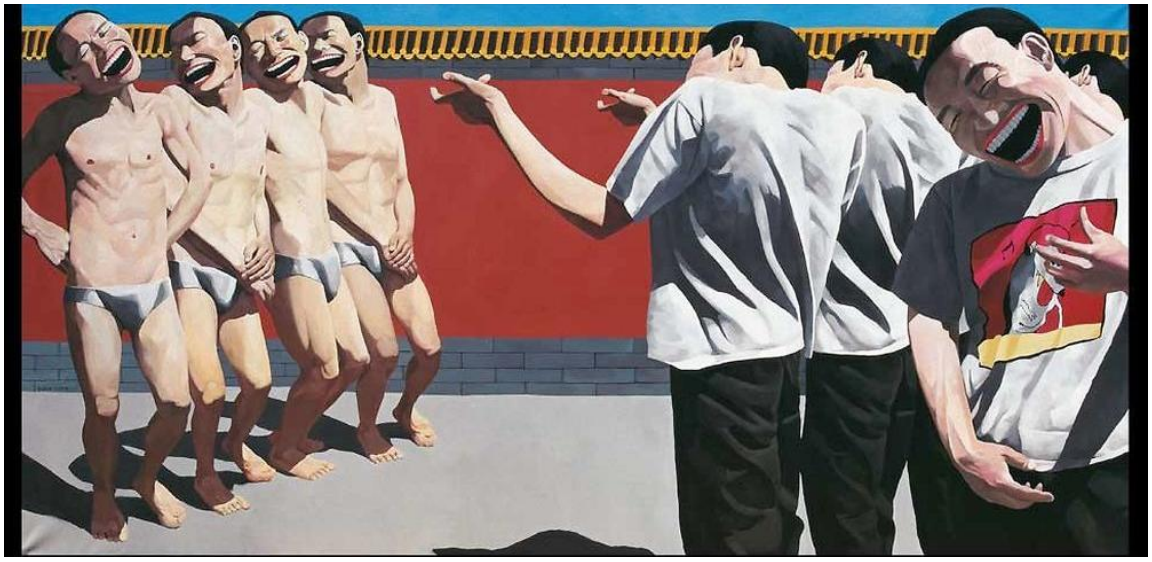
In his painting *Execution* (Figure 20, 1995), Yue presents a scene resembling *The Execution of Emperor Maximilian* (Figure 21, 1869). In Yue's painting, all the figures from Manet's original work are replaced with Yue's signature laughing-face men, set against the backdrop of the Forbidden City's red wall. Despite sharing the same laughter, the figures appear to laugh for different reasons: the group on the left is being 'executed,' while the group on the right points invisible guns at them.

The absence of individual traits in Yue's figures – regardless of their activities, such as swimming, dancing, or rioting – evokes the image of soldiers (albeit with cheerful faces). This allusion to Chinese history likens the figures to Emperor Qin Shihuang's terracotta warriors, emphasising the subordination of individuals to the collective and the infamous incident Burning of Books and Burying

of Scholars by Qin Shihuang (Kunz, 2001). However, Yue's painting diverges from Manet's original, depicting a self-inflicted massacre due to the same identity between killers and victims and that, due to the lack of guns, is rendered a farce.

Figure 20

Execution



150x300 cm. By Yue Minjun, 1995, painting, oil on canvas, private collection.

Figure 21

The Execution of Emperor

193x284 cm. By Édouard Manet, 1869, painting, oil on canvas, located in the National Gallery, London, United Kingdom.

The painting's symbolic meaning is not difficult to grasp, as the execution scene before the Forbidden City readily brings to mind the Tiananmen Square Incident. Nonetheless, certain enigmas persist; in other words, an invisible, allegorical layer lies beneath the symbolic dimension. It seems Yue intentionally directs viewers towards thoughts of the Tiananmen Square Incident; however, the painting's ambiguous stance seems to prevent viewers from empathising with the artist, creating a sense of emotionlessness. The lack of weapons makes execution meaningless; therefore, the purpose of the people in the painting seems unclear, which is a deliberate void created by Yue, a bore, a meaninglessness, a motif that recurs in many of his other works, reflecting the emotion of his times.

Despite varying narratives, Yue's paintings consistently feature laughing faces as a unifying element. In this context, interpreting these laughing faces might be the key to understanding the allegorical dimension of his art. Born in 1962, Yue's childhood coincided with the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), during which a 'visual glut' of Mao Zedong's images and words pervaded every medium and setting imaginable, including everyday items such as 'teapots, cups, badges, and stamps' (Ho, 2013, p. 235). He was too young to receive socialist ideology and propaganda, but Mao's face was constantly present in his daily life as a regular symbol. Mao's omnipresent figure, symbolising power and domination, likely influenced Yue's future artwork as he appropriated and adapted Mao's images into his homogeneous laughing figures.

Another significant element in Yue's paintings is that all his figures have their eyes closed. Regardless of the activity they are engaged in, they are always laughing without their eyes open, as if deliberately avoiding seeing. This could suggest that their actions are a manifestation of their subconscious, or that they have grown so accustomed to their behaviour that it has become second nature. Yue's painting *The Sun* (Figure 22, 2000) offers some insight into this phenomenon. In this piece, numerous identical-looking individuals gaze towards the left side of the canvas, behind which a red sun rises. The composition evokes memories of the Cultural Revolution era when Mao was likened to the sun through the slogan 'Chairman Mao is the red sun in our hearts,' accompanied by posters depicting people gazing into a promising future (Ho, 2013, p. 236).[76,77] In contrast, the recurring motif of closed eyes in Yue's paintings implies an instinctive reaction to shield oneself from the sun's harsh rays, a method of 'avoiding the blinding power of the sun' (Ho, 2013, p. 236).

Synthesising the analysis, it becomes evident that Yue employs a double narrative within his iconic figures: the laughing, eyes-closed crowd. On the one hand, the repetitive and endless depiction of these characters serves as a satirical representation of the Maoist era's visual glut, where Mao's images were omnipresent, causing individuals to lose their identities and 'melt into the socio-ideological conformity of communism' (Ho, 2013, p. 238). On the other hand, closed eyes imply a passive resistance to the central authority, suggesting that people feel so powerless that their only recourse is to close their eyes.

[76] See https://www.bridgemanimages.com/en-US/chinese-school-20th-century/chairman-mao-is-the-red-sun-in-our-hearts-august-1969-colour-litho/colour-lithograph/asset/283338, retrieved November 18, 2024.

[77] In 2010, Ai Weiwei had an exhibition *Sunflower Seeds* at Tate Modern. In this exhibition, Ai used sunflower seeds to imply Chinese people for the same reason: Mao is the sun.

Figure 22

The Sun

200x280 cm. By Yue Minjun, 2000, painting, oil on canvas, private collection.

Although Richard Vine contends that Yue's paintings incorporate 'a protest against the disguises adopted under Mao,' 'a Warholian exercise in deadpan seriality,' and 'a rejection to Communist all-the-sameness' (2008, p. 26), Yue's intentions are, in fact, more subtle.[78] Rarely does he explicitly express his political stance in his paintings; instead, he employs a humorous narrative to render serious issues comical, halting the narrative just before revealing his personal emotions. This approach differs from both Scar Painting and Rational Painting, which convey a solid didactic tone, as if the artists are seeking validation for their viewpoints. This residual group identity from the Cultural Revolution is what Yue Minjun's paintings, and Cynical Realism in general, oppose. One possible explanation for this shift is that, following China's economic surge and the Tiananmen Incident, the social function of art diminished, causing artists to focus on their personal experiences and immediate realities (Li, 1991) rather than grand narratives or abstract collectivism.

Yue Minjun and other Cynical Realist artists' conception of 'realism' deviates from traditional objective realism, instead taking the form of a humorous and absurd narrative crafted by those artists themselves. To them, realism serves as a corrective measure against the grandiose and vacuous philosophical issues prevalent in the 85 New Wave movement, urging individuals to confront pressing societal concerns, even if they induce feelings of disorientation and ennui.[79] Furthermore, this

[78] Western scholars always regard Chinese political works as radical ones that sharply critique the government. However, Chinese artists are much more implicit and seldom clearly express their emotions in their works. The Western perspective of simplifying Chinese political art into a political stance is a reflection of Cultural Orientalism, which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

[79] It reminds me of Gustave Courbet's (1819-1877) painting *The Painter's Studio: A Real Allegory Summing Up Seven Years of My Artistic and Moral Life*, which can be seen as allegory of realism in different ways. First, it foregrounds the artist's commitment to depicting the real world and ordinary people, rather than the idealised or romanticised subjects favoured by the academic art of his time. By including diverse social classes in the painting, Courbet highlights the democratic nature of Realism, which sought to give voice to those who were often marginalised or overlooked in art. Second, the painting is a self-conscious statement of Courbet's artistic principles and ambitions, which is the background. By placing himself at the center of the painting, Courbet asserts the role of the artist as an active observer and commentator on society. The unfinished state of the

mindset refrains from condescension and opts for a peaceful engagement with life (Li, 1991). Consequently, Cynical Realist artists are able to perceive the absurdity and monotony of the world, utilising their art to document it.

Not only Yue Minjun but also numerous Cynical Realist artists have demonstrated an ambiguity in their expression of political attitudes within their paintings. While political ideas often hide within their artwork, akin to literati paintings, these artists have adopted the roles of observers, chronicling the peculiarity of their lives and asserting the tedious nature of their reality. Their paintings, replete with humorous and absurd narratives, prompt viewers to contemplate both the overtly expressed and the concealed elements – an allegorical endeavour. Thus, it can be argued that such paintings establish a complicit relationship with viewers, particularly Chinese audiences, who, due to a shared cultural background, possess a common perspective on the subjects discussed. In this context, Cynical Realist paintings acquire an allegorical quality in collaboration with their viewers.

In the aftermath of the 85 New Wave movement, modernity in China remained incomplete, and many sought to define a uniquely Chinese form of modernity.[80] The 85 New Wave artists, often perceived

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landscape painting within the larger work further emphasises the ongoing, evolving nature of the artist's creative process and the Realist project. Additionally, the title itself, *A Real Allegory*, is a provocative statement that challenges conventional ideas about allegory and representation. By calling the painting both 'real' and an 'allegory,' Courbet suggests that his Realist approach, which is grounded in the truthful representation of the world, can still convey deeper meanings and symbolic significance. In this case, I think this painting could be an intriguing reference, similar to Cynical Realist paintings, which has an implicit relationship between aesthetics and society.

[80] In the late 1990s, the previous rational painter, Wang Guangyi, started to make his famous series, Great Criticism (Figure 23, 2005), in the framework of Political Pop, in which he used Red propaganda and Maoist images, and combined them with pop culture, reminding viewers of works by Alexander Kosolapov, a Russian-American artist who combined Soviet Socialist propaganda and American pop culture together. In *About Cleaning the Passion of Humanities* (2011), Wang indicates that he combines images of workers, peasants, and soldiers from the Cultural Revolution with imported commercial graphics that have penetrated the everyday life of the contemporary public, and as a result, those two cultural elements from different periods would eliminate their essential content in the process of irony and deconstruction, thus achieving an absurd and total emptiness. This series criticised numerous targets, from famous brands to institutions. His works popularised 'a playful and fractured way of looking, which allows a society caught in rapid transformation to see itself with a sense of humour, estrangement, and maybe unsettled resignation' (Tang, 2015, p. 141). Li Xianting pointed out his work's influence on other Chinese artists and, moreover, generated a unique Chinese-speaking manner in the post-ideological era (Li, 2002), due to Wang's utilisation of Cultural Revolution-style mass criticism against Western commercial culture, which used a humorous and absurd way to convey an inexplicit cultural criticism. However, some critics believe there is what is known as double kitsch (towards both propagandist art and consumer mass culture) in Wang's paintings. For example, Gao Minglu writes that most Political Pop artists are ambivalent about the Cultural Revolution and Mao's ideology, including Wang Guangyi (1998). Gao points out that the ambivalence embedded in their artworks never completely rejected Mao's era but has somehow remained an unbelievable flirtation with it by eulogising the persuasive power and unique aesthetic of Mao's propagandist art. As for Wang Guangyi, Gao believes that Wang's endless and straightforward placement of propagandist art next to consumer mass culture could be regarded as a typical example of double kitsch, resulting in a kitsch advertisement of another advertisement, which made him a producer of his commercial products instead of a critic or preacher (1998). Gao Minglu's criticism seems to be derived from his critical view of the marketing strategy at that time, which considered Political Pop as an independent avant-garde 'in order to cater to an international art community still clinging to a Cold War geopolitical imagination' (Tang, 2015, p. 150). Gao believes that neither Political Pop nor Cynical Realism is independent or avant-garde, but a conspiracy of ideological and commercial practices. Norman Bryson shares this opinion (1998). He suggests that Wang Guangyi's work reduces the aspirations active in the social field on the modified socialism and capitalism to a level of kitsch design, which mocks and negates both of them. This act regards both systems as signifiers and formulas, ignoring the complexity of both systems. In fact, different from Cynical Realism, Political Pop adheres to a Western system of reception, wherein viewers can immediately grasp the intended expression. Recognisable symbols of late capitalism, such as Coca-Cola, or images of Red Guards associated with the Cultural Revolution,

as elite or capitalist, aimed to establish a new visual culture by incorporating Western philosophy and art – a recurring phenomenon in Chinese history.[81] Given that the period between 85 New Wave and Cynical Realism spans less than a decade, the latter could not entirely escape its connection to the former, as evidenced by both movements' exploration of life's absurdities. However, Cynical Realist painters relinquished the heroic complex of salvation and evolved into cynical observers.

Figure 23

Great Criticism: Swatch

200x340 cm. By Wang Guangyi, 2005, painting, oil on canvas, located in Tate, London, United Kingdom.

Unlike Rational Painters, who consistently focused on the meaning of human existence through a metaphysical lens, Cynical Realist painters prioritised the self and their immediate surroundings. This approach allowed their works to more authentically concentrate on tangible reality and transcend the confines of Western philosophy (Li, 1991), rendering political allegory less nebulous and more grounded in reality. Cynical Realism also benefited from 85 New Wave's experimental forays into the

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are often integrated into the works, rendering them highly symbolic. Therefore, it is inappropriate to conflate Cynical Realism and Political Pop as a single category because Cynical Realism transcends this approach with a more allegorical core. In the aftermath of the traumatic Tiananmen Incident and amidst uncertainties surrounding freedom of speech in the 1990s, Cynical Realist artists deliberately obscured their representations and refrained from expressing explicit opinions. They were acutely aware that their works possessed an allegorical quality due to the powerful emotions they were suppressing. Consequently, irony emerged as their sole effective medium. These artists conveyed deeper feelings beneath the veneer of boredom – they were not disinterested, for if they had been, they would not have painted. Instead, they just felt helpless in an era characterised by rapid change.

[81] This actually constantly happens in Chinese history: the Western Affairs Movement (1861-1895) regarded the West as advanced and tried to use it to solve Chinese issues. However, such movements always ended in failure because the mere appropriation of the West could not solve China's local problems for the different cultural context and background.

unfamiliar realms of surrealism. However, by discarding the intentional metaphysics and obscure representation (Li, 1991) still present in the 85 New Wave movement, Cynical Realism not only managed to convey feelings of boredom and helplessness but also enabled Chinese art to bypass fractured modernity and transition towards a new Chinese modernism.

The Impulse of Allegory

It is evident that all three movements – Scar Painting, 85 New Wave/Rational Painting, and Cynical Realism – represent attempts to establish Chinese modernity. Scar Painting adopted the style of Soviet Realism, which was introduced to China before the Cultural Revolution. The 85 New Wave movement primarily appropriated Western philosophy and culture, while Cynical Realism synthesised and deconstructed the artistic resources available in China, employing them in a more localised context. The first- and second-generation political artists sought answers within Western culture, as the Chinese cultural heritage had been denied and lost during the Cultural Revolution. Although the third generation was not entirely free from the influence of the 85 New Wave, their disillusionment with its failed attempts to construct a new culture resulted in fragmented works. Self-mockery, humour, and irony remained, transforming their works into allegories.

Simultaneously, a clear transition from symbolism to allegory is evident in the process of modernisation within Chinese art. As this evolution unfolded, representation in paintings became increasingly fragmented, which, from an aesthetic standpoint, is intrinsically linked to time. Rationality or humour, as the spirit of art, 'appear petrified and as if spellbound in a single moment' (Benjamin, 1996, p. 224); therefore, beauty exists in the form of disruption of an imaginary completion, instead of the surface of the image. This transition was primarily driven by the uncertainty among artists following the Tiananmen Incident, when they were unsure of what was permissible and what was prohibited. Direct symbols lost their fundamental function, giving rise to more complex allegories in painting. While artists seem to depict their personal and private lives, Jameson posits that all Third World literature (and painting) is allegorical (2019). Despite the controversy surrounding Jameson's claim within academia (Szeman, 2011), it is strikingly fitting for the Chinese context of the time, given the ambiguous nature of the boundary between private and public.[82]

In artistic practice, allegory serves as both a form and a stylistic cypher, allowing artists to navigate sensitive political topics and convey deeper meanings through their works. The fifth-generation Chinese filmmakers in the 1980s effectively utilised allegory as a means to explore the relationship between politics and aesthetics, often using private stories to express public concerns.[83] The use of

[82] The distinction between private and public in China was not as clear-cut as in the West, but rather maintained a dynamic standard. When public discourse became impossible, artists resorted to private narratives. However, when their works needed to be displayed publicly, allegory emerged as a practical solution because it could mix the sense of private and public. Consequently, the allegorical impulse is embedded in the practice of all three generations of political allegorical artists, whether they are conscious of it or not. In the face of repression, passive resistance in China has always manifested itself through allegory.

[83] In discussing allegory within Chinese cultural production, it is necessary to expand beyond the boundaries of painting and consider other forms of artistic expression, such as film and novel, which also reflect the fragmented and broken modernity of late modern China. Following Fredric Jameson's approach in *Allegory and Ideology* (2020), where he connects disparate cultural products across mediums—ranging from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to Mahler's symphonies—through the shared function of allegory, I aim to position both Cynical Realist

allegory provided a subtle yet powerful way to comment on the societal issues of their time.

Zhang Yimou's film *To Live* is an excellent example. While the narrative follows the lives of a couple – Xu Fugui and his wife Jia Zhen – as they endure the hardships and tragedies of China's turbulent history, the film's allegorical nature allows it to transcend the personal and reflect on broader social and political issues.[84] The couple's story is representative of the experiences of many ordinary Chinese people who also strive to endure and hold onto the prospect of a brighter future amid challenging times. The film does not present direct critiques of the tragic movements throughout history, such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Instead, the focus is on the individuals' suffering lives, which are interwoven with the larger historical context. By placing personal experiences in the foreground and modern Chinese history in the background, the film highlights the interconnectedness of individual and collective struggles, allowing audiences to empathise with the characters and reflect on the broader implications of their experiences.

The use of allegory in both third-generation artists' and fifth-generation filmmakers' works demonstrates the versatility and power of this stylistic cypher. By employing allegory, artists and filmmakers navigated the complex and ever-changing socio-political landscape of China while still conveying meaningful and poignant messages. The double relationship between the private and the public, the individual and the collective, and the tragic and the humorous are all woven together through allegory, allowing these works to resonate deeply with their audiences and to have a lasting impact on the cultural landscape.

The persistent adoption of Western elements from the 1980s onwards renders Chinese modernity an incomplete phenomenon: fragmented and chaotic. Nevertheless, modernity itself is not a singular construct, but an amalgamation of discourses, cultures, and ideologies. As such, in China, the understanding of modernity can only manifest as a multiplicity of modernities. The modernity of art that emerged in the West, however, represents a singular form of decadence, which could be understood as a form of resistance to modernity's homogenising effects, by challenging established norms and values, and provoking critical reflection on society.[85] This aligns with Adorno's perspective

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painters and fifth-generation filmmakers within a broader cultural and ideological framework. These creators, while working in different mediums, grapple with the same melancholia born from broken modernity—a world where totality has dissolved, and nature has been fractured. In this fragmented landscape, allegory emerges as a mode of expression that unites their practices. In fact, the fifth-generation Chinese filmmakers' works echo the allegorical impulse found in Cynical Realist paintings. Like Baroque artists (Maravall, 1986), these filmmakers and painters operate without explicitly 'periodising' themselves, instead navigating the political and aesthetic constraints of their time in the dark as to where they are going. Their works do not attempt to restore the lost totality of modernity but instead embrace its ruins and fragments, using allegory as a vehicle to engage with the tensions between individual agency and systemic forces. By examining Zhang Yimou's film alongside Cynical Realism, I aim to illustrate how allegory functions across mediums to critique reality and reflect on the melancholia of broken modernity. This cultural criticism approach, informed by philosophical speculations rather than art-historical periodisation, indicates how these artists and filmmakers, though unaware of their shared direction, articulate their responses to the disintegration of historical coherence and the aesthetic possibilities that arise within this context.

[84] See https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1994-12-14-ca-8647-story.html, retrieved November 18, 2024.

[85] Decadence, in the context of art and culture, often refers to a decline in traditional values, moral standards, or aesthetic sensibilities, typically associated with excessive indulgence, materialism, and hedonism. In this sense, decadence can be seen as a critique of modernity, as it highlights the negative consequences that may arise from the rapid social, economic, and technological changes characteristic of modern society. By emphasising the decline in traditional values and the rise of self-indulgence, artists and thinkers who focus on decadence aim

on the role of art in modernity in resisting social norms and promoting critical thinking.[86]

Mao regarded decadence as an essential sin of the West due to the tragic memory of China in the 1920s; therefore, he decided to go against it in the new structure of communism after the establishment of the new China (Esherick, 1979; Friedman, 1994; Hinton, 2004). However, the result was anti-modernity, where art could not fully perform its critical function.[87] The national ideological discourse in China criticises Western modernity for its hegemonic, colonial nature. At the same time, Chinese modernity comprises values that oppose Western modernity, which is also a politicised stance. It is both modern and traditional, critiquing the West while affirming Chinese history. While Western modernity is global and assimilates the entire world into a single cultural code, Chinese modernity seeks to resist the homogenising Western paradigm and preserve its own distinctiveness.

Chinese modernity cannot achieve completion and cultural assertion if everyone, particularly the intelligentsia, pursues Western modernity, as exemplified by 85 New Wave. After that, Chinese artists start to search for a means to escape this predicament and establish a distinctively Chinese modernity. They aim to resist Western modernity, not wanting to align themselves with the West and recognising that their destiny lies elsewhere. However, they also strive to resist the notion that Chinese modernity is merely a counterpoint to Western modernity, as it too can challenge Chinese society through allegory, which, surprisingly, alludes to the concept of Western modernity. In this manner, Chinese modernity becomes a double: acceptance with rejection, resistance with negotiation. It originates from its Western counterpart, and attempts to make it localised have never stopped.

Returning to the second-generation artists, I note that after recognising the limitations of Soviet Realism and the breakdown of Chinese traditional culture, incorporating Western culture appeared to be a practical approach. Second-generation artists might not have considered their works allegorical due to their fervent political nihilism. Nevertheless, as a result of the connection between past (tradition) and present (Western culture), the allegorical impulse emerged as an aesthetic response

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to expose the potential dangers and pitfalls of unbridled modernisation. Alternatively, decadence can be considered an inherent aspect of modernity itself. As societies modernise, they undergo significant transformations in terms of values, norms, and ways of life, which is also the starting point of Cynical Realism. These changes can lead to a sense of fragmentation, disorientation, and loss of meaning, which in turn can give rise to decadent attitudes and behaviours. In this sense, decadence is not so much a critique of modernity as it is a manifestation of the complex, multifaceted nature of modern life.

[86] In *Aesthetic Theory* (1997) and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002), Adorno posits that art possesses the potential to resist social norms by offering a critical perspective on society and its values. According to him, art constitutes one of the few domains in modern society that can withstand the homogenising effects of mass culture and the culture industry, which generates standardised, mass-produced commodities catering to consumer needs rather than fostering authentic artistic expression and creativity, because the culture industry created a false consciousness that served to reinforce the dominant ideology of capitalism and prevent individuals from developing a critical awareness of the world around them. Thus, Adorno regarded such modernity as a source of domination and repression, in which individuals were reduced to passive consumers and workers, rather than active agents capable of shaping their own lives and society. Adorno believes that true art in modernity is characterised by its capacity to evoke dissonance and contradiction, thereby challenging the viewer to grapple with complex and often disquieting ideas. That is to say, art can resist social norms by unmasking society's contradictions and injustices, providing a critique of prevailing ideologies and values, and this critical function is indispensable in a society increasingly dominated by instrumental rationality and the culture industry. In this sense, Adorno perceived modernity in art as a form of resistance against dominant culture, a vehicle for preserving individuality and encouraging critical reflection.

[87] Of course, it is not the only reason. The broken modernity in China is also due to the discontinuous cultural intervention and lack of the background of traditional culture. However, here I would like to discuss this through the ideological approach.

when they rejected tradition while it remained embedded in their works. In their paintings, they neither commanded nor persuaded but instead produced a double rejection, a negotiation in order to renegotiate. Wang Guangyi's *Frozen Arctic* series, similar to the works of Troy Brauntuch or Robert Longo, 'generates images through the reproduction of other images' (Owens, 1980, p. 69), continuously inviting re-reading and reinterpretation, suggesting that the viewers update their interpretations through the allegorical dimension – a trembling between tradition and Western culture. Aesthetically, viewers read their works through others or use the experiences of other works to examine them, wherein a new one replaces the old memory system, while the new system returns to replace the old. In other words, previous experiences become unstable in viewing, which also appears in the reception of Cynical Realist works.

It could be concluded that Rational Painting unconsciously regained a lost aesthetic foundation – distinct from the traditional Chinese allegory of emptiness – for the allegorical impulse after the Cultural Revolution, while Cynical Realism began to utilise it as a critical practice in politics, advancing towards a new Chinese modernism. Both generations of artists proffered and deferred a 'promise of meaning' (Owens, 1980, p. 70), leaving viewers frustrated with the intransparency in their works. By reappropriating and reinterpreting history, whether Western or Chinese, they rescued and salvaged it. Especially for Cynical Realist painters, after realising the failures of modernism (and establishing modernity), they embraced the idea of recycling, reusing, and reinterpreting existing elements in their work instead of seeking to discard historical influences and create an art of pure formalism like the art of Rational Painters.

Allegory in Cynical Realism also drove Chinese art into a state of modernism because it started to enable artists to engage with history, culture, and politics in a critical and transformative way. This approach challenged the notion of originality espoused by Rational Painters and invited viewers to consider the multiple layers of meaning, interpretation, and context in a work. The allegorical impulse thus reflected a broader shift in Chinese art away from the modernist ideals of progress, purity, and formalism towards a more complex, self-referential, and historically conscious mode of artistic representation. Cynical Realist works became incomplete, like ruins of Chinese culture awaiting deciphering. A distance has been established by artists to distinguish their works from their own era. Through allegory, their works transcended the previous memory system and formulated a new one. This engagement constantly challenges established narratives and encourages alternative perspectives, fostering a more nuanced and complex understanding of the past.

When engaging with allegory, Chinese artists are constantly dealing with proximity and distance. Distance, manifested through alienation, fosters the use of irony and cynicism as a means to address sensitive subjects or critique social structures. On the other hand, when conveying emotions that require a sense of proximity, artists often guide viewers towards other relevant imagery. This strategy creates connections between the viewer and the artist's intended message, fostering a deeper understanding and emotional resonance, which is more effective than direct representation.

If artists have unspoken representations, dream images or surrealist images could provide the optimal platform to evade repression because every fragment could occur in a dream, and every fragment

could signify something else.[88] In the case of Cynical Realism, surrealist imagery halted the regressive modernity resulting from the Tiananmen Incident and ushered Chinese modernity into the postmodern realm. When discussing social structures is censored or restricted, Chinese artists may employ dream imagery and surrealism as a means of concealment. This artistic style enables them to express their emotions and critique societal issues subtly and indirectly, even without conscious intent. By doing so, artists can maintain their creative freedom and effectively convey their messages within the limitations imposed by censorship.

Owing to the endeavours of these artists, Chinese painting is not merely a mutation of Western art but also a distinct expression within the Chinese context. The impulse of allegory emerged after the Cultural Revolution due to a political desire to express opposition against the previous memory system, and surrealist images became the ideal form to encapsulate such desire rather than realism.[89] This was the situation before 2013, when the government tightened social and political controls in China (Brady, 2016). Prior to 2013, allegory was more aesthetic than political. After that, allegorical painting could potentially become a critical component of political representation in contemporary China under cultural censorship. This will be explored in the next chapters.

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[88] Regarding allegory and dream images, Joel Fineman writes (1980, p. 46): 'I therefore psychoanalytically assume that the movement of allegory, like the dreamwork, enacts a wish that determines its progress – and the dream-vision is, of course, a characteristic framing and opening device of allegory, a way of situating allegory in the mise en abyme opened up by the variety of cognate accusatives that dream a dream, or see a sight, or tell a tale…'

[89] The memory system refers to the collective memory and cultural framework through which historical events, cultural practices, and social norms are remembered, interpreted, and understood. This system is shaped by the experiences, narratives, and ideologies of a society or community, and it influences how people perceive their past and make sense of their present.

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Chapter 3
Allegory, Irony, and Critical Practice

This chapter starts with a revisit to Bada Shanren. The first section revisits Bada Shanren, indicating that his work is ahead of his time and has the potential to be studied to navigate contemporary censorship. After that, by exploring how irony leads his works into an allegorical dimension, this chapter intends to explore how and why irony makes paintings allegorical, which serves as a theoretical basis for the next chapter, where a new model will be introduced to solve the problem of critical expression under Chinese censorship. Also, by exploring the social function of allegory between Fredric Jameson and other philosophers, this chapter explains why allegory is the ideal method to disguise direct critical practice under cultural censorship in contemporary China.

Aesthetics of Silence: A Revisit of Bada Shanren

Bada's duality in character, ambiguous in whether his mental state was a genuine consequence of his tumultuous life or a façade, grants him an intricate identity; it becomes a metaphor for the broader cultural and political ambiguities of his era. His identity allows Bada to deftly manoeuvre within his art, perplexing the audience about the origin and nature of his paintings' imagery. His creations, characterised by an oddness where the line between animal and human blurs, consistently imbue animals with human significance and emotions, seldom associated with non-human entities. This innovative approach in the history of Chinese art presents a conundrum, engaging the observer in an unsettling exchange of gazes, a visual cypher ripe for allegorical interpretation.

Echoing the implicit manner detailed in Chapter 1, Bada Shanren's double disguise, outwardly ambiguous persona and the nuanced, indirect allegory within his work, can be seen as a continuation of traditional literati strategies. His feigned madness and ambiguous depictions of humans are reminiscent of the allegorical methods used by Chinese literati painters like Zheng Sixiao. This strategy allowed Bada to express subversive ideas under the guise of insanity, a cunning use of personal narrative as a veil for political critique, which emerges as a multifaceted shield to evade the authorities.

In the *Two Quails* (Figure 24, 1694) by Bada Shanren, two quails perched on a rock. An initial glance reveals an apparent sense of humour emanating from the birds' expressions. However, prolonged observation unveils a darker, more anomalous aura surrounding the avian figures. The representation of the birds diverges from traditional Chinese paintings, where animals are often depicted in their natural essence without symbolic overtones. In contrast, Bada's quails are endowed with eerie, human-like smiles and eyes that gaze upwards beyond the painting's confines, suggesting an acute awareness of their environment. The birds appear to shy away from the viewer, as if cognisant of being observed, thereby evading direct engagement. However, their contorted forms elicit a sense of unfamiliarity, invoking feelings of estrangement. The exaggerated plumpness of the birds hinders their ability to take flight from potential threats, symbolising Bada's own encumbered state – trapped by his identity and compelled to withdraw from reality. Furthermore, the quails' evasive demeanour

establishes a dynamic interplay between observer and subject, blurring the roles and creating an enduring interaction that transcends time. This lends allegory the power to allow Bada and his creations to breach the confines of their era and resonate with contemporary audiences, challenging the constraints of linear time and chronology.

Figure 24

Two Quails

Unknown dimension. By Bada Shanren, 1694, painting, ink on paper, located in Sen-oku Hakuko Kan, Tokyo, Japan.

The motif of duality pervasive in Bada's oeuvre and life catalyses an exploration into the realm of allegory, which forms the bedrock of this research. The dynamics of perception – what is observed and how one is perceived – are not inherently reciprocal. In fact, traditional Chinese allegory operated to destabilise the binary of subject and object, engendering a multifaceted interplay between transparency and opacity. Owing to this nuanced mode of representation, political critiques could be subtly woven into paintings, serving as an understated yet potent form of resistance against cultural censorship that has coursed through the history of Chinese literati paintings.

Bada's aesthetics of silence resonates with the themes of emptiness and indirect expression explored in Chapter 1: a withdrawal of direct speech. His paintings, often devoid of direct speech or explicit imagery, align with the traditional Chinese approach to allegory. This silent resistance, a hallmark of literati painting, becomes a canvas for contemplation and indirect critique, reflecting the deep, often political, meanings embedded in his work. In examining Bada Shanren's paintings, we discern a profound prescience, a foretelling of the complexities of late modern China. His art, while deeply rooted in the socio-political milieu of his era, transcends its immediate context, revealing an acute

understanding of an emerging repressive modernity. Bada, in essence, paints not just his present but also a future where artistic expression grapples with ideological constraints.

Bada's deployment of allegory echoes the allegorical impulse, which was discussed in Chapter 2, that characterises late modern Chinese art. For ethical and artistic autonomy, Bada's work stands as a paradigm of introspective defiance, subtly woven into the fabric of his artistry. His paintings, a testament to personal integrity, reflect a conscious divergence from the prevailing socio-political ethos, embodying a silent yet resolute form of resistance. This artistic autonomy, rooted in ethical self-determination, manifests through layers of allegory and irony, offering critique and commentary without overt proclamation. Such an approach to expression underlines Bada's commitment to maintaining his individual voice amidst the restrictive milieu of his time. His art, therefore, becomes not just an aesthetic endeavour but a moral stance, a quiet affirmation of the artist's right to personal expression within the confines of cultural constraints.[90] This ethical autonomy, embedded in Bada's allegorical style, prefigures the allegorical impulse in late modern Chinese art, illustrating how artists can navigate censorship and societal expectations while adhering to their personal values and artistic vision. In other words, Bada's work, although created centuries earlier, speaks directly to the themes of repression and expression that define late modernity in China. His paintings, laden with allegorical ambiguity, articulate a dialogue that extends beyond his temporal confines, engaging with issues that would only become salient in later periods.

Bada's emotional instability and ambiguity give him a position as an outsider in his own time, a figure who does not fully deliver within the strictures of his historical moment. A double index is formulated, allowing him to have a double relationship between painting and time: his works are blind to time, and time is also blind to it, therefore opening out another time. Such a position imbues his work with a timeless quality, making his work uncanny (Kristeva, 2024; Freud, 1976).[91] It allows his art to transcend temporal boundaries and communicate with an era of Chinese late modernity. In this sense, Bada Shanren's legacy is not confined to the past; rather, it unfolds and reveals its full implications in a future context, one that grapples with similar tensions between artistic freedom and societal repression. In other words, Bada's work, with its subtle, allegorical style, prefigures the challenges faced by Chinese contemporary artists expressing themselves within political and cultural crisis. His fusion of traditional Chinese painting with innovative, personal allegory mirrors the blend of Chinese and Western elements in later modern art.[92] This synthesis reflects a broader cultural struggle to find a unique artistic voice under contemporary repression.

Thus, Bada's art becomes a bridge between eras, offering insights into the continuous struggle for creative autonomy in the face of political constraints. His works, embodying a sense of ethical

[90] The theoretical explanation of the transcendence from the aesthetic to the moral will be found in Chapter 5.

[91] The uncanny, characterised by a blend of the familiar and the foreign, can, in my opinion, manifest in the subtle strangeness and enigmatic qualities of Bada's paintings because Bada's work brings forth repressed elements within a familiar context. His paintings reveal underlying tensions or fears that resonate with deeper psychological experiences, making the familiar seem strangely unfamiliar or unsettling. Moreover, from a Kristevan perspective, Bada's work touches on the abject, elements that are part of us but also expelled. For example, his portrayal of figures that are simultaneously human and animal, or his ambiguous expressions of emotions, could blur the boundaries between what is self and what is other, evoking the uncanny.

[92] That is to say, Bada's practice is much ahead of his time and embeds with an allegorical impulse which emerges in Chinese late modernity.

autonomy and resistance, provide a valuable lens through which to view the negotiation and resistance from Chinese artists, as well as a strategy for the contemporary repressive era. In this case, it is necessary to theoretically understand how Bada's work becomes allegorical.

How Does Irony Turn into Allegory in Bada's Painting?[93]

In Bada's work, as well as in other allegorical Chinese paintings, images are fundamentally passive: they occupy empty spaces and lack meanings individually. An image, 'quite simply, is nothing' (Wall, 1999, p.14). It contrasts concepts and becomes allegorical only when the background of creation is attached. In other words, when viewers enter the images, the images also come back to viewers. Such involvement is not beyond representation because of 'the profound involvement of the subject in its own representations' (Wall, 1999, p. 14). Instead, the involvement is an unrepresentable movement, turning the meaningless into the allegorical. It is here that irony plays a crucial role.

Irony, as employed in Romantic discourse, emerges from a closed examination of the assumptions born from the notion of a complete representation, mirroring to an extent the operations of reason itself (Kierkegaard, 2000; Schlegel, 1991).[94] In this vein, irony highlights the inherent incompleteness of perspectives striving for a holistic comprehension. Schlegel contends that philosophy lacks a definitive form and that language in a true sense, as the ultimate idea and acknowledgement of the highest, the boundless, can never be accurately portrayed; hence, irony is imperative for all

[93] Irony is a rhetorical and artistic device that presents a divergence between appearance and reality, or between expectation and outcome. It operates through ambiguity, contradiction, and tension, encouraging audiences to uncover deeper meanings beyond surface-level representations. In this sense, irony is not merely a form of wit or critique but a complex tool for engaging with philosophical, aesthetic, and cultural questions. It enables the construction of layered narratives that invite reflection on the nature of representation, truth, and human experience. In this research, two types of irony will be mainly discussed: romantic irony and postmodern irony. The romantic irony, rooted in German Romanticism and theorised by Friedrich Schlegel (1991) and Søren Kierkegaard (2000), suggests the perpetual tension between creation and destruction in artistic and philosophical endeavours. Schlegel describes it as the perpetual self-creation and self-destruction of art, indicating the incompleteness of representation and the dynamic interplay between the finite and the infinite. Kierkegaard argues that irony fosters self-awareness, enabling individuals to confront contradictions within thought and existence. Romantic irony is inherently reflective, offering a pathway to transcend superficial representations and explore existential depth. Postmodern irony, as theorised by critics like Julia Kristeva (1986) and Fredric Jameson (2020), challenges grand narratives and looks into the constructed nature of meaning. It is self-referential, often employing intertextuality to critique originality and authority. Unlike Romantic irony's aspirational engagement with the infinite, postmodern irony thrives in ambiguity and multiplicity, embracing the instability of meaning. This form of irony aligns with postmodernism's broader critique of cultural norms and epistemological certainty, positioning irony as a playful yet critical engagement with the fragmented realities of the contemporary world. In my practice, which will be explained in Chapters 4 and 5, irony functions as a conceptual bridge between the Romantic and postmodern, enabling a critical dialogue within the framework of allegory. Romantic irony's emphasis on transcendence informs the philosophical depth of Chinese allegory, while postmodern irony's self-referentiality enhances its engagement with modern issues of representation and authorship. Together, these forms of irony allow allegory in my research to operate as a multidimensional tool, critiquing historical and contemporary political realities while fostering reflective and interpretative spaces for audiences. Through irony, I explore how allegorical painting can navigate cultural and political constraints, transforming aesthetic narratives into ethical and political inquiries.

[94] Kierkegaard writes that irony originates from the Greek philosopher Socrates, starting from a feigned ignorance or self-deprecation by Socrates, who often used this method in dialogues to expose the ignorance or inconsistencies in the arguments of others while pretending to be ignorant himself. It is also a dialectical method, used to guide the interlocutor to find the truth through questioning and answering. In other words, Socratic irony is less about mocking and more about leading to self-awareness and understanding: its utilisers claim to know less than they do and encourage others to express their views fully, thereby revealing the flaws in their reasoning.

philosophical endeavours that neither belong to history nor form a system; therefore, irony evolves as a dynamic interplay of self-formation and self-annihilation as it navigates the juncture between the finite and the infinite. Similarly, in Bada's work, irony invites a journey beyond superficial representations, leading to allegorical understanding. The blurred lines between animal and human forms, mirroring the ironic dialectic between the finite and the infinite, enrich this dialogue.

In *The Man Without Content*, Giorgio Agamben (1999) examines modern aesthetic challenges, with a particular focus on the dynamics of irony. He introduces the idea of the artist as a man devoid of content, a man whose sole identity springs eternally from the void of expression, grounded solely in this enigmatic stance within his own being. Romantic thinkers perceived irony as a tool for detaching from the tangible realm, consequently elevating inner experience as the fundamental basis of aesthetic realisation. Through irony, art morphs into its own subject, embodying the notion of 'the poetic I' (Agamben, 1999, p. 55) via a dance of negation. Hegel, for his part, viewed irony as innately aligned with a destructive calling (Pinkard, 2001). This negation process cultivates self-awareness, yet its boundaries stretch beyond the external realm, striking back at the very self that initiated the movement. Agamben interprets this as 'destroying the very principle of negation' (p. 56), noting Hegel's depiction of irony's fate as 'a self-annihilating nothing' (p. 52).[95] Consequently, art manifests as a negation that self-negates, that eternally outlives itself due to its inherent incapacity to perish. Art remains continually estranged from itself, seeking a bond with reality solely as nothingness, and with art morphing into the sheer potentiality of negation, nihilism thrives in its essence. Both nihilism and art discover their quintessence in the guise of Nothingness, with art eternally tethered to the shades of this nihilism that clandestinely steers the trajectory of Western history.

In Postmodern irony, self-referentiality plays an important part. This irony often points back to its own constructedness, the conventions of its genre, or the act of storytelling itself. In paintings, this form of irony reflects a heightened awareness of the image as an image, inviting viewers to become critically engaged with the works and ideas it presents, which is intertextuality, a term first coined by Julia Kristeva in 1986, referring to the relationship between a text and other texts either contemporary or historical. In this case, through intertextuality, irony challenges the viewer to recognise the references, making viewing an active, engaged process. It also interrogates the nature of narrative, originality, and the construction of meaning. Moreover, it links all images together, enriching the possibilities of interpretation and providing a means of criticising. Therefore, intertextuality within postmodern irony is a robust domain, opening up myriad avenues for literary exploration and critical discourse. It reflects postmodernism's broader concerns with questioning established norms, critiquing existing structures, and exploring the liminal space between images, artist, viewer, and context.

If we come back to analyse Bada's works again, it could be argued that his works can be interpreted as a form of visual irony, both classic and postmodern. His artwork extends an invitation to navigate through seemingly simplistic imagery to unveil profound and often unsettling meanings. Like the movement of irony within the Romantic and postmodern discourses, Bada's allegorical visuals impel

[95] The Romantics believed that irony was the ability that allowed artists, who had deeply experienced the boundless nature of artistic principles, to detach themselves from the uncertainties of the world and recognise their own superiority over all subjects. Irony implied that art had turned inward, becoming its own subject matter, and could now only express the negative potential of the poetic I, which, through denial, endlessly elevates and reflects upon itself.

an exploration beyond the veneer of representation. His paintings are not mere static depictions but dynamic puzzles that engage the observer in an enduring quest for understanding and meaning. Romantic irony, spotlighting the interplay between the finite and the infinite, finds a visual analogy in his works. The blurred demarcation between animal and human forms in his images, where creatures seemingly morph into one another, visually mirrors the ironic dialectic between the finite (physical) and the infinite (metaphysical essence). The ambiguity surrounding Bada's mental state, whether a reality or a façade, enriches this ironic dialogue. It gestures toward the elusive essence of truth and identity, which, akin to the irony highlighted by Schlegel (Albert, 1993), resides beyond the grasp of mere representation.

Also, Bada's images are self-referential. His paintings do not merely stand as independent artefacts but also engage in a self-reflexive dialogue with his own fate and existential state. The animals, for instance, reflect human-like consciousness and emotional depth, echoing his own identity and emotions. In this case, his art turns the lens onto itself, creating a meta-dialogue that extends beyond the superficial layers of representation. Meanwhile, his work fosters an ironic aesthetic by invoking a dynamic engagement between the observer and the subject, perpetually generating meaning through a dialectic process. Through the images of quails, for instance, an initial humorous resonance transitions into a profound, eerie realisation as the observer delves deeper into the visual narrative. The transcendence of time and chronology through this dynamic interaction echoes the timeless, boundless domain of irony, where understanding and meaning morph and multiply.

In this case, irony forms an allegorical layer for Bada's work, an 'unrepresentable movement' (Wall, 1999, p.14). When viewers step into the visual narratives, the once passive images morph into vibrant allegorical tales. This transformation navigates through the domains of representation and non-representation. Bada's expressions arise from the nothingness of expression, from void to creation. Bada's artistic narrative can be perceived as a trajectory from emptiness or a void towards the manifestation, on the canvas, of existential angst, identity, and critique. His evocative delineation between animal and human forms stems from an abstract void, evolving into a discernible yet enigmatic imagery that induces contemplation and a quest for meaning. To be more detailed, each image in Bada's work, when isolated, might appear as being voided of specific meaning but, in conjunction with its allegorical narrative, significance appears. The nothingness in his works is a fertile ground where allegory, symbolism, and irony intertwine to foster a deeper comprehension of existence, identity, and reality.

The subtle embedding of political critique within fanciful landscapes and non-human imagery exemplifies a form of visual irony. The eerie, sometimes unsettling imagery in Bada's work, and the ambiguous delineation of forms, encapsulate a nihilistic essence – a critique of reality, a yearning for transcendence, and perhaps a quest for liberation from worldly shackles. It presents a muted yet potent resistance against cultural censorship, a testament to the subversive power of irony as a vehicle for socio-political critique. The essence of resistance against socio-political constraints in Bada's practice emanates from a negation – a rejection of oppressive realities, which also steers towards a thematic nothingness, where the conventional is dissolved to pave the way for an explorative understanding.

Allegory and Ideology

In Bada's paintings, what initially seems ironic – such as whimsical brushstrokes or colour choices – gradually unfolds into complex allegorical narratives. These narratives interweave the literal with the symbolic, akin to Jameson's layers of allegory. As a matter of fact, Bada's simple depiction of a bird or flower in his work can, through allegorical interpretation, represent broader socio-political commentaries or philosophical musings.

Allegory, in its layered and interpretive nature, gains additional depth when contextualised through the perspectives of historical embodiment in the works of Bada Shanren, as well as through theoretical engagement from philosophers like Walter Benjamin and Craig Owens. Benjamin, in his *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (2009), conceptualises allegory as a medium that reveals deeper truths beneath surface appearances. He suggests that allegory transforms ordinary objects into symbolic entities. Craig Owens follows Benjamin's framework, seeing allegory as inherently deconstructive and critical. Owens argues in *The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism* (1980) that allegory challenges and subverts established meanings. This aspect of allegory is evident in how Bada's art subtly dissects and comments on his socio-political context. By cloaking his critiques in symbolism and allegory, Bada navigates the rigid confines of expression in his time, much like contemporary Chinese artists face censorship today.

The convergence of postmodern irony and allegory in the field of art, particularly in Chinese paintings, offers a rich tapestry for analysis. This intersection is exemplified in the works of Bada Shanren, where irony functions as a nuanced critique of surface representations and an invitation into the allegorical dimension. In the context of postmodern irony, Bada's paintings disrupt traditional narratives, compelling viewers to question and reassess the images. This critical engagement reflects Fredric Jameson's understanding of allegory, which he perceives as transcending literal interpretations to reveal deeper, multi-layered meanings.

Jameson's approach to allegory, particularly in the postmodern context, considers allegory essential in representing historical reality (2020). Unlike traditional readings, his multi-level allegorical model offers a comprehensive framework for understanding texts and artworks.[96] Besides the Christian use of allegory, Jameson also uses this model to analyse Mahler's music and *Hamlet* in the later chapters of his book *Allegory and Ideology*. This model always starts with the literal meaning of the text (or music, paintings…), and then proceeds to the allegorical, moral, and anagogical levels. Such four levels might differ from the traditional readings of allegory because Jameson regards it as essential for its ability to represent historical reality. Jameson thinks that Benjamin's allegory became 'restricted to a specific historical period' (p. 30), lying in Baroque decoration which either in its state of over-ripeness or as a litter of ruins is read as an expression of Melancholy, while Paul de Man's effort restricted in reading and linguistics. In Jameson's approach to postmodern, allegory plays an essential role in

[96] This model can be applied to analyse Bada's work, where the surface-level (literal) imagery gives way to deeper allegorical, moral, and anagogical interpretations.

society – but what is the relation between allegory and ideology, and which is the representation of the subject's imaginary relationship to its real conditions of existence?[97] In *Always Allegorize* (2020), Franco Moretti believes there is a contradiction between allegory and ideology. Allegory is always a revealer, while ideology isolates the components of a culture. In this way, the relationship between allegory and ideology might become allegory against ideology. Virtually the whole of human culture is a product of ideology, while the internal structure of allegory makes elements of ideology in a way that 'is not itself ideological' (Moretti, 2020, p. 55). Therefore, allegory might be a solution to break the boundaries of different ideologies and to redeem criticism universally.

In *The Political Unconscious* (2013), Jameson suggests that ideology might hide inside the form of narrative, which he called 'ideology of form,' and the figures or stories are decorations and effects of the narrative. Utilising such narrative, works are not merely mechanically reflecting a certain concept of any specific class but also becoming a political allegory, a symbolic and imaginative solution to the existing insoluble social contradictions.[98] In this way, the subtext participates in organising and reconstructing the reality. An example could be given by conducting a close reading of *An Old Maid* by Balzac. In this novel, Mademoiselle Cormon finally married an abrupt and energetic capitalist, Du Bousquier. However, it was quickly apparent to us that he was sexually impotent. Jameson thinks it was an allegory of the social contradictions after the French Revolution: the nobles were decent but had little power to get involved in politics, while the bourgeois were energetic but failed to achieve any great success. At the end of the novel, the marriage without sex, according to Jameson, is 'above all a didactic work and a political object-lesson that seeks to transform the events of empirical history into an optional trial run against which the strategies of the various social classes can be tested' (p. 164). It is an imaginative solution to the reform of the French social system after the revolution and a comedic solution to a historical tragedy. This solution might be regarded as political unconsciousness and also as one of the contemporary functions of allegory.

In his essay 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism' (2019), Fredric Jameson suggests that contemporary literature could be allegorically interpreted, which rejects Paul de Man's idea that the allegorical mode is opposite to meaning and communication.[99,100] He suggests that all

[97] Jameson writes, allegory 'has today become a social symptom: but of what? I tend to feel that allegory raises its head as a solution when beneath this or that seemingly stable or unified reality the tectonic plates of deeper contradictory levels of the Real shift and grate ominously against one another and demand a representation, or at least an acknowledgement, they are unable to find in the Schein or illusory surfaces of existential or social life. Allegory does not reunify those incommensurable forces, but it sets them in relationship with one another in a way which, as with all art, all aesthetic experience, can lead alternately to ideological comfort or the restless anxieties of a more expansive knowledge' (2020, p. 34).

[98] For example, the symmetry of masks made by Brazilian Indian tribes, according to Claude Lévi-Strauss's research (1988), is an imaginary solution to unequal tribal relations.

[99] To some degree, it also rejects Jameson's own idea that 'Exegesis, interpretation, commentary have fallen into disrepute' in *Metacommentary* (1971, p. 9).

[100] Jameson's concept of 'national allegory,' especially in the context of Third World literature, suggests that personal narratives often reflect broader societal and cultural themes. This perspective can be extended to Bada's

the texts of the Third World, which have suffered from colonialism and imperialism, could be read as national allegories. In Jameson's opinion, the relations between the public and the private in the Third World are different from those in the West. In the Third World, they always come together without separation and division. In this way, texts about private matters might reflect on collective issues and allegorise public situations. That is why 'the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the third-world public culture and society' (p. 165).

Jameson's view gives another perspective to analyse literature from Third World countries. However, for most critics, this essay is infamous because they believe Jameson is studying Third World literature from the First World academy's vantage point. In *Third World Short Story as National Allegory?* (1996), Thomas Palakeel argues that Third World literature is written in lots of local languages, and only a few texts are translated. He thinks First World critics base their aesthetic pronouncements on the books mediated and handpicked by the establishments linked to the First World for their allegorical and political content. Aijaz Ahmad (1987) also thinks the idea that all Third World texts could be read as national allegories is theoretical Orientalism, or an example of using Otherness to achieve the aim of exploring the West instead of the Other itself. In Ahmad's opinion, the definition of the Third World based on the experience of colonialism and imperialism is never ideologically or cognitively neutral. Also, Ahmad points out that the ramifications between private and public worlds, which identify the 'first world', also influenced 'third world' countries so that we cannot assume that a Third World text relating to the private sphere could be allegorised by being related back to the public or national sphere. What is more, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak thinks Jameson's opinion is based on his assumption that he knows what the allegory refers to before reading the text. In his essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (2023), Spivak indicates that the Other, especially the subaltern, cannot express aloud in their society or culture. Therefore, it is impossible for Jameson to 'pre-know' and interpret.

However, Imre Szeman suggests that it seems that 'almost without exception, critics of Jameson's essay have wilfully misread it' (2001, p. 804). In his opinion, the general theory of Third World literary production that Jameson proposed is 'an attempt to conceptualise the relationship of literature to politics that goes beyond the most common (and commonsense) understanding of the relations between these terms' (p. 804). In other words, what Jameson has proposed is not patronising but provides a model to analyse the literature from the Third World (which is alienated from the West) using the cultural and materialist approach. The model, or the method he utilises, insists on totality, which could be regarded as a significant concept of his research. That might be why Jameson claimed that all Third World texts could be read as national allegories in his essay.

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work, where the individual elements in his paintings – imbued with irony and allegorical depth – can be seen as reflecting wider socio-political and cultural narratives.

Jameson's claim that 'the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the third-world public culture and society' (2019, p. 165) comes from a close reading of Lu Xun's work. This claim does not suggest that, of necessity, Third World writing is narratively simplistic or overtly moralistic or that such texts are nothing more than exotic versions of Bunyan, as some other critics think. Instead, what I see from the claim is Jameson's struggle to seek national independence and cultural autonomy under imperialism and its aftermath because it is 'a reflection of the economic situation of such areas in their penetration by various stages of capital, or as it is sometimes euphemistically termed, of modernisation' (2019, p. 163). In other words, allegory represents, reflects, and situates ideology.

In this vein, allegory within artworks harbours the capacity to act as an imaginative conduit for addressing and potentially transforming existing social issues and historical afflictions. The concept of the national allegory may inadvertently become a means of posing critical inquiries. A pertinent illustration of this is found in Lu Xun's *Medicine*.[101] In his exploration of *Medicine*, Jameson emphasises the need to rethink conventional symbolic interpretations.[102] He notes that in narratives in this novel, elements like sexuality and politics are not isolated but intersect and influence each other, creating a complex web of meanings. This complexity leads Jameson to remark on the nature of allegory, which he views as distinct from traditional symbolism. According to Jameson, allegory is

[101] In the story, Hua Laoshuan acquires steamed bread soaked in human blood, procured with the earnings of his labour, hoping to cure his son Hua Xiaoshuan's tuberculosis. This belief, portrayed as widespread within the novel, encapsulates national consciousness and reflects pervasive barbarism, superstition, and ignorance, not as isolated incidents but as manifestations of a collective spiritual malaise that characterised the societal psyche of the era. However, the source of the blood, Xia Yu, is a revolutionary who was executed for his opposition to the Qing Dynasty, embodying loyalty and conviction in his revolutionary ideals. The sale of his blood as a cure paradoxically contrasts the intended symbolism of his sacrifice. At the novel's climax, following the placement of an anonymous wreath on Xia Yu's tomb, his mother solicits a crow to land on the grave as a sign of his spirit's presence. In Chinese tradition, the crow often portends misfortune, yet here it defies such superstitions, refusing to conform to the mother's request and soaring towards the distant horizon. This act starkly repudiates conventional optimism and introduces a Taoist nuance of cosmic indifference: the 'universe is unconscious.' It signifies that individual anguish and martyrdom may be rendered inconsequential on a broader societal or worldly scale. The crow, ignoring the collective yearning for consolation, including that of the readers desiring political and ideological clarity, asserts its autonomy, thus subverting the secular hope previously suggested by the wreath. As articulated by Lu Xun, the ambiguity of the crow's symbolism leaves its precise meaning open to interpretation, yet it undeniably challenges the very fabric of secular hope.

[102] Jameson writes: 'In the analysis of a story like this, we must rethink our conventional conception of the symbolic levels of a narrative (where sexuality and politics might be in homology to each other, for instance) as a set of loops or circuits which intersect and overdetermine each other—the enormity of therapeutic cannibalism finally intersecting in a pauper's cemetery, with the more overt violence of family betrayal and political repression.… brings me to the cautionary remark I wanted to make about allegory itself—a form long discredited in the West and the specific target of the Romantic revolution of Wordsworth and Coleridge, yet a linguistic structure which also seems to be experiencing a remarkable reawakening of interest in contemporary literary theory. If allegory has once again become somehow congenial for us today, as over against the massive and monumental unifications of an older modernist symbolism or even realism itself, it is because the allegorical spirit is profoundly discontinuous, a matter of breaks and heterogeneities, of the multiple polysemia of the dream rather than the homogeneous representation of the symbol. Our traditional conception of allegory—based, for instance, on stereotypes of Bunyan—is that of an elaborate set of figures and personifications to be read against some one-to-one table of equivalences: this is, so to speak, a one-dimensional view of this signifying process, which might only be set in motion and complexified were we willing to entertain the more alarming notion that such equivalences are themselves in constant change and transformation at each perpetual present of the text' (2019, p. 170).

characterised by its discontinuous nature and the multiplicity of meanings, contrasting with the one-dimensional, fixed interpretations often associated with symbols. He suggests that allegorical meanings are not static but continually evolve with the text, inviting readers to engage with a dynamic and interpretatively open narrative (2019).

Jameson challenges the conventional understanding of allegory as a mere collection of symbols corresponding to a single, fixed meaning. Instead, allegory should be seen as a dynamic and complex interplay of different symbolic levels with a narrative. Jameson's assertion that the allegorical spirit is profoundly discontinuous supports the notion that allegory can be a powerful vehicle for critique and interrogation. It embodies the complexity of life and social contradictions rather than offering a simplified, unified symbol. As Jameson notes, this reawakening of interest in allegory is a response to its ability to capture the fragmented and often contradictory aspects of contemporary life, which cannot be adequately represented by traditional symbolism or realism. In this case, allegory's resurgence and its complex, often multivalent nature provide a rich ground for artists and writers to engage in critical discourse, especially in the context of decolonisation and post-colonialism. Allegory becomes a mode through which hidden or suppressed social critiques can be subtly introduced and explored, offering not just a reflection of reality but also a critique of it, inviting the audience to uncover and contemplate the underlying messages and issues being presented.

Thus, artworks may be interpreted as cultural productions that resonate with specific social situations and concerns. However, within the Chinese context, cultural censorship often influences this interaction. When analysed, it is crucial to consider the ideological values embedded within these works, given their latent political unconscious. Conversely, the creators of these artworks may view their creations as a form of cultural strategy, suggesting that these works transcend mere artistic expressions to become multifaceted interpretations and critiques of their context.

Suppose we follow the framework of Jameson's postmodern allegory to discuss the political and critical implications in artworks. In that case, it needs to be addressed: 'What is missing in his discussion of national allegory is a discussion of the nation to match that of allegory' (Szeman, 2001, p. 814). In Jameson's discourse on Third World Literature, he appears to conflate the notion of the nation with the political, and, occasionally, with an idealised collective or community. This conflation raises the issue of the nation's role in interpreting texts from the Third World, a role that, according to Jameson, seems underexplored. There's an implication that the term 'nation' in the context of national allegory may warrant a more critical examination than Jameson offers.

As for my research, the specific 'nation,' of course, is China, where cultural censorship has a long history, and contemporary practices continue to navigate a complex landscape of government control and surveillance (Solomon, 1998). Since Xi Jinping's rise to power in 2013, there has been a notable ideological tightening across various sectors in China, including the arts (Brady, 2016; Movius, 2022),

which has led to a more restricted environment for expression, with artists facing increased scrutiny and the parameters of permissible content becoming narrower. Meanwhile, events like the 2019 protests in Hong Kong are also leading to heightened self-censorship among artists.[103]

In this context, postmodern allegory could serve as a subversive tool for artists to navigate the tightened landscape of cultural censorship. By employing multi-layered symbolism and indirect references, an allegorical strategy from literati painting and Cynical Realism, artists could create works that are open to interpretation, allowing them to subtly address social issues and critique the government without overtly transgressing the boundaries set by the state. Allegory's inherent ambiguity offers a protective layer for artistic expression, which, while possibly aligning superficially with the state's cultural agenda, may convey deeper, more critical messages to audiences attuned to its nuances.

A New Understanding of Legacy

The irony inherent in Bada Shanren's work and the subsequent shift towards allegorical interpretation underscores a crucial aspect of contemporary cultural analysis.[104] The irony not only serves as a critical tool for disassembling preconceived notions about art but also sets the stage for a more profound engagement with the allegorical. It invites the viewer to explore beneath the surface, to understand the interplay of historical realities, cultural narratives, and individual expressions within the artwork. This exploration is crucial in comprehending the full spectrum of meanings that allegory, as conceptualised by Jameson, brings to the forefront.

[103] Xi Jinping's cultural agenda emphasises the development of cultural undertakings and industries with a 'people-centred creative orientation' (Movius, 2022) and the cultivation of artistic talent that adheres to both moral and artistic standards. This indicates a push for cultural expressions that align with socialist values and promote national confidence, suggesting an environment where the promotion of government-sanctioned narratives is encouraged, while dissenting voices are further marginalised.

[104] Bada Shanren's irony is nuanced and multi-layered, engaging both Romantic and postmodern sensibilities, while Cynical Realism's irony remains largely within the Romantic framework, reacting to historical fragmentation without fully reconstituting or re-engaging it. Both Bada and the Cynical Realists deploy irony as a way to address political contexts indirectly, yet their methods reveal different capacities for engaging with historical continuity and transformation. Bada's irony, echoing Walter Benjamin's notion of allegory (2009) as a 'ruin' that reconstructs historical fragments with deliberate ambiguity, interacts dynamically with the past and present. His work bridges eras by embodying irony not only as a reaction to his time but as a forward-looking dialogue with temporality itself. In this sense, Bada's irony synthesises elements of Romantic and postmodern irony, where Romantic irony reflects the fragment's inherent incompleteness (de Man, 1969, pp. 187-228) and postmodern irony challenges linear historical readings through allegory. Cynical Realism, by contrast, reflects the immediate post-1989 climate in China—a fragmented temporality marked by historical disillusionment and a rejection of socialist ideals. This irony aligns with Jameson's (2013) 'historical allegory,' where symbolic fragmentation reflects unresolved social contradictions. However, unlike Bada's work, which engages with allegory to critique and restructure these fragments into a layered narrative beyond his time, Cynical Realism remains tethered to its historical moment, primarily reflecting the brokenness of the 1990s. In doing so, it lacks the recursive engagement with history that Bada's work achieves. Thus, while both Bada Shanren and the Cynical Realists use irony to mediate political commentary under restrictive conditions, Bada's irony offers a richer allegorical practice that reconstructs historical fragments, resonating across time. His approach becomes a flexible, layered critique—a framework that Cynical Realism touches upon but does not fully realise, given its emphasis on reflecting rather than reconstructing temporality and history.

The transition from the irony in Bada Shanren's paintings to the allegorical dimension represents a journey from a critical questioning of representation towards an understanding of the multilayered narratives that art can convey. This journey is reflective of a broader movement in postmodern art and literature – one that challenges the reading of the work on multiple levels, deciphering not just the immediate, but also the hidden, the historical, and the symbolic. Through this lens, Bada Shanren's art becomes a vivid canvas on which irony and allegory converge, providing a profound commentary on both the personal and the collective human experience, which is perfectly suitable for current censorship.

The exploration of Bada Shanren's art, particularly through the lens of irony and its progression into allegory, has unveiled the intricate layers of meaning inherent in his work. Irony, as a fundamental aspect of Bada's artistic narrative, serves not just as a stylistic element but as a critical mechanism for navigating the constraints of political expression. His use of irony – subtle, yet profound – paves the way for allegorical interpretations, allowing for a nuanced critique of socio-political realities under the guise of innocuous imagery. This interplay of irony and allegory in Bada's work epitomises the sophisticated artistry necessary for conveying veiled resistance and commentary in an environment where open criticism was fraught with peril.

The significance of this interplay extends beyond Bada Shanren's historical milieu, resonating within the broader canvas of artistic expression where allegory, rooted in irony, becomes a strategic tool against censorship and societal constraints. The upcoming chapter aims to delve deeper, exploring how contemporary artists employ allegorical techniques, rooted in irony, to navigate and critique their socio-political landscapes. It will examine the myriad ways artists today continue to draw upon the legacy of figures like Bada Shanren, embedding complex meanings in their work that challenge viewers to look beyond the surface.

In conclusion, the study of Bada Shanren's art, particularly his manipulation of irony to engender allegorical depth, offers a crucial perspective on the multilayered potential of art as a medium for critique and socio-political commentary. His enduring influence not only sheds light on the historical role of art in navigating oppressive regimes but also serves as a guiding beacon for contemporary artists and scholars in understanding and harnessing the power of irony and allegory. This legacy is instrumental in our ongoing quest to comprehend and articulate the complexities of Chinese culture through the transformative lens of art.

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Chapter 4
Allegorical Political Painting: Advancing to A New Relationship with Time

This chapter explores how contemporary Chinese political artists navigate the dual constraints of cultural censorship and self-censorship through allegory. Amidst a regime where political expression is meticulously monitored, allegory emerges as a strategy enabling artists to veil critical commentary within layers of metaphor and historical allusion. This discourse is rooted in my practice, which bridges the emptiness of Bada Shanren's paintings and the fullness of Jörg Immendorff's artworks. By looking into the interplay between external censorship mechanisms and the internalised restraint of self-censorship, the chapter illuminates the transformation of allegory from a historical artistic impulse to a contemporary mode of political engagement. Through an analysis that connects theoretical perspectives with personal practice, the chapter reveals how allegory, infused with irony and temporal fluidity, becomes a resilient medium for political expression, offering a subtle yet potent critique of the socio-political landscape in contemporary China.

The Significance of My Painting: Allegory Against Self-censorship

Chinese cultural censorship, deeply rooted in the country's political regime, primarily serves to uphold the ideological objectives of the ruling Chinese Communist Party, or CCP (Hladíková, 2021). This form of censorship extends far beyond the mere suppression of dissent and encompasses a strategic shaping of the cultural narrative to align with the CCP's ideological goals. Literature, art, and other forms of cultural expression are carefully monitored and regulated to ensure they propagate the desired narratives, emphasising social harmony and the progress achieved under CCP rule (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013).[105]

[105] In the article *Ai Weiwei: How Censorship Works* (2017), Ai explains how cultural censorship affects artists. Directly confronting government narratives, Ai's politically charged works have been censored in China. His name was erased from his exhibitions, a symbolic act that represents the erasure of the artist's identity and diminishing the value of their creative expression. This act of censorship extends beyond simple suppression; it involves controlling the narrative around an artist's work and even their public persona. He writes, '(in China) I cannot speak in any public forum. My name is expunged everywhere in the public media. I am not allowed to travel within China and am banned from the state media, where I am regularly scolded.' On self-censorship, he writes 'people who willingly censor themselves are vulnerable to moral challenges of many kinds. They have never been victims and never will be, despite their occasional show of tear wiping. Each time they display their servility, they bring warmth to the hearts of the authoritarians and harm to people who protest. Their craven stance, as it becomes widespread, also becomes the deeper reason for the moral collapse of our society. If these people believe that their choice to cooperate is the only way to avoid victimhood, they are embarking on an ill-fated journey in the dark.' I disagree with his opinion,because it may not fully encompass the role of self-censorship in the work of artists who do not see themselves as social activists. For these artists, self-censorship facilitates an indirect engagement with socio-political themes, enabling them to explore and reflect on these issues in a manner that is less confrontational yet potentially more introspective and complex. This leads to the development of an allegorical language that invites viewers to engage in deeper contemplation. In contexts where direct expression might be met with severe consequences, subtlety does not necessarily dilute the message; rather, it can add layers of meaning, enriching the viewer's experience and understanding. The use of allegory, in this case, can be seen as a strategy that places the onus of interpretation on the audience, thereby engaging them in an active dialogue with the artwork. This method respects the audience's intelligence and perceptiveness, challenging them to uncover the veiled critiques embedded within the art rather than telling them what is right or wrong. Thus, self-censorship is not merely a limitation but a challenge. It compels artists to think critically about the role of art in society—whether it should serve as a direct political tool or as a reflective medium that captures the realities of the socio-political landscape. Therefore, while Ai Weiwei's stance against

The contrast between Zhao Yang's (b. 1970) *Roma Is a Lake 180418* (Figure 25, 2018) and Sheng Qi's (b. 1965) *Beijing Bird's Nest* (Figure 26, 2008) illustrates two divergent responses to the pervasive threat of censorship faced by Chinese artists living domestically and abroad. Zhao Yang's painting depicts an environment reminiscent of Wang Guangyi's *Frozen Arctic No. 29* (Figure 12, 1985), where a solitary figure skates on an expanse of ice. Trees and colourful decorations in the background suggest a festive occasion, but the figure's precarious balance on the ice evokes a sense of isolation and vulnerability. The ice might symbolise a treacherous political landscape—beautiful yet fraught with danger and potential catastrophe. A contradiction appears in the painting. The cracks in the ice suggest the fragility of a seemingly stable political entity, beneath which tumultuous and conflicting forces are ready to erupt. Notably, Zhao does not attempt to resolve these tensions directly. The lone figure of a dancer, vulnerable and almost serene, reflects a similar emotion to that in Bada Shanren's work: subtle, cryptic imagery conveys a distant reflection on the political dynamics of his time without overtly committing to a clear stance.

Figure 25

Roma Is a Lake 180418

90x125 cm. By Zhao Yang, 2018, painting, oil and acrylic on canvas, private collection.

In contrast, Sheng Qi's *Beijing Bird's Nest* (2008), created in the relative safety of the UK, adopts a more confrontational stance. His painting overtly critiques state power, symbolised by the Bird's Nest

self-censorship aligns with his personal and political ethos, it is essential to recognise that other artists may discover in self-censorship a different kind of value—a space where silence speaks volumes and the unsaid can be as powerful as the outspoken. See Ai's article on https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/06/opinion/sunday/ai-weiwei-how-censorship-works.html, retrieved November 18, 2024.

stadium—an emblem of national pride and state authority. The uniformed figures and streaks of red, reminiscent of blood, convey an oppressive atmosphere, reflecting the darker side of collective identity and control. Sheng's diasporic position affords him greater freedom to directly address themes of oppression, collective conformity, and state control. In his work, symbols of authority are laid bare, and his critical stance towards the Chinese political system is unmistakable.

Figure 26

Beijing Bird's Nest

100x102 cm. By Sheng Qi, 2008, painting, oil on canvas, private collection.

In Zhao's work, however, we find an ambiguous stance that reveals a more cautious rejection of the political expression—one that does not directly confront authority but instead depicts a fable. This subtle approach, in contrast to Sheng's directness, reflects how Zhao's position as an artist within China necessitates a more layered, indirect form of expression.[106] Here, political critique is painted into an ambiguous landscape rather than explicitly declared. This ambiguity likely arises from the pressures of self-censorship, where the artist balances creative expression with caution, exploring the boundaries of political commentary through implicit methods.

Self-censorship in contemporary China reflects a complex balance between state-imposed narratives and internalised regulation within society. This balance was notably reinforced by Xi Jinping's 2014 speech at the Forum on Literature and Art in Beijing, where he addressed the role of art in upholding

[106] Another example of political expressions by domestic artists is Hu Weiyi's (b. 1990) video works, which employ urban imagery to subtly critique censorship through symbolic obstructions. In *The Window Blind*, Hu presents windows from typical 1980s and 1990s buildings, altered to either block or reveal scenes of daily life as curtains glide across them. This dynamic symbolises the transient visibility and suppression inherent in censorship, where everyday actions are intermittently concealed and disclosed, reflecting the erratic nature of cultural control in contemporary China (Jiang, 2021). See this work on https://hdmgallery.com/exhibitions/34-hu-weiyi-the-window-blind-beijing/press_release_text/, retrieved November 18, 2024.

ideological and cultural values. Xi stressed that 'literature and art cannot lose their direction in the tide of the market economy,' indicating the importance of works that 'reflect the voice of the people' and 'persist in serving the people and socialism' (2014). Xi's words, reminiscent of Maoist directives in Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, suggest a revival of state rhetoric emphasising that art should contribute to 'social harmony' and 'show the people glory and hope, telling them that the dream is reachable' (2014). This speech exemplifies the expectations placed upon artists to align their works with the ideals of the Communist Party, promoting a positive narrative that prioritises stability over critique.

In response to such directives, there has been a gradual shift from 'hard' cultural censorship—characterised by strict, institutionalised control over artistic expression during the Maoist and early post-Mao eras—to 'soft' self-censorship, which relies on internalised, psychological forms of control (Hladíková, 2021). While direct censorship once enforced ideological conformity through overt suppression, economic dependency, and personal repercussions, contemporary self-censorship has evolved into a subtler but pervasive form of regulation. Artists, writers, and cultural institutions now participate in a system of self-monitoring and indirect restriction, often adapting their work preemptively to avoid potential avoid the potential consequences of external censorship, such as professional repercussions or legal action (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013). This transition reflects a broader societal shift: while the state no longer explicitly dictates every artistic or literary detail, it has successfully instilled a collective sense of responsibility for upholding social and ideological stability.

In practice, this 'soft' censorship permeates all stages of artistic production. Artists like Zhao Yang, whose work explores themes of political tension without direct confrontation, embody the complex social dynamics at play. Zhao's choice to employ fable-like ambiguity, as in his painting *Roma Is a Lake 180418*, suggests an implicit negotiation of self-censorship, where sensitive political themes are hinted at rather than openly expressed. This approach mirrors the pressures faced by artists in contemporary China, who, like Zhao, balance creative exploration with caution to avoid crossing state-defined boundaries.

This system of self-regulation is not only a professional norm but also a socially reinforced behaviour, with individuals and communities mutually influencing each other's adherence to these unwritten rules. The pervasive social expectation to uphold harmony and unity compels artists to internalize the values promoted by state rhetoric, often leading them to self-censor even in the absence of explicit external pressure. This 'velvet prison' of acquiescence creates an environment in which artists' individual expressions are shaped by a broader societal commitment to stability, where public silence often masks private dissent (Haraszti, 1990). This transition from overt censorship to self-imposed regulation reflects an evolving social contract in contemporary Chinese society, where artists, audiences, and institutions collectively navigate a landscape of regulated expression through a shared understanding of the ideological stakes.

This socially embedded form of self-censorship ultimately fosters a sense of unity among cultural producers, aligning them with state objectives in ways that may feel seamless yet impose limitations on artistic freedom (Butler, 1998). It allows the Chinese Communist Party to maintain ideological control without direct intervention, embedding its values within the very fabric of cultural production.

Thus, the social perspective on self-censorship in China reveals a unique interplay between state influence and communal conformity, illustrating how artists negotiate their position within a society that prizes stability over dissent.

On a philosophical level, self-censorship in China reflects an internalised form of power, echoing Foucault's concept of productive power—a force that shapes not only behaviour but also thought, constructing the frameworks through which individuals interpret reality and situate themselves within it (1977). For Foucault, power does not simply limit; it actively forms subjects who embody its ideological boundaries through processes of internalised regulation. This resonates with Butler's idea of productive constraint, where censorship simultaneously restricts expression and molds the identities of those within its influence (Butler, 1998). In this light, self-censorship becomes an existential negotiation: a balance between personal expression and alignment with the ideological narrative. Artists deploy symbolic or ambiguous language to convey their truths within safe boundaries, maintaining agency without directly violating state-imposed restrictions.

As an artist, my experience with self-censorship began in 2020 when I created a series of paintings reflecting on the pandemic, intending to capture how it reshaped our daily lives. Yet, despite the lack of overt critique, a gallery informed me that these works could not be displayed at the Art021, an art fair in Shanghai, due to their direct reference to the pandemic. This experience marked a turning point in my practice, as it was the first time I directly confronted cultural censorship. Since then, I've found myself needing to consider whether my paintings could actually be exhibited in China when making them. This has become a struggle because, in the process of self-censoring my work, I realised that the traditional symbolic system no longer worked; one-to-one references were too easily detected, often resulting in artworks rendered unexhibitable or even banned by the government.

At that time, I faced two paths. One option was to avoid politics in my work, like many other artists who, wary of cultural censorship, chose to embrace apolitical abstract impressionism, a style that has grown increasingly popular in China (Gao, 2011). The other option was to challenge ideological boundaries and seek ways to conduct political critique implicitly. Allegory, with deep roots in Chinese art history, offered a solution by allowing complex or controversial topics to be addressed indirectly. Through allegory, layered meanings can emerge without overtly confronting ideological limits. This realisation has since shaped my practical method, where allegory functions not only as a creative tool but also as an essential strategy within the broader landscape of self-censorship in contemporary Chinese art.

To regain critical practice in painting under contemporary cultural censorship and self-censorship, reinterpreting tradition through the lens of allegory, anchored in the understanding of temporality stemming from Bada Shanren and resonating with the allegorical impulse based on Chinese late modernity, is a realistic solution. In my allegorical painting, there is not a linear interpretation but rather an intricate interweaving – akin to curving lines – that embodies the essence of allegory, necessitating the incorporation of a level of disguise in my creations. The allegory I employ is deeply rooted in the historical tapestry of traditional Chinese culture: emptiness and irony. I embrace a connection to historical memory through the prism of painting's history, a connection many contemporary artists eschew due to the prevailing penchant for immediacy over historical reflection.

The synthesis of traditional and late modern representational frameworks is exemplified in the works of Bada Shanren. Bada's approach, which amalgamates the endeavours of Chinese *yimin* artists with implicit nature, transcends the confines of historical temporality, resonating with the present through a way of oddness: a poignant reflection of the contemporary repressive climate. His work embodies both resistance and negotiation, epitomising a potentially optimal approach to confronting the escalating intensity of Chinese cultural censorship. Consequently, the tradition of allegorical painting is repositioned not as an exotic Other but as a trenchant challenge to our perceptions, offering insights that can be harnessed to address contemporary dilemmas.

Emptiness enhances the implicit nature of my practice as an approach to expressing and hiding simultaneously. It is different from the concept of nothingness in Western philosophy. Nothingness, according to Sartre, indicates a state of nonexistence or the internal negation separating existence and identity (Sartre, Richmond & Moran, 2022). Emptiness, on the other hand, is the void containing everything in an unseparated nature, which could allow transformation at any second. It introduces both nothingness and fullness, allowing the emotions in the painting to be hidden and expressed simultaneously. However, by mentioning emptiness, I do not intend to address the spiritual space through the painting's surface or form as traditional Chinese painting does. Also, contrary to the overt and discernible narratives characteristic of Cynical Realism – constructed through amalgamations of daily life, dreams, and memory, a technique steadfastly employed within this movement – my painting adopts a more enigmatic approach. This obscurity is not without intention; it signifies a deliberate integration of the literati ethos, deeply entrenched within Chinese poetic aesthetics. This ethos champions a representational process that demands active engagement from both the artist and the observer, navigating the liminal spaces from absence to presence and, reciprocally, from presence to absence. Such a methodology not only diverges from the explicit narrative style of Cynical Realism but also embeds complexity, suggesting a dialogic interaction between the artwork and its viewers, thereby enriching the interpretative experience.

My paintings' narrative and visual constructs might superficially obscure the inherent emptiness, as the completeness of content and expression veils this underlying void. However, this emptiness is deliberately articulated through allegorical dimensions wherein my works bifurcate into external and internal narratives. The external layer often unfolds through fables or dream-like vignettes, seemingly detached from realist phenomena, echoing Jörg Immendorff's painting. This layer invites audiences with its apparent transparency, yet it is only a precursor to the deeper, internal narrative. The internal, allegorical layer is where my true concerns lie, exploring the complexities of Chinese social and political landscapes alongside cultural critiques. This dimension of my work is not immediately perceptible, demanding viewers' deeper engagement to uncover the allegorical impulses derived from my social and political contemplations. Driven by a 'silent speech,' my practice inherits and reinterprets the stylistic nuances of Neo-Expressionism, extending beyond mere aesthetic contemplation. This approach transcends geographical and cultural confines, challenging the viewer to consider the broader, often hidden implications of the allegory presented. Thus, my practice is not merely an artistic endeavour but an exercise in expanding the dialectical relationships within the painting, establishing a discourse that reaches beyond the constraints of China's socio-political boundaries.

In my practice, I navigate the interstitial spaces bridging Western and Chinese cultural paradigms, positing my work as an embodiment of allegorical art. This conception of allegory transcends its traditional Western interpretation, engaging with a dual heritage incorporating Chinese tradition. Distinctively, allegory within the Western canon, as explicated by Walter Benjamin (2009), serves as a mechanism for deconstructing historical symbols, emerging as a foundational experience precipitating the advent of modernity. Conversely, the allegorical tradition in literati painting manifests as a repudiation of modernity, with traditional Chinese painting prioritising depictions of a time characterised by the absence of human dominion – preferring to underscore the primacy of nature over technology and portraying an era minimally impacted by human intervention.

My allegory demonstrates a dual resistance, leveraging Western and Chinese perspectives to critique modernity and its absence.[107] Although human figures often populate my paintings, they are portrayed with a lifelessness that echoes that of objects, characterised by rigidity, artificiality, and puppet-like behaviour. This depiction imbues the human subjects with an alienation reflective of, yet divergent from, Bada Shanren's strategy of animating the inanimate. Such alienation seeks to strip away humanity's characteristics, propelling the work into a remoteness analogous to the concept of deep time in Western philosophy (Turpin, 2013). Thus, humanity in my work is a dual concept: while the paintings discuss human beings, they simultaneously underscore a transition towards a non-human state. This silent representation, laden with my internal expressions, positions humanity not as a focal point but as a conduit to explore a state beyond the human, offering a critique of human engagement and its ultimate insignificance in the broader cosmic narrative.

In conclusion, I am trying to integrate the essence of Chinese implicitness within the framework of Western oil painting, aiming to address distinctly Chinese concerns – namely cultural censorship and self-censorship – through allegorical means. This approach embodies a sophisticated synthesis of Chinese and Western cultural elements, predicated on the interplay and divergent interpretations of analogous concepts across these cultural spectra. The allegorical method employed, irrespective of its Western or Chinese contextual roots, emerges as a strategically efficacious mode to navigate the constraints of censorship and articulate the inexpressible emotional landscapes through painting. My practice is dedicated to forging an allegorical discourse that bridges Western and Chinese cultures, endeavouring to establish a viable model that empowers artists to convey their critical perspectives and critiques within environments marked by censorship constraints.

The Forms of My Painting: German Neo-Expressionism, Jörg Immendorff, and Bada Shanren[108]

[107] Such a position allows my practice to become both resistance and negotiation. On the one hand, my works discuss the issues and problems in Chinese society when cultural censorship prevents Chinese artists from addressing criticism publicly and collectively. On the other hand, my political works do not have any stereotypical political symbols such as *Bleeding Tiananmen Square*, painted by Sheng Qi. My practice therefore seems to be a negotiation like literati painting. However, I believe it is the only way for artists to communicate politics safely and comfortably through artwork under cultural censorship because otherwise works cannot be exhibited in China. Also, I disagree with some so-called Chinese dissident artists' statement that Chinese political art is either protesting or celebrating. I believe its position could also be in-between – neither simply celebrating nor protesting – because of its complexity in expressive methods and cultural background, which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

[108] By placing Neo-Expressionism and Bada together, I do not intend to connect or compare them aesthetically from an art historical approach. Instead, I wish to discuss how they individually contribute to helping

My paintings inherit the 'silent speech' in traditional Chinese painting, while the form mainly originates from German Neo-Expressionism, especially Jörg Immendorff's (1945-2007) practice, which is considered fullness. Jörg Immendorff is both an artist and an allegorical figure who consistently questions the role of artists in politics and society. His art features a dual representation, akin to that of Bada Shanren. Immendorff's transition from his Maoist period to his *Café Deutschland* series, as noted by Cox (2001), signifies an evolution in both the form and ideological stance of his practice. This shift reflects his political disillusionment, the complexities of cross-cultural engagement, and a deeper exploration of historical temporality and allegory.

Immendorff's early engagement with Maoist themes stemmed from intense political activism and an idealism pervasive in Western Europe during the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period marked by student protests, anti-war movements, and a widespread critique of capitalist societies (Barker, 2008). For many left-leaning intellectuals and artists, Maoist China represented a beacon of revolutionary potential, although perceptions were often romanticised, obscuring the stark realities of the Cultural Revolution (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals, 2006). Immendorff's initial attraction to Maoism can be understood as pursuing alternative political models and rejecting the dominant Western social order. However, this movement experienced a deceleration as a deeper awareness of the complexities and contradictions inherent in Maoist China emerged (Lovell, 2019). As the brutal excesses of the Cultural Revolution and the human toll of Mao's policies became clearer, many of its Western proponents began to reassess their positions.

For Immendorff, his Maoist series, while echoing similar values, stands apart from the Chinese context. This series emerged as a reaction to his disillusionment with the European political landscape of the late 1960s and a growing dissatisfaction with his role as an artist (2013).[109] In 1970, he joined the

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me find where my paintings are located and placed, as well as establishing my practice model within the practice-led research. German Neo-Expressionism, an art movement of the 1980s led by artists like Anselm Kiefer (b. 1945) and Georg Baselitz (b. 1938), investigates the complexities of German identity and historical trauma, particularly surrounding the World War II (1935-1945) and the Nazi era (1933-1945). Drawing on Freud's concepts of mourning and melancholy, Donald Kuspit (1991) interprets Neo-Expressionism as a response to national guilt and a melancholic attachment to a mythologised past. Neo-Expressionist artists portray fragmented figures and desolate landscapes through expressive, often unsettling imagery, embodying a historical memory and identity struggle. This art form captures Germany's inner conflict—a melancholic pride in its mythic heritage alongside the inescapable guilt of its history—making German Neo-Expressionism a deeply introspective exploration of both personal and collective trauma. German Neo-Expressionism has widely influenced contemporary Chinese artists by offering a model for expressive, individualised, and even politically charged artwork through navigating personal identity and broader historical narratives when Chinese art was exploring new directions after decades of Socialist Realism (Sun & Wang, 2023), allowing Chinese artists to reflect on national trauma and cultural memory. When I was in China learning painting, my teacher was deeply influenced by this movement, and asked me to look into it as well. At that time, I realised German Neo-Expressionism resonated with aspects of Chinese history after 1949 regarding themes like a tragic past, the legacy of tradition, and the complex yearning for modernity. Just as German Neo-Expressionism grapples with the trauma of the World War II and the haunting memories of Nazi history, Chinese artists confronted the impact of the Cultural Revolution, the trauma of state-imposed ideological shifts, and the loss or suppression of traditional values. This melancholic exploration of identity, rooted in history and memory, was prominent in both contexts. As for Immendorff, his work defies linear temporality by merging elements from various historical epochs, connecting past, present, and future together, and redefining 'history' as an ongoing dialogue. The combination of historical narratives with contemporary concerns in his work inspires my own practice. His influence encourages me to create a space where viewers are invited to navigate through layers of meaning and temporality, exploring the intersections of history, memory, and identity in a manner that transcends temporal boundaries.

[109] In the description of Immendorff's exhibition *Maoist Paintings – The Early Seventies*, it was written on

League Against Imperialism and redirected his artistic practice towards supporting the German Maoist party, producing paintings that critiqued capitalism and the oppression of the proletariat.[110] Immendorff viewed Maoist China and the Cultural Revolution through an objective, Western, and exotic lens, akin to Wang Guangyi's interpretation of Nietzsche. The Maoism depicted in his works became idealised and fantasised, overlooking the brutality of the Cultural Revolution and perceiving it solely as a proletarian liberation movement.[111] Consequently, Maoism in his paintings assumes an exotic quality wherein Immendorff interprets Western values through imagined or pictorial representations of Maoist China that scarcely reflect German political realities. As the truths about the Cultural Revolution gradually came to light, Immendorff's disillusionment became not only political but also personal. Within his Maoist series, he wrestled with the role of art and the artist in society, which eventually, in his opinion, became a scam. His shift away from overtly Maoist themes signifies a deeper interrogation of art's effectiveness as a political tool and a critique of the oversimplifications in his earlier works.

The *Café Deutschland* series signifies Immendorff's shift towards a more complex and allegorical approach to painting. This series probes the complexities of German history and identity, positioning itself as a response to Immendorff's earlier phases of disillusionment.[112] By orchestrating encounters

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Michael Werner's website that 'In 1970 Jörg Immendorff joined the League Against Imperialism, pledging henceforth to direct his creative endeavors to the service of the German Maoist party. Disillusioned by the outcome of European political events of the late nineteen-sixties, and increasingly dissatisfied with his role as an artist, Immendorff sought to produce paintings for and about the working masses.' (https://www.michaelwerner.com/exhibitions/jorg-immendorff5)

[110] See also: https://www.michaelwerner.com/exhibitions/jorg-immendorff5.

[111] Immendorff's Maoist period from 1971 to 1976 suggests his idealised interpretation of Maoism as a movement for proletarian liberation rather than a nuanced, historically accurate reflection of Mao's policies. After participating in the Maoist-aligned groups in 1971, 'Immendorff joined in Mao's call for an art that would support the struggle of the working class masses, and that would attack what Immendorff deemed as the slave ideology of imperialist culture. This led Immendorff to critique his own previous art actions (Baby, Lidl and *Mietersoldaritat*), which he then determined to be naive, driven by egotistical desires and bourgeois values. Mao's ideas renewed Immendorff's belief that art could transform society, as he first understood it from Beuys. Immendorff changed his practice and pledged himself to create art in the service of the people' (p. 57, Cox, 2001). This portrayal, however, omits the violent repression of the Cultural Revolution, presenting instead an optimistic and utopian vision of Maoism's emancipatory potential. Immendorff's agit-prop paintings, like *Kann man damit etwas verändern?* (*Can You Change Anything with These?*) (Figure 27, 1972), further illustrate his utopian perspective. In this painting, Immendorff asks whether the painter's tools—a brush and canvas—can instigate social change, ultimately answering that art must reveal social contradictions to serve the masses. He writes at the bottom of the painting, 'Certainly not, but when ideas take shape, one can examine the basis on which they were created. We can check what goal they aim for. We can determine whether they superficially reflect social conditions, decorate walls as ornaments, or whether they contribute to revealing contradictions and join the struggle to resolve these contradictions.' His writings suggest a selective, optimistic embrace of Maoist ideas, grounded in his desire to transform German art but sidestepping the Cultural Revolution's harsher realities. This approach, which positions Maoism as a framework for political and artistic liberation, demonstrates Immendorff's intent to create a revolutionary art in solidarity with the working class, though one that is removed from the complex socio-political realities of Maoist China.

[112] In Immendorff's *Cafe Deutschland I* (Figure 28, 1978), he uses a divided composition to represent the divided nature of Germany, resonating with the ideological split between the East and West. Figures like Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) appear alongside political leaders and symbols associated with socialist and capitalist ideologies, creating a tense, almost confrontational atmosphere. The inclusion of Beuys, known for his socially engaged art, serves as a stand-in for Immendorff's conflicted role as an artist navigating both political and commercial spheres. In *Readymade de l'histoire de Café* (Figure 29, 1987), on the left, Immendorff references the storming of the Bastille on 14 July 1789, while on the right, he includes the German Revolution of 1848, marked by the execution of the revolutionary leader Robert Blum (1807-1848) (p. 173, Cox, 2001). Dressed as a waiter, Immendorff positions himself between the exiled avant-garde figures seated before him and the political martyrs of history represented in the landscape. A Phrygian cap rests on his forearm in place of a traditional server's white napkin, symbolically linking him to the theme of revolution. Beneath his feet is an image of two nude women

among figures from disparate historical epochs within the allegorical confines of *Café Deutschland*, Immendorff investigates the stratified nature of historical temporality and the intersections of personal and collective memory. The shift towards allegory and a more abstract engagement with temporality suggests Immendorff's pursuit of a deeper, more multifaceted mode of expression. Shifting away from the overt political narratives in his Maoist series, Immendorff redirects his focus inward, exploring the intricate interplay among history, culture, and identity through a distinctly German prism. The *Café Deutschland* series reflects a maturation of Immendorff's practice, where the exoticisation of the 'Other' and the straightforward political messaging of his early work are replaced by a richer, more complex dialogue with the past and the present.

Figure 27

Kann man damit etwas verändern?

90x80 cm. By Jörg Immendorff, 1972, painting, acrylic on canvas, private collection.

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playing chess, a likely nod to Duchamp's (1887-1968) famous photograph of himself playing chess with a nude woman (p. 173, Cox, 2001). By depicting them, Immendorff underscores Germany's recurring struggle for freedom and unity, suggesting a history marked by unrealised aspirations and suppressed revolutionary energies. The fragmented and divided compositions in these paintings create a sense of disorientation, symbolising Immendorff's disillusionment with both the promises of socialism and the materialism of Western society (Cox, 2001). This dual critique reflects his ambivalence towards both political systems, positioning Cafe Deutschland as a space where Germany's historical and ideological contradictions are laid bare and interrogated. Through this series, Immendorff explores his disillusionment as he grapples with the complexities of German identity in a divided, ideologically polarised nation.

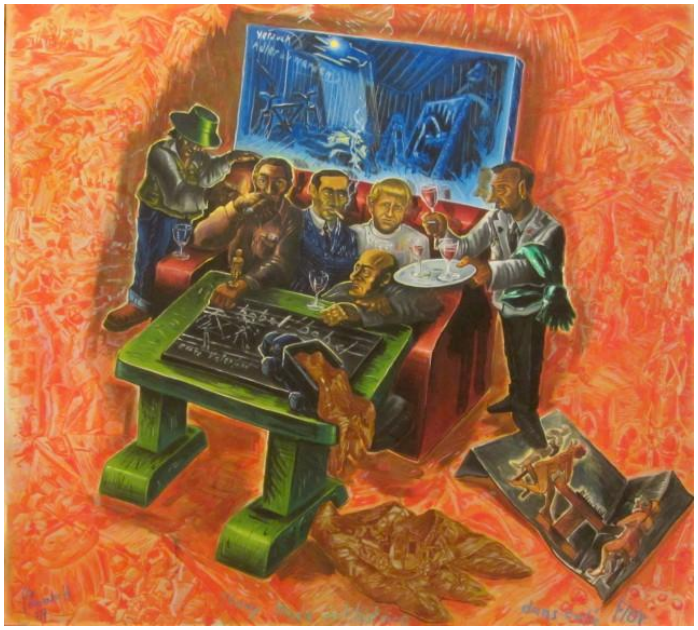
Figure 28

Cafe Deutschland I

280x320 cm. By Jörg Immendorff, 1978, painting, oil on canvas, located in Museum Ludwig Koln, Kolin, Germany.

Figure 29

Readymade de l'histoire de Café



152x177 cm. By Jörg Immendorff, 1987, painting, oil on canvas, located in Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, Netherlands.

The 'double figure' of Immendorff – spanning his Maoist period (1971-1976) and the *Café Deutschland* series – encapsulates the tension between idealism and reality, external political engagement and introspective historical inquiry. The shift is the consequence of constantly exploring political representations: What is subjective self-expression based on the artists' own experience and opinion? What is the discourse of following the crowd?[113] What is realistic? What has been fantasised? In fact, Immendorff's 'double figure' resonates with the experiences of contemporary young-generation Chinese artists born after 1995 – like myself – who underwent academic training in China. Post-2010, Socialist Realism has pervaded Chinese art academies, compelling artists to produce works that laud the governmental and political system. Such works typically glorify the 'red history' of the CCP or the strides toward modernisation since 1979. Consequently, artists are often expected to conform to these normative roles, a condition that is typically met with acquiescence rather than critique.

Due to the similarity of background and representation between Immendorff and contemporary Chinese artists, I believe adopting Immendorff's allegorical method from his *Café Deutschland* series as a strategy to navigate and address political expression under Chinese cultural censorship is a thoughtful and sophisticated approach. Immendorff's transition to allegory, particularly his method of staging history and examining temporality, offers a potential framework for engaging with political themes in a context where direct expression may be restricted.[114]

In my practice, I am developing a painting language that draws inspiration from Immendorff's method of reflecting historical moments that resonate with contemporary issues brought by censorship without direct confrontation. The relationship of my paintings to temporality is abstract and complex, diverging from Immendorff's approach, as my narratives do not rely directly on real historical events. Instead, they operate as fables that straddle reality and fiction, marked by anachronisms that blend traditional and contemporary, offering a critique shrouded in temporal complexity. Moreover, by creating ambiguous settings that defy precise temporal or geographical categorisation, my narratives become fragmented – the rejection of totality – leading to a sense of melancholia (Freud, 1957; Benjamin, 2009).[115] This abstraction acts as a protective layer, enabling my paintings to address

[113] This is about cultural subjectivity, or autonomy, enabling the painting to reflect reality and temporality, which will be examined in my final chapter. By cultural subjectivity, I have in mind a particular core identity out of which Chinese painting emerges. I refer to this as 'cultural subjectivity,' which, of course, originates in the artist and is then invested in the paintings they make. I am always seeking the answer to the question of how to produce (or keep) a Chinese subjectivity inside images. Subjectivity is a paradoxical concept because concentrating on it too much might risk the rejection of globalisation and diversity. However, I believe that for Chinese artists – especially those who embed political criticism in their works – subjectivity is significant when maintaining the autonomy of allegory as received from the West's frequently condescending attitude towards Chinese political allegorical forms. When any critical voice in a Chinese allegorical painting is discovered in the West, there is always a stereotypical opinion that this painting contains an allegory criticising the Chinese government for its repressive autocracy. As a grand narrative ignoring the fate of individuals, such a stereotype intends to give an ultimate answer to Chinese political and social issues: its system. I called it 'the dissidence hypothesis.' This will be examined in the next chapter.

[114] Here I use the term 'staging history' to describe Immendorff's idea of deconstructing historical narratives and arranging them onto a stage.

[115] Freud describes melancholia as a condition where the ego is overwhelmed by loss, leading to self-directed grief and internal fragmentation. This mirrors Benjamin's concept of allegory, which he characterizes as a reflection on historical and existential decay, where meaning is continually fragmented and reassembled from ruins. Both frameworks suggest that loss leads to a profound internal and external fragmentation but also to a form of creative engagement. In melancholia, the loss transforms the self into a complex site of critical introspection. Similarly, in allegory, historical and narrative breakdowns offer opportunities for reinterpretation

sensitive topics without explicit references to current events or figures.

In my narratives, stories are told with layers to comment on social and political themes in a manner that is oblique and metaphorical, akin to the storytelling approach in Chinese literati painting. In the first glimpse, a story without politics can be noticed. When the seeing becomes constant, the political representation will come out due to the narrative I stage. My subtle engagement with social themes is through a mixture of dreaming and daily images, depicted in a stage-like composition similar to Immendorff's. Compared to Immendorff's paintings, my practice is more implicit because the political layer will be revealed after a delay of interpretation, which is worked between the painting and viewers, a double, a process originated from Bada.

The concept of 'being double' in Bada's work and life serves as a foundation of my painting for exploring allegory: the asymmetrical relationship between what we see and how we are seen. Traditional Chinese allegory destabilises the subject-object relationship, resulting in a complex interplay between transparency and opacity. This mode of depiction allows for the implicit communication of political and critical opinions in paintings, serving as a passive and concealed form of resistance to cultural censorship throughout Chinese history. However, this tradition seems to have gradually been abandoned in political allegorical painting through three generations of artists due to fullness taking the place of emptiness.[116] In my practice, I maintain a connection to tradition and seek to establish a unique relationship with temporality and time. In other words, I endeavour to keep my practice receptive to tradition while being open to another alternative future.

In this approach, I seek to reinterpret tradition through allegory by focusing on an evolved relationship with time, as exemplified in the work of Walter Benjamin. This relationship does not adhere to linear progression (or the notion that seeing is believing) but instead embraces a curvature of lines (seeing and disbelieving) to which allegory is committed. Consequently, I incorporate an

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and the construction of new meanings from the fragments. Thus, melancholia and allegory philosophically converge in their view of fragmentation as both a state of despair and a source of creative reconfiguration, where the act of engaging with ruins and losses prompts a reimagining of both history and self.

[116] Although there have been some discussions on the localisation of oil painting, most of them are through the aesthetic level (expressing the object) instead of the personal expression (expressing the artist). For example, Dong Xiwen (1914-1973) writes 'Chinese painting often requires the combination of three elements—form, texture, and vitality—with a single stroke. This expressiveness, which fully captures both the spirit and the form, and this method that prominently pursues the characteristics of life and the physical properties of nature, represent an extremely high form of realism in artistic creation. I believe this approach could also be extended to oil painting, creating a variety of techniques and forms' (1957, p.7). In the post-Cultural Revolution era, discussions within the Chinese art community about reclaiming and redefining national artistic identity still focused primarily on formal aesthetics rather than the philosophical and spiritual dimensions traditionally embodied in literati painting, which emphasised a more holistic connection between the artist's inner life and their artistic expression. During the 1980s, debates initiated by artists and critics such as Wu Guanzhong (1919-2010) revolved around the concept of 'Abstract Beauty' (1980), advocating for scientific analysis and appreciation of form, which he believed was inherently beautiful and needed to be abstracted from objects. He argued that focusing on formal qualities could resonate with Chinese traditional art by extracting and analysing the elements of form, colour, and composition inherent in objects. Wu writes that abstract beauty is at the heart of formal beauty, suggesting that true aesthetic form is inherently abstract and can only be achieved through abstraction, while abstraction always exists in Chinese traditional painting (1980). However, in Western modern art, both abstraction and formalism are not primarily concerned with visual 'beauty'; rather, they involve infusing geometric forms with imagination, ideas, and utopian spirit, reflecting a dialectic unity between the spiritual and the material. In other words, the form of abstraction of the modern West primarily stems from a symbolic impulse rather than an aesthetic one, constituting an organisation of form that involves conceptual participation, rather than being purely visually oriented (Gao, 2023, p. 54).

element of disguise in my work. This allegory stems from the historical memory of traditional Chinese culture. While many contemporary artists prefer to disregard memory and tradition, I choose to maintain this connection to the history of painting.

The intersection of traditional and modern representational systems is expressed through the work of Bada Shanren. His method, which synthesises the efforts of Chinese *yimin* artists and incorporates an implicit nature, transcends its historical context and enters a realm of strangeness that resonates with the repressive present. His work embodies both resistance and negotiation, offering an ideal – and perhaps the only viable – solution for confronting the crisis of increasingly stringent Chinese cultural censorship. In essence, the tradition of allegorical painting is not perceived as an exotic 'Other' but as an immediate challenge to our understanding, aiding us in addressing contemporary issues.

Beyond Bada and Immendorff: From Blankness to Temporal Fluidity

The painting *Fish Masseur* (Figure 30, 2022) was created during my exploration of traditional Chinese political practice. *Fish Masseur* resonates with literati painting, drawing inspiration and taking principles from Bada Shanren and other literati artists. The fish motif in the composition directly appropriates Bada's renowned piece, *The Mandarin Fish* (Figure 4, 1694), where he utilised the fish as an allegorical representation of his despondency over the downfall of the Ming Dynasty and as an expression of his nostalgia.[117] In *Fish Masseur*, although the symbolic significance of the fish is borrowed from Bada's painting, the interpretation is deliberately obfuscated through an allegorical juxtaposition of contemporary and traditional elements. This composition portrays a scene in which several fish eagerly nibble at the dead skin on a person's feet while a grinning fish, indifferent to the ongoing activity, chooses not to partake in the role of a masseur.[118] The serene blues and greens contrast with a stark white background, which might represent the superficial calmness in society, masking undercurrents of control and surveillance. The blending of realistic and surreal elements helps create a dream-like, almost eerie atmosphere that could imply the obscured nature of censorship. The surreal depiction encourages viewers to look deeper, symbolising the need to see beyond the surface in politically restrictive environments.

[117] See Chapter 1.

[118] I was born in a city known for its abundance of natural hot springs. During my childhood, fish spas were trendy in my town. Even today, I vividly recall the sensation of the fish nibbling at my skin – it felt akin to an electric shock. As I immersed my feet in the water, fish from all corners of the pool would gravitate towards them, and this elicited a feeling of flattery, albeit superficial, as the fish seemed unconcerned about whose feet they were tending to, driven purely by their innate impulse to consume the dead skin, which was also their food.

Figure 30

Fish Masseur

120x150 cm. By Hengzhi Gong, 2022, painting, oil on canvas.

This painting, featuring a smiling fish that refrains from partaking in the nibbling of dead skin from a human foot, serves as a multifaceted allegory. It symbolises the individual's struggle against predetermined fate and societal expectations, manifesting as an act of defiance against authoritarian demands. This portrayal of resistance is not without its burdens; choosing to be the 'smiling fish' entails a conscious decision to reject self-serving instincts, embodying an act of self-negation to assert one's identity. Refusing to engage in the act of eating dead skin transcends mere choice, emerging as an ethical imperative that challenges the status quo.

The allegory within this artwork is conveyed on two fronts: public and private. In the public realm, the fish's refusal to eat dead skin suggests a declaration of autonomy, an assertion of self-governance dictated by moral conviction rather than external pressures. This act is not merely an alternative but the sole path through which the fish can remain authentic to its essence, resonating with the existential predicament faced by Bada Shanren. For Bada, maintaining his true self was intrinsically linked to his expression of dissent against contemporary societal norms, thereby envisioning the possibility of an alternative future. Hence, the ethical decision embodied by the fish transcends a simple act of defiance; it becomes a complex interplay of morality and aesthetics, asking viewers to perceive these elements not as disparate entities but as interconnected facets of a coherent whole. Through the vehicle of allegory, the painting crafts a narrative space that encourages a holistic contemplation of both moral and aesthetic choices, echoing the layered intricacies of resistance and identity affirmation.

In *Fish Masseur*, as in Bada Shanren's *Two Quails* (Figure 30, 1694) and *The Mandarin Fish* (Figure 4, 1694), attributing human characteristics to animals is a fundamental strategy for conveying irony. The anthropomorphism in Bada's paintings serves as an ironic commentary on his era, subtly critiquing the social and political environment through the irony inside the oddness of his animals, which has been

discussed in Chapter 3. In my practice, I extend this tradition by adding complexity to the narrative while imparting human emotions and gestures to the fish. This anthropomorphism brings irony, deconstructing the expected meaning of the image itself and transforming the animals into symbols of broader human concerns. Therefore, this painting resists straightforward interpretation and becomes allegorical. Rather than acting as a direct or unified symbol, allegory creates a ruin of signification—a fragmented space where meanings and temporal layers coexist and require the viewer's active engagement to interpret. In my work, the depiction of fish extends this ironic gesture, using blank spaces to evoke a state of suspension and incompleteness. These blank spaces serve as pauses, establishing temporal narratives and interpretations, extending the allegory into time and memory. In other words, allegory keeps the ambiguity alive. Leaving portions of the canvas deliberately uncoloured, revealing the underlying gesso, is not merely an artistic experiment but a strategic deployment of visual silence. This silence, or blankness, is reimagined not just as a gap in the visual field but as an integral component of the narrative structure, imbuing the artwork with a layer of abstract allegory. The incomplete quality of blankness is integral, serving not as mere visual silence but as a space that invites interpretation and resists closure. Much like Bada's ironic subversion, where the humanised qualities of animals indirectly critique the societal conditions of his time, my paintings employ this ambiguity to suggest that meaning oscillates between presence and absence, between what is seen and what is hidden. By avoiding definitive narratives, both Bada's and my works create a layered allegory, one that critiques indirectly through a balance of irony and anthropomorphism.

In the painting *Louis XVI* (Figure 31, 2024), the blankness becomes more abstract.[119] While the canvas teems with detailed imagery, the underlying voids invoke a deeper, unsettling narrative. This painting depicts children in an idyllic setting, eerily reenacting the execution of Louis XVI. Beneath the surface of this pastoral play, the painting critically addresses the surge of nationalistic fervour and xenophobia within contemporary China, illustrating how easily the potent forces of propaganda can twist the innocence of youth. This macabre mimicry starkly mirrors adult societal behaviours, revealing a disturbing reflection on the influence of nationalistic ideologies on the next generation.

In *Louis XVI*, juxtaposing the ill-fated king with children engrossed in play intensifies the tension between inevitability and choice, weaving a complex tapestry of moral and aesthetic considerations. Unlike Louis XVI, whose demise was preordained by the tumultuous tides of history, the child in the painting occupies a realm of potentiality, where fate is not yet sealed. This distinction illuminates the interplay between the private and the public spheres through allegory as it unfolds in *Fish Masseur*. Here, the moral decisions faced by individuals are mirrored in the aesthetic realm, challenging viewers to navigate the blurred boundaries between ethical imperatives and artistic expression. By embedding this moral dilemma within the visual narrative, the painting not only underscores the autonomy of individual choice against the backdrop of collective expectations but also elevates the act of defiance into an aesthetic statement. Thus, allegory serves as a bridge, magnifying the tension between what is ordained and what can be altered, between the silent dictates of history and the resonant voice of personal conviction.

[119] I reconsider the concept of the blank in this painting, regarding it not only as a blank in the composition but also as a blank in the narrative. Therefore, I connect the blankness with the emptiness that originated from literati painting as an allegorical vehicle, relating absence and presence at the same time.

Figure 31

Louis XVI

120x150 cm. By Hengzhi Gong, 2023, painting, oil on canvas.

Originating from Immendorff's approach of blending history within contemporary contexts, this painting abstracts temporality, merging past with present through a fable-like narrative. Unlike Immendorff's direct historical juxtapositions, *Louis XVI* introduces a layer of allegory devoid of a specific timeframe, thereby critiquing modern China under the guise of French history. This strategic ambiguity serves both as a critique of contemporary societal issues and as a safeguard against direct censorship, leveraging historical allegory to mask pointed social commentary. The narrative's intentional incompleteness and the enigmatic relationship among the characters transform the viewing experience into a decoding challenge, encouraging interpretations that resonate with the underlying political tensions of our times by allegory. Even though censors realise the painting has a political dimension, they cannot censor it, which is similar to the strategy in literati painting. While objects are symbolic and metaphorical, they are still natural objects, such as flowers or plants. The painting *Louise XVI*, after all, is a picture depicting kids playing on the grass.

Through *Louis XVI*, my work looks into the fluidity of time, weaving past, present, and potential futures into a single narrative fabric. This piece draws inspiration from Immendorff's historical stages and Bada Shanren's timeless allegories, embodying a cycle of recurring societal themes. By integrating historical motifs with current dilemmas, the painting becomes a medium for reflecting on enduring issues, offering resistance to censorship through its allegorical language. The deliberate narrative gaps and visual blanks in my compositions are not just aesthetic choices but strategic tools for evoking temporal and interpretative dynamism, safeguarding artistic expression within the confines of restrictive environments.

Irony, Absurdity, and Dark Humour: Making Temporality More Abstract

Bada's use of irony, manifested through exaggerated expressions, ambiguous scenes, and the odd behaviour of animals, can be seen as a subversive tool to critique or reflect on his socio-political context. My approach to irony mirrors Bada's by employing daily symbols and narratives that reflect contemporary absurdities and societal contradictions. Also, my practice draws from Immendorff's allegorical irony, particularly in staging history and abstract temporality. Those connections not only anchor my practice within a historical continuum of Chinese artistic resistance but also expand it by incorporating the complexity of representation within the contemporary. Also, my practice draws from Immendorff's allegorical irony, particularly in staging history and abstract temporality, through which I could create a space for irony to function as a protective veil, allowing for subversive commentary without direct confrontation.

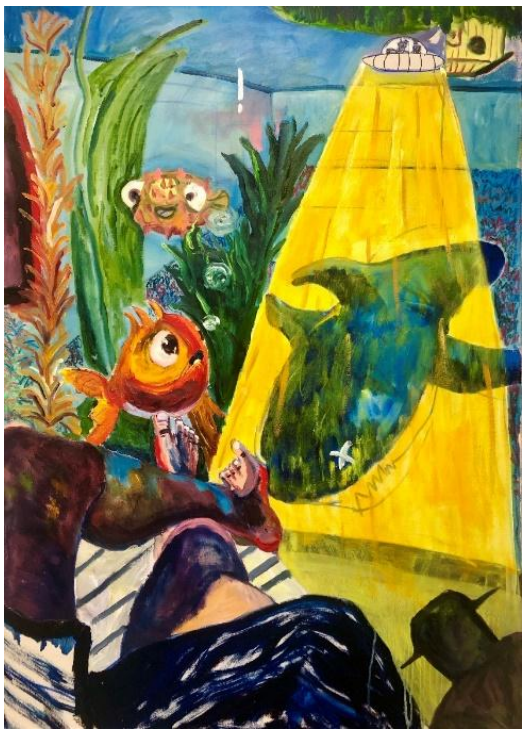
My paintings employ temporal fluidity with a unique twist by incorporating a sense of dark humour. This approach not only challenges linear perceptions of time but also uses irony to create a sense of detachment, opening the question of the permanence of societal norms and historical narratives. This temporal detachment, enriched with irony, becomes a vehicle for critiquing contemporary issues through the lens of private awareness and cultural memory. The ironic elements in my work serve as bridges between the past and present, the traditional and the modern. By invoking fabled allegories and absurdities simultaneously, I create a temporal dialogue where irony highlights the nature of human folly and societal issues.

The narratives in my paintings often culminate in a seemingly light-hearted joke. Despite recounting a melancholic tale, an element invariably emerges to disrupt the solemn atmosphere. Beneath the veneer of humour lies an infinite sadness – a sense of helplessness. In my paintings, humour and sorrow are a duality, each serving as a disguise for the other. This mutual obfuscation renders the narrative's objective unclear. While humour remains on the surface, an underlying element precludes it from penetrating the deeper meaning. This engenders a series of questions: Is the narrative intended to be amusing, satirical, or a reflection of desperation? Persistent uncertainty gives rise to instability in expression, which contributes to the establishment of a disguise and allegory in my paintings. As the boundaries between various elements become indistinct, viewers are challenged to discern the artist's intentions behind the depicted images. Consequently, the responsibility of interpreting the artwork – whether or not to believe in its message – is entrusted entirely to the viewer.

In the painting *Melancholia, but 10 Seconds* (Figure 32, 2022), the swimming pool in my apartment transforms into the backdrop for a dark fairy tale. This piece conveys a sense of humour through the emotions expressed by the fish. The two goldfish on the left exhibit distinct facial expressions: the one at the top appears oblivious to the ongoing abduction, sporting a cheerful countenance, while the other goldfish is bewildered as it witnesses the kidnapping.

Figure 32

Melancholia, but 10 Seconds



90x120 cm. By Hengzhi Gong, 2022, painting, oil on canvas.

This painting embodies irony with a cutting edge.[120] The fleeting memory of the goldfish, constrained to a ten-second loop, subjects it to perpetual torment – an endless cycle of shock, forgetting, and renewed shock. This Sisyphean ordeal threatens to unravel the fish's sanity, suggesting that wilful blindness might be its only refuge from pain. Thus, the abduction of the shark unfolds unnoticed, unchallenged. In this context, empathy transforms into a source of anguish, and apathy emerges as a grim coping mechanism. The paradox is stark: to observe is to invite infinite sorrow, casting the goldfish's continuous gaze as a defiant act against the ease of oblivion. This sharp portrayal indicates the tragedy of awareness in a world inclined towards indifference, where the weight of caring becomes unbearable and the allure of turning away becomes a poignant, albeit tragic, salvation.

This painting seizes a moment fraught with the absurd and the surreal, yet it is the '10 seconds' that pierces through, signifying a fleeting grip on memory and comprehension. It casts a stark light on the fractured, discontinuous nature of individual perception of time, where memory ebbs and flows in transient, cyclic patterns. Within the shadow of cultural censorship, the act of forgetting is mandated in China, elevating the act of remembering to a form of resistance. The goldfish, doomed to forget after ten seconds, chooses remembrance despite the inevitable shock of reawakening to reality – a

[120] This painting was inspired by a distressing incident I discovered on Weibo, where a video of a chained, intellectually disabled woman in a rural house led to suspicions of her being a trafficking victim. Despite initial uproar, efforts to investigate were blocked by local authorities, and interest quickly waned. Created months later, my follow-up found minimal ongoing discussion, suggesting that public attention is short-lived, even for critical issues. This reflects a broader societal tendency to forget atrocities, highlighting the challenge of maintaining focus on important matters.

symbol of silent resistance. This is not merely a personal battle against oblivion but unfolds into a national allegory, where collective experiences of remembering and forgetting reflect the broader societal struggle against enforced amnesia. By placing the figures in my painting within this fragile, paradoxical realm, I look into the intricate temporal dynamics that dictate how societies engage with their past, oscillate between memory and forgetfulness, and cyclically return to themes and events. This exploration serves to explore the connection between collective identity and historical narrative, highlighting the important role of temporality in its construction and perception.

This painting transcends specific temporal markers, situating its narrative in a space that is both immediate and timeless. This abstraction of time challenges the linear progression of historical time, suggesting that certain themes, such as forgetfulness and indifference, are perennial. This painting invites viewers to reflect on the nonlinear experiences of time, where past, present, and future converge in moments of collective amnesia or awakening. The abstract treatment of time in this painting enriches its temporal dimension, encouraging a deeper engagement with the concept of temporality itself. By blending the immediate with the allegorical, the painting becomes a meditative space for considering how time affects perception, memory, and social consciousness. This abstract temporality fosters a dialogue with the viewer that transcends the specific moment depicted, engaging with broader questions about navigating the temporal landscape of people's lives and societies.

Figure 33

Welcome Dinner

120x150 cm. By Hengzhi Gong, 2023, painting, oil on canvas.

In *Welcome Dinner* (Figure 33, 2023), a painting infused with allegorical dark humour, the absurdity of cows offering a human steak as a gesture of hospitality is sharply ironic. This scenario echoes Lu Xun's *Medicine*, where the macabre trade of blood for cure results in inevitable tragedy, highlighting the

futility and horror of such exchanges. Unlike Lu Xun's tale, cannibalism is replaced with a surreal hospitality that hides a sinister trap in this painting: the human faces a paradoxical choice between offending his bovine hosts by declining their offer or consuming the steak of unknown origin. This quandary encapsulates a broader critique of choice under duress, symbolising desperation and absurdity: we have the choice, but neither is the right answer.

The arrangement of figures around the dinner table, reminiscent of a twisted *Last Supper*, could suggest the perversion of communal and cultural norms under censorship. The placement of characters and their interactions imply the tensions and unspoken agreements that characterise public discourse under surveillance. The use of dark, sombre tones interspersed with shocks of bright red and orange could be a visual metaphor for the violence and stark realities hidden beneath the surface of everyday life. The textural contrasts between the roughness of the animal fur and the smoothness of human skin underscore the unnaturalness of the scenario, reflecting the grotesque distortions of truth in censored societies. The depiction of cows offering a human steak presents a disturbing inversion of the food chain and societal roles, serving as an allegory for how power can be both consumed and offered in a repressive regime. This could reflect the unsettling reality of how power dynamics are presented in society, where the oppressed may be unknowingly complicit in their own oppression.

The tension in *Welcome Dinner* escalates beyond previous works, presenting no clear resolution but a profound sense of despair masked by superficial humour. Here, the humour morphs into tragedy as the human subject freezes in indecision, embodying the perpetual dilemma of moral versus aesthetic choices, and how private decisions are thrust into the public sphere through allegory. The pause of decision is a freeze of time, thus opening out a new future of the unknown. The painting's abstract absurdity mirrors the voracious nature of capitalism in China, where individuals are ensnared in a cycle of consumption and exploitation.

Welcome Dinner forges a temporal bridge, juxtaposing historical allegories with contemporary narrative, deepening the engagement with time. Unlike *Melancholia, but 10 Seconds*, which plays on fleeting memory, this piece looks into history as an enduring cycle of exploitation, reflecting China's capitalist entanglements. The allegory in this painting suggests that history's atrocities are not distant memories but active echoes in today's societal fabric, urging reflection on the cyclical recurrence of social issues.

By extending the thematic depth of *Melancholia, but 10 Seconds*, this painting reveals a more complex temporality where the concept of the past is abstracted. This abstraction reflects not just a fictional or altered past but also critiques the present's compressed reality. Through *Welcome Dinner* and other works discussed in this chapter, I establish a model of allegorical representation that navigates the complexities of time, humour, and the existential paradoxes within the framework of Chinese cultural censorship. This model underscores the interplay between allegory, temporality, and irony as instruments for exploring the nuanced dynamics of public and private choices in the face of authoritarian constraints.

A New Model for Political Practice

My model for political allegorical painting emerges as a sophisticated framework that embraces and transcends cultural and temporal boundaries. It is rooted in a deep understanding of the Chinese literati tradition, particularly the allegorical and ironic methods exemplified by Bada Shanren, and is informed by the stylistic and conceptual innovations of Western Neo-Expressionism, notably the work of Jörg Immendorff. This cross-cultural and cross-temporal dialogue enriches the model with layered complexity, enabling a multifaceted approach to political expression.

Central to my model is the relationship with temporality, where past, present, and future intermingle within the canvas, creating a temporal fluidity that defies linear constraints. This fluidity, inspired by the abstract engagement with time seen in Immendorff's *Café Deutschland* series and the timeless allegory of Bada Shanren, is a critical response to the challenges posed by censorship. By embedding narratives in a nonlinear temporal framework, my paintings offer a critique that is both immediate and detached, allowing for a reflection on recurring societal themes beyond the immediacy of contemporary issues.

Irony, an essential element in my practice, is a subversive tool that veils critique in humour and absurdity. Drawing from both Bada's subtle mockery and Immendorff's allegorical irony, I employ irony not just as a stylistic device but as a method of engaging with and critiquing societal norms and political realities. This strategic use of irony ensures that the political commentary in my paintings remains open to interpretation, circumventing direct censorship while inviting the viewer into a deeper engagement with the work.

The allegorical nature of my paintings stands as a testament to the resilience of artistic expression in the face of censorship. Through allegory, I navigate the complexities of contemporary Chinese society, echoing the silent speech of the literati tradition while addressing modern issues. This dual engagement with tradition and contemporaneity allows my work to resonate with a broad audience, offering multiple layers of meaning that unfold over time and reflection.

My paintings, characterised by a blend of emptiness and narrative fullness, embody the allegorical model's essence. The strategic use of blank spaces and the intricate interweaving of narratives not only create a visual and conceptual depth but also serve as a metaphor for the unspoken and unseen forces shaping contemporary life. This approach, where emptiness and irony intertwine, mirrors the historical practice of allegorical painting, recontextualised to confront the nuances of modern censorship.

In summary, my model of political allegorical painting is a dynamic and reflective approach to artistic expression under censorship. It is a model that honours the legacy of Chinese literati painting while embracing the challenges of contemporary artistic practice. By intertwining traditional Chinese aesthetics with Western Neo-Expressionism, I forge a path that is both innovative and rooted in history. Through the use of temporality, irony, and allegory, my paintings offer a space for critical discourse, challenging viewers to engage with the complexities of society and the enduring power of art as a form of resistance. This model not only navigates the constraints of censorship but also

celebrates the potential of painting to communicate profound political and social critiques in an era of increased surveillance and control.

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Chapter 5
Beyond Allegory: An Alternative Path of Political Expression

This is a theoretical chapter offered with a conclusion, where I conduct a deeper examination of my practice by explaining how allegory intersects with aesthetics, ethics, and politics. Rooted in the philosophical underpinnings of Immanuel Kant, my exploration extends beyond aesthetics to engage with moral questions, thereby establishing a philosophical dialogue that bridges personal narrative with collective resonance. This chapter then explores the nature of choice, illuminated through allegorical narratives that transcend mere visual art to embody ethical contemplations and political discourse. In the end, I conclude my project by discussing the position of my practice in the contemporary, which seeks to move beyond the binary of dissident art and Socialist Realism, advocating for a nuanced and complex interplay between ethics and aesthetics, further broadening into political discourse through allegory. This position not only enriches the narrative's complexity but actively involves viewers in contemplating the ethical and political choices depicted, thus evading cultural censorship, mirroring the political fabric of contemporary China, bringing new modernity into the Chinese political art landscape, and contributing to a broader discourse on the significance of bridging aesthetics and politics in contemporary art.

From Aesthetics to Morality

The allegorical relationship between aesthetics and morality in my practice is connected through the sublime.[121] The journey from beauty to the sublime is not merely a transition but a transcendence that leads my practice into a deeper, more philosophical dialogue. In this transcendence, surface beauty is an entry point, a visual allure that initially captivates aesthetic sensibilities (Kant, 2000). However, the true essence of the work lies beyond this initial engagement, where the sublime emerges as a powerful force that invites an encounter with the infinite (Clewis, 2009).

In my paintings, this process of transcendence is fundamental. The beauty in the paintings intentionally draws viewers into deeper contemplation, elevating the experience from aesthetic appreciation to a confrontation with the sublime. This confrontation presents an overwhelming vastness, complexity, or power that challenges comprehension, evoking awe, unease, and introspection. The sublime in my works is often manifested through scenarios that juxtapose the familiar with the overwhelmingly immense or powerful, such as the goldfish and the shark or the

[121] Kant's discussion of the sublime, detailed in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, highlights the sublime as exceeding mere beauty, invoking the infinite and the moral. Unlike beauty, which is rooted in form and immediate pleasure, the sublime evokes an overwhelming sense of vastness or power, challenging our sensory capacities and leading to a realisation of the mind's ability to conceptualise beyond sensory limits, especially the concept of the infinite. This experience, categorised into the mathematical sublime (the vastness beyond imagination) and the dynamic sublime (nature's overwhelming might), transcends aesthetic judgment to encourage deep reflection on human cognition and rational potential. The sublime experience, rooted in the mind's response rather than the object itself, underscores our rational superiority and capacity for moral reasoning, emphasising the mind's connection to universal moral principles. Kant's sublime, therefore, enriches artistic practice by encouraging works that provoke reflection beyond beauty, urging viewers to recognise their sensory limits and the transcendent power of reason and moral judgment. This philosophical foundation transforms art into a conduit for engaging with the sublime's ethical and awe-inspiring aspects, positioning the sublime not just as an aesthetic concept but as a deep philosophical exploration of beauty, understanding, and morality.

visitor and the cow, thereby straddling the boundary between the known and the incomprehensible. This juxtaposition is not intended to dismay or simply shock but to spark recognition of the individual's ability to engage with ideas and principles that transcend sensory experience, particularly those concerning morality and ethical judgment.

Moreover, the sublime in my art is deeply connected to Kant's notion that the sublime experience underscores the human capacity for moral reasoning (Kant, 2000). Through the aesthetic experience of the sublime, viewers are not only awed by the transcendence of sensory limits but are also led to reflect on their place within the moral universe. Thus, the artworks transcend mere beauty and act as catalysts for ethical engagement and moral reflection. The aesthetic choices, for instance, eating or not eating at the *Welcome Dinner*, become the moral choices of accepting or not accepting. This process illuminates the dual and allegorical capacity of my paintings to provide aesthetic pleasure and function as a medium for philosophical and ethical inquiry.

The emergence of morality within the sublime represents a moment where my art transcends aesthetic boundaries to engage with the ethical dimension. This intersection, where the sublime becomes a conduit for moral reflection, is rooted in the Kantian philosophical tradition, which posits that true sublimity engages not just the senses but the faculties of reason and moral judgment. The sublime in my work serves not just as an overwhelming aesthetic experience, but also as a gateway to ethical engagement. It presents scenarios that, while exceeding the bounds of ordinary experience, invoke a deeper consideration of the moral laws (Lyotard, 1991) and principles that govern our actions and decisions. This moment of confrontation with the sublime thus becomes an encounter with 'the moral law within' in Kant's epitaph.[122] It is where the boundless capacity for reason and ethical deliberation is both challenged and affirmed, prompting the viewer to reflect on their own ethical stance and the universality of moral considerations.

My paintings serve as arenas in which the sublime does not dwarf the human subject but highlights the capacity for ethical engagement. This engagement is facilitated by the sublime's ability to elicit a sense of awe that is both unsettling and illuminating, pushing the observer beyond the comfort of sensory pleasure to the rigorous demands of ethical inquiry. In this context, morality emerges not as an imposed set of rules but as an inherent aspect of the sublime experience, establishing a dialogue between the viewer and the work. Through this dialogue, the paintings become more than visual objects; they are ethical landscapes that challenge observers to navigate their moral intuitions and principles. The viewer's journey through these landscapes is both personal and universal, reflecting individual ethical deliberations within the broader context of human moral endeavour.

The complex interplay between aesthetics and ethics manifests vividly in the allegorical narratives that underpin my body of work, wherein the concept of choice is the practical means for this transcendence. This section will revisit *Welcome Dinner*, a seminal piece in my practices epitomising my exploration, to theoretically explain the function of choices in my paintings. At the heart of *Welcome Dinner* lies a paradoxical invitation: a scene where bovines, in an unsettling display of

[122] It reads: 'Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily we reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. I do not seek or conjecture either of them as if they were veiled obscurities or extravagances beyond the horizon of my vision; I see them before me and connect them immediately with the consciousness of my existence.'

hospitality, offer their flesh to human guests. This scenario, while surreal, encapsulates an ethical dilemma – the choice to accept or decline this grotesque generosity. This choice, seemingly simple, unravels into a complex web of moral considerations that challenge viewers' ethical compass. The act of choosing in this context is emblematic of the broader existential choices faced by individuals in society, where the distinctions between right and wrong are often blurred by the nuances of circumstance and perspective.

This discussion of choice resonates with narratives in the movies of Chinese fifth-generation directors. *Raise the Red Lantern* by Zhang Yimou, set in 1920s China, portrays the life of Songlian, who becomes the fourth wife of a wealthy man. The household's strict hierarchy and the competition among the wives for the husband's favour serve as the primary backdrop for exploring this theme. The lantern-lighting ritual, which indicates the husband's choice of wife to spend the night with, symbolises power dynamics and personal agency within the household. Songlian, once a university student with prospects of an independent life, finds herself in a situation where her autonomy is severely restricted. Her decision to marry into wealth may initially appear as an exercise of agency. Yet it quickly becomes apparent that she is subject to the whims of her husband and the oppressive traditions that govern the household. The film captures the struggle for autonomy not just through Songlian's attempts to navigate and manipulate the household's power dynamics, but also in her moments of rebellion, such as tampering with the lanterns or forming secretive alliances. Conversely, compliance is portrayed as a survival strategy within the oppressive framework of the household. The wives' competition for the master's favour underscores how compliance with the established norms and expectations can be leveraged for personal advantage, albeit within a limited scope. This compliance, however, comes at the cost of personal integrity and the suppression of individual desires and ambitions. In the film, through Songlian's oscillation between submission and resistance, questions are gradually raised: What does it mean to assert one's autonomy in the face of structural pressures?[123] At what point does the cost of compliance outweigh the benefits of conformity? Pleasure was the initial reason for the choice, and displeasure was the opposite. However, what if the result of choices is always displeasure? No matter what she chooses, she will still suffer in the movie because the fundamental problem is the political system (McFarlane, 2006); thus, she has to choose the lesser of two evils – choices give rise to displeasure as much as pleasure. Therefore, her choice transcends into a moral one and epitomises the countless Chinese women under the feudal system, becoming a national allegory.[124]

In this case, the choices are not mere narrative devices; they are ethical problems that compel the artist and the audience to confront the ethical dimensions. These choices demand a moral reckoning, inviting a deeper engagement with the work that transcends aesthetic appreciation. They highlight the tension between societal norms and personal ethics, underscoring the Kantian struggle with duty and moral law. Through this allegorical representation, the artwork becomes a medium through which the complex territory of moral choices is navigated.

[123] Autonomy leads to the discussions of realism between Adorno and György Lukács, which will be explained in the last section this chapter.

[124] Deleuze's 'fold' is a metaphor for the complexity of the Baroque, signifying the infinite divisibility of matter and the fluidity of form and identity. This concept can be applied to the narrative structure of allegory, particularly in how it layers and intertwines various dimensions of human experience. This will be explained in the next section.

In my painting, the act of choosing emerges not merely as a recurring thematic element but as a methodological approach, infusing each painting with a complex layer of meaning. This gesture of choice acts as a critical nexus through which the interplay between directness and indirectness is explored, offering a nuanced examination of the dynamics of expression and interpretation within the framework of allegory. This methodological stance is pivotal in complicating the narrative structure of the allegory, transforming each artistic piece into a multidimensional exploration of ethical and political quandaries. The gesture of choice imbues the narrative with a sense of ambiguity and open-endedness, inviting viewers to engage in a deeper, more active process of ethical contemplation. Through this engagement, viewers are not passive consumers of paintings; rather, they become co-creators of meaning, tasked with navigating the moral landscape that the allegory presents. The choice is not only an act in the scenarios of painting, but also a decision for the viewers. When they choose to read the painting allegorically, the political dimension emerges. Moreover, the gesture of choice within the allegorical context reflects the broader socio-political environment in which my art is situated. It acknowledges the complexities and constraints in Chinese society and culture, highlighting the interplay between personal agency and external pressures. This dynamic is particularly resonant in contexts marked by political tension and censorship, where the indirectness facilitated by allegory allows for a subtle yet complex commentary on societal issues. The allegorical gesture thus embodies a critical strategy for navigating the delicate balance between direct expression and the necessity for obfuscation. It encapsulates the artist's role in challenging the current, offering a medium through which difficult truths can be broached and societal norms questioned, all while maintaining a veil of metaphorical abstraction that safeguards both the message and the messenger.

In essence, the gesture of choice within my allegorical painting stands as a testament to the power of art to foster reflection, dialogue, and change. By complicating narratives and engaging viewers in the ethical and political dimensions of choice, my paintings aim to transcend the boundaries of traditional visual storytelling. They strive to offer a space where the direct and the indirect coalesce, revealing the multifaceted nature of human experience and the enduring relevance of allegory in articulating the complex interrelations between individual choice and socio-political realities.

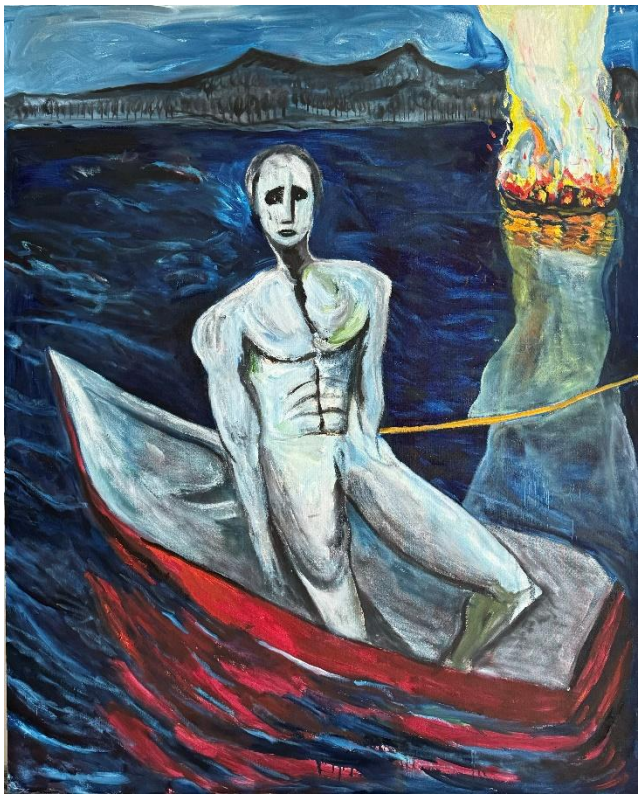
Departing One (Figure 34, 2024) could serve as an example of transforming aesthetic choice into moral inquiry through the Kantian framework of the sublime, with allegory serving as the underlying structure. The central figure, seated in a boat adrift on turbulent waters, symbolises a fractured identity between engagement and detachment, history and futurity. His form is anatomically exaggerated and disjointed, almost sculptural, reflecting a disunity that indicates the tension in his identity. This dissonance is heightened by the surrounding environment: flames flicker in the background, illuminating the water with a volatile brightness that contrasts starkly with the figure's still, almost indifferent posture. The calmness of the figure amidst a burning scene, seated in a boat tethered to an unseen force, evokes a sense of suspended time and fragmented identity. This suspension is the point at which aesthetics begins to shift towards moral consideration, that the sublime invites the viewer to confront the infinite and the unknown, evoking not only awe but also introspection.

The sublime transcends the boundaries of sensory pleasure, moving into where reason and moral

judgment are engaged. In *Departing One*, this transcendence is enacted through the figure's impassive stance in the face of destruction. His detachment hints at an internalised moral dilemma—whether to act or remain indifferent—a choice that, while visually implicit, challenges the viewer to contemplate the ethical dimensions of passivity versus action. He either comes back to save the boat in great danger without knowing whether his brave action matters because it is unclear whether anyone is on that boat, or he just does nothing, and no one will know about the incident except viewers. This aesthetic arrangement of the scene becomes an allegorical stage for exploring the moral implications of detachment. Moral ambiguity arises naturally from the aesthetic experience, where the allure of the sublime transforms into an ethical reflection of the figure's responsibility in the chaotic scene.

Figure 34

Departing One



120x150 cm. By Hengzhi Gong, 2024, painting, oil on canvas.

Allegory is essential to this process, as it allows the painting's elements—flames, water, and the boat—to function as symbols with layered meanings, blurring the lines between the literal and the symbolic. Allegory brings fragmented meanings, where each symbol invites a multiplicity of interpretations. The disjointed figure, drift boat, and burning background each carry individual significance yet contribute to a collective allegory that resists simple interpretation. Through this fragmented allegorical structure, *Departing One* transforms aesthetic choice into a site of ethical contemplation, reflecting the figure's internal struggle and, by extension, my reflection on external pressures.

As the viewer contemplates the figure's position—suspended between the flames and an unknown future—a question arises: Is this figure a saviour or an observer, a participant or a passive witness? This ambiguity embodies Kant's notion of the sublime (2000) as a gateway to ethical contemplation, where the aesthetic choice—to depict ambivalent calm amidst chaos—transcends into a moral dilemma. The calm, introspective figure symbolises my position within a socio-political landscape fraught with restrictions and dangers, each choice involving a complex negotiation between personal integrity and external pressures.

The boat, serving as a link to the past and tradition, further contains the moral gravity of the figure's choices. As Kant suggests (2000), moral reasoning is often provoked by encounters that exceed ordinary experience, compelling individuals to confront otherwise dormant ethical values. In *Departing One*, the protagonist's tether to his past becomes an emblem of this moral weight, binding him to a history that simultaneously supports and restricts his autonomy. His decision to either sever or maintain this connection—whether to act or remain detached—is a moral quandary embedded within the painting's allegorical structure. Here, allegory functions as a ruin that embodies fragments of moral and historical meaning, inviting viewers to engage with the painting on a deeper ethical level.

Thus, the aesthetic becomes a conduit for morality, as the viewer, like the protagonist, is drawn to consider the implications of both action and inaction. In this sense, the sublime moment in *Departing One* lies in engaging the viewer's moral faculties, presenting a choice that transcends mere aesthetic appreciation. The indifference of the figure—whether it is passive acceptance or active choice—represents a critical juncture in which the aesthetic experience leads to a moral reflection on the role of artists within a complex socio-political framework.

This moral ambiguity ultimately bridges political discourse, with allegory as the binding agent that intertwines aesthetics, morality, and politics. In contemplating the figure's potential choices, viewers are invited to reflect on the political implications of disengagement versus involvement. Here, morality is not isolated from the political sphere but becomes a precursor to it, as the decision to act or withdraw in the face of danger symbolises the broader choices that artists make in response to cultural censorship. This transition from aesthetics to morality, and finally to politics, encapsulates the layered allegorical function of the painting, serving as an entry point for the next section's exploration of how ethical choices in art inevitably intersect with political meaning.

Allegory as a Catalyst from Ethical to Political Discourses

Raise the Red Lantern (1991) serves as an example of my research in which the dimensions of aesthetics, ethics, and politics are not separate layers but intrinsically interwoven, much like the fabric of the Baroque fold that defies simple categorisation according to Deleuze's idea of the fold.[125] In the

[125] In the case of Songlian in the film *Raise the Red Lantern*, her navigation through the intricate social hierarchy of the feudal household is emblematic of the folding process according to Deleuze (1991). The aesthetic dimension is represented through the visual and narrative style of the film, capturing the opulent yet oppressive atmosphere of the household. This aesthetic experience is not merely for visual pleasure but serves as a gateway to deeper ethical considerations. The ethical dimension is unfolded through Songlian's struggle for autonomy and dignity within the confines of a rigidly structured and patriarchal society. Her choices and actions, oscillating

movie, allegory is the mechanism that folds those dimensions together, creating a complex, multidimensional narrative that extends simple storytelling into multiple levels, presenting the beautiful (aesthetic), the family (ethical), and power (political) not as isolated threads but as interlaced, influencing and shaping one another. These three dimensions, in other words, are always allegorical for one another. This interplay heightens the significance of Songlian's choices, making them emblematic of a collective experience that is at once personal and universal, historical and contemporary.

In my practice, allegory emerges as a medium that weaves aesthetic allure with layers of ethical and political commentary, establishing a multifaceted dialogue that transcends the conventional boundaries of beauty. It enables the embodiment of complex and often contentious themes within the accessible yet profound domain of allegorical representation, allowing for a nuanced exploration of socio-political issues under the guise of ostensibly innocuous imagery. Allegory facilitates a multidimensional discourse, enabling me to encode moral inquiries and political critiques within the visual narrative. This encoding serves not merely as a protective veil against the prying eyes of censorship but also as an invitation for the viewer to engage in a deeper, more reflective interaction with the work. Viewers are encouraged to decipher the underlying messages through the lens of allegory, thereby participating in a silent conversation on the ethical and political dimensions that shape collective experiences. In this case, allegory could be a strategic tool for navigating the constraints imposed by censorship, particularly in contexts where direct political expression may lead to suppression or retribution.[126] By cloaking socio-political critiques in layers of allegorical narrative, artists can articulate dissenting viewpoints, expose societal flaws, and champion change, all while eluding confrontation with censorship. In this way, allegory becomes both the shield and the spear, protecting the artist's voice while delivering sharper critiques of injustice, inequality, and oppression.

Allegory not only functions as a narrative mechanism in my work but also as a philosophical stance, asserting the inseparability of aesthetics, ethics, and politics. Through the allegorical narratives that permeate my paintings, I strive to foster a dialogue that challenges viewers to reconsider their perceptions, to question prevailing norms, and to engage with the pressing moral and political issues of our time. In so doing, my art seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse concerning the power of visual storytelling to illuminate the ethical and political contours of contemporary society, demonstrating the enduring relevance and transformative potential of allegory as a medium for ethical and political discourse.

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between submission and resistance, engage the viewer in a moral inquiry into the value of individual agency against collective norms. This ethical exploration is intimately tied to the aesthetic presentation, as the portrayal of Songlian's plight elicits a visceral response from the audience, grounding moral considerations in a tangible, empathetic experience. Politically, Songlian's story transcends her individual experience to comment on the broader societal structures that dictate the roles and fates of women within the feudal system. This dimension addresses questions of power, gender dynamics, and the impact of traditional values on personal freedom and social status. In this context, the allegory uses Songlian's story to critique not just a historical period but also the lingering effects of such structures in contemporary society. In this way, this film's allegory opens up a way of thinking about the relationship between individual and collective, heterogeneous and homogeneous, and singularities and multiplicities.

[126] Even apolitical paintings are not safe if they are interpreted as politically symbolic. One of my friends painted a tilted scale and was asked to take the painting down by the officials before the exhibition started because the tilted scale could represent an unfair society. From this case, we can see that the narrative system of symbolism could not work under Chinese cultural censorship.

In other words, I not only depict choices in my painting, but also give the choices to the viewers through returning the power of explanation to them. I do not intend to preach or to force my point of view on the audience. Instead, I establish a sense of complexity, and leave the audiences in a space of reflection where moral inquiry and artistic expression converge. Thus, allegory expands the expression in my painting. This approach underscores the conviction that art possesses the unique capacity to look into the complexities of moral and political discourse, offering insights that transcend conventional verbal articulation. By employing allegory, I navigate the relationship between the visible and the invisible, the said and the unsaid, thereby enriching the viewer's engagement and interpretation of my work. In this context, allegory becomes a bridge, connecting the aesthetic space with the political sphere in the painting. It allows for the presentation of politically charged themes in a manner that is both accessible and complex, inviting viewers to participate in a dialogue that reaches beyond the confines of the canvas while rejecting the censors in order to realise the political dimension immediately. This dialogue fosters a deeper understanding of the moral questions at stake, encouraging a deeper reflective and critical engagement with the work. The allegorical form thus becomes a vehicle through which the subtleties of political commentary are woven into the fabric of visual aesthetics, imbuing the artwork with layers of meaning that demand contemplation and introspection.[127]

Moreover, this bridging of aesthetics and politics through allegory enriches the interpretive experience, offering multiple entry points for engagement with the work. Viewers are invited to decode the allegorical symbols, unravel the layers of meaning, and, in the process, confront the moral and political questions that underpin the narrative. This interactive process of interpretation fosters a dynamic relationship between the artwork and its audience, transforming passive observation into an active exploration of the complex interplay between moral ethics, political critique, and artistic expression.

For example, the moral ambiguity in *Departing One* (Figure 34, 2024), embodied in the figure's suspended decision, transitions into political discourse through allegory. In this painting, the protagonist's situation on the boat becomes more than a personal dilemma—it symbolises the relationship between individual agency and collective history. This tether, much like the constraints faced by artists navigating cultural censorship, reflects the tension between maintaining fidelity to the past (self-censorship) and embracing the uncertainties of the future (allegorical political painting). The decision to sever or sustain this connection is not merely a moral choice but a political act, encapsulating the broader stakes of autonomy and resistance in a repressive socio-political environment.

Melancholia, a state not of despair but of critical reflection on loss and fragmentation, arises within the mourning towards direct political expressions. Allegory transforms the ruins of history into spaces where time, meaning, and agency are unsettled, allowing the viewer to piece together fragments of

[127] The challenges inherent in this approach are as significant as the opportunities it presents. Navigating the delicate balance between aesthetic appeal and political message requires a nuanced understanding of both domains. The risk of diluting the political critique to ensure aesthetic harmony, or, conversely, of compromising aesthetic integrity for the sake of political expression, is ever-present. However, these challenges are also opportunities for innovation and creativity. They compel artists to continuously refine their practice, seeking ways to amplify the resonance of the allegorical narratives and enhance the viewer's engagement with the artwork.

truth, while melancholia is a complex reaction to loss, where the subject is unable to fully process the object of mourning, resulting in an ongoing attachment to it. In *Departing One*, the figure's tether to the boat represents this melancholic attachment—a link to a past that is simultaneously lost and preserved, both a source of stability and a burden preventing progress. The melancholia here is not an expression of passive mourning but an active engagement with the tensions of history, identity, and choice.

The fragmented identity of the figure mirrors Freud's notion of melancholia (1957) as an internal division, where the ego splits between self-reproach and reflection, creating a space of introspection. The protagonist's disjointed anatomy and sculptural quality visually convey this division, symbolising my fractured relationship with tradition and modernity, memory and aspiration. This melancholia, however, also becomes a critical tool for interrogating the past. The tethered boat is not merely an anchor to history but a dynamic force that challenges the figure to reconsider his position within the temporality. The flames in the background, evoking both destruction and renewal, add another layer to this allegorical reading: the past must be confronted, even in its most volatile form, to reimagine future possibilities.

In this painting, the interplay between allegory and melancholia is central to how it transitions from morality to politics. The moral ambiguity of the figure's choice becomes a metaphor for the political decisions faced by contemporary Chinese artists. In a socio-political landscape shaped by censorship and cultural suppression, these choices are not merely personal but deeply political. The indifference of the figure, whether interpreted as passive acceptance or a deliberate withdrawal, mirrors the melancholic condition of artists who grapple with their role in an environment where direct political engagement can lead to suppression, yet disengagement risks irrelevance. The flames can symbolise both the destruction of oppressive structures and the consuming forces of historical memory, while the boat represents both the weight of acceptance and the possibility of escape. Through this fragmented allegorical structure, *Departing One* transforms aesthetic choice into a site of ethical and political contemplation, reflecting the figure's internal struggle and, by extension, the artist's attitude towards external pressures.

This attitude, framed by melancholia, indicates the political dimension of the painting. Freud's understanding of melancholia as a fixation on unresolved loss (1957) parallels the protagonist's situation on the boat. Yet, melancholia can also be productive, transforming the ruins of the past into a critique of the present. In this sense, Departing One is not merely a reflection of loss but a critique of the socio-political structures that enforce this loss, offering viewers a space to question the implications of action, inaction, and compromise. Images in the painting become allegorical markers of this critique, inviting viewers to consider how the past, while inescapable, can be reimagined to confront the present's challenges.

In sum, the integration of aesthetics and politics through the use of allegory in my practice not only challenges conventional boundaries between artistic disciplines but also reaffirms the role of art as a powerful medium for societal reflection and critique in China, which is less direct than politics. It asserts the potential of allegory to act not only as a philosophical concept but also as a catalyst for dialogue and change, highlighting the transformative power of allegorical painting to navigate and

articulate the moral and political dilemmas of contemporary China. Through this approach, my work aspires to contribute to a broader discourse on the significance of bridging aesthetics and politics, offering a nuanced perspective on the ways in which art can engage with and illuminate the issues in contemporary China.

Yearning for A New Possibility

This written submission has charted a transformative journey through allegory within the context of Chinese art, from traditional practices to complex contemporary narratives. By interlacing Western philosophy with the allegorical traditions of Chinese art, this research indicates the adaptive and subversive capacities of allegory, particularly within the restrictive environments imposed by contemporary Chinese censorship.

By linking the moral and aesthetic dimensions through Kant's philosophy and exploring how allegory connects these with politics as the theoretical foundation, my painting establishes a complex discourse different from traditional, late modern, and current Chinese political art. In my paintings, the fullness of choices denies simple answers. Instead, dilemmas exist everywhere in my paintings. No matter how to choose, it will always lead to a dead end. The dilemma is also the epitome of the current state of Chinese political art, where artists living in China have to respond to censorship while those living abroad have to witness their works gradually become 'Other' as a response to Orientalism.[128]

In contemporary Chinese art, there is a common narrative that political repression and censorship are essential background stories from a Western perspective of observation (Tang, 2015).[129] In this case, the genuine artworks are supposed to fight with Chinese government propaganda and become a a form of political dissidence or even a protest. Tang writes: 'It is a thesis predicated on the classical liberal conception of society as resistance against state, of personal liberty in opposition to tyrannical power' (p. 212). In the narrative under discussion, the ideal protagonist is envisioned as an artist who faces censorship or, more dramatically, persecution by the state. This artist, cast as a quintessential figure within the story, is elevated to a status of reverence or idolisation, being seen as a bearer of truth. The allure of this narrative framework lies in its simplification of complex issues into a clear-cut

[128] I find it is a problem that Chinese art is always looked at with a certain kind of Orientalism in the West. In his book *China and Orientalism: Western Knowledge Production and the P.R.C*, Daniel F. Vukovich (2013) put this on the table for the first time. In his preface to the book, he writes that Orientalism with regard to China is similar to Edward Said's opinion as a '…not classical, literary types of discourse about an essential other, but a social-scientific, Cold War-inflected writing is less overtly orientalist and racist and more full of detail… More modernizationist than exoticising' (p. xiii). In Vukovich's eyes, Western understandings of China provide an example of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of sanctioned ignorance, which is not open to cultural and political critique from barbarians outside the disciplinary gates, making the representation from China become one of Otherness. Such an environment might cause 'a discursive formation that precedes and in some sense determines, or exerts pressures and sets limits upon, the speaking subject' (p. xiii) and forbids the real, local voice from China. Due to the word limit in this dissertation, this will not be analysed thoroughly but written as a conclusion. It will be further explored in my future research.

[129] According to Tang, the persistent narrative was established in the Enlightenment critique of Oriental despotism and was strengthened by the ideological divide of the Cold War. He believes that the fundamental thesis of this narrative is that art is a creative expression of freedom and individuality, both of which are antithetical to authoritarianism.

dichotomy of right and wrong, casting an extraordinarily heroic figure as the recipient of moral support. This configuration facilitates the comprehension and appreciation of art from alien cultures and societies, making it relatable through the lens of familiar political debates and interests. Consequently, when a society or nation is depicted as oppressive or authoritarian, its art becomes more accessible and subject to discussion. This is because the narrative offers a benchmark for analysing such artworks and establishes a viewpoint for Western audiences to engage with them.[130]

In this case, the current Western narrative on Chinese contemporary art usually reduces it to a political stance.[131] This narrative evaluates Chinese contemporary art only through its dissidence towards repression and will seldom invite audiences to look at Chinese contemporary art through a cultural approach. If audiences follow its pattern, the most significant work in Chinese contemporary art must express political dissent or activism. Ai Weiwei might be an example made into a superstar by this Western narrative passively (although he seems to enjoy it). Meanwhile, there are even a number of artists who are taking advantage of this stereotypical narrative, making sensitive political art simply to satisfy Western audiences and gain fame.[132]

The political narrative and the discriminatory standard could not clarify Chinese contemporary art because art and artists play more than one role in contemporary Chinese society, even for critical and political art. Not all the art about politics in China is fighting with the country's so-called authoritarian regime.[133] However, if Chinese artists want to showcase their political practice in the West, they have

[130] Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), celebrated by *The New York Times* as a leading figure among China's artists and a formidable critic of the CCP, has become emblematic of the narrative that intertwines artistic prowess with political dissent (Tang, 2015). His rise to global recognition was catalysed by Alison Klayman's documentary *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry*, and further amplified by his 2021 solo exhibition Interlace at Jeu de Paume in Paris, which delineated his dual identity as both an artist and a political activist (Marsh, 2021). Critics like Jed Perl have offered mixed reviews, praising Ai's activism while questioning his artistic merit (2013). Ai's international acclaim predominantly stems from his role as a dissident, with his art serving as a secondary, albeit provocative, platform for his political statements, exemplified by his controversial series of photographs gesturing disrespectfully at landmarks worldwide. This portrayal, carefully managed by Western media, underscores a reluctance to complicate the narrative of Ai's opposition to the Chinese regime. The Western media and art establishments have simplified Ai Weiwei's complex political engagement into a heroic struggle against tyranny, often ignoring the nuanced realities of Chinese politics and the broader implications of endorsing such freedom of expression without considering its contextual consequences (Tang, 2015, p. 213). This approach not only highlights a preference for easily digestible political art but also reveals a broader disinterest in the complex dynamics of local politics beyond the West.

[131] During my recent visit to an exhibition of the work of a Chinese political artist in London, I observed the gallery's curator explaining the artist's works to the audience in a remarkably simple manner. He said the obscured eyes of a stone lion were a metaphor for censorship, indicating the artist's dissent against the Chinese government. This interpretation struck me as an oversimplification, which overlooks the rich complexity of Chinese culture and its modes of representation. This oversimplification mirrored my own experience in 2023 while exhibiting Welcome Dinner, where Western collectors repeatedly sought a direct political stance from me, disregarding the cultural and allegorical depth of my work. Such attitudes suggest a position where Western narratives strip Chinese art of its complexity, reducing it to binary oppositions that affirm external political biases.

[132] A recent illustration is Badiucao (b. 1986), who describes himself as an exiled artist. Through his paintings that deliberately vilify Xi Jinping and other CCP leaders, he has positioned himself as a dissident artist, subsequently gaining recognition in the West. However, his work, lacking in depth and complexity, aligns him more with activism than artistry. This dual identity as either activist or artist serves primarily as a means to achieve fame, rather than a genuine engagement with artistic or political discourse. For more on his works see: https://news.artnet.com/art-world-archives/italy-anti-chinese-government-badiucao-show-2034812, retrieved November 18, 2024.

[133] In the video *From No. 4 Ping Yuan Li to No.4 Tian Qiao Bei Li* (https://youtu.be/fvufNIlhNuc), Ma Qiusha talked about her experience of studying art and her relationship with her parents. Although she looked calm when talking, she took a blade with blood out of her mouth at the end of the video. This performance implicitly

to simplify their expressions to satisfy Western viewers. At the same time, if they wish to discuss politics in China, they need to disguise all their intentions. In this case, a paradox emerges, which refuses Chinese political painting that genuinely wishes to discuss culture and politics to be universal, and my practice could become a potential solution for both situations.

My work concentrates on the intricate relationship between personal narratives and their collective resonance, unveiling a critique far more subtle than straightforward public dissent. Although my practice aims to discuss Chinese politics and society, which is a grand narrative, I accomplish it by depicting the individual, whether it is a horse, a fish or a human being. Similar to *Raise the Red Lantern*, the fate of the individual in my painting is also an allegory of broader political expression. In this case, my work is never a political stance but opens up a space of allegory for discussion and reflection. Through exploring the historical role of allegory within Chinese political discourse and its application in the late modern era, I have cultivated a distinct comprehension of the allegorical effect within painting. This insight positions painterly allegory not merely as a technique but as a particular genre within the art form, which bridges Western and Chinese oil painting alongside a fusion of contemporary and traditional motifs, aiming to construct a complex narrative that navigates the interplay between ethical considerations and aesthetic expression. This narrative ambition seeks to elevate these discussions into politics, utilising allegory as the medium through which such transcendent dialogue is achieved.

Through my practice, I wish to maintain the dynamic relation and tension between the spheres of morality, aesthetics, and politics, which stems from a reluctance to confine my work within the boundaries of dissident art or Socialist Realism, both of which tend to offer overly simplistic narratives of resistance or endorsement. In fact, if we look at these two genres closely, it reveals a similarity in their foundation: both forms exhibit a pronounced aversion to the nuances of postmodernity and its complexities, a sentiment likely rooted in the Cultural Revolution's legacy.[134] Socialist Realism is built on a utopia, where the inevitability of the revolution determines the perfection of the communist future (Ding & Lu, 2014). In other words, Socialist Realism prioritises socialism over realism. Socialist Realism's artworks, tasked with educating and transforming the working class, were required to embrace communist utopia as an absolute truth and accept the inevitability of revolution. On the other hand, in the discourse of dissident art, Socialism is an Oriental monster which is on the other side of Capitalism and thus is authoritarian and barbaric. In this case, dissident art, through this lens, may be perceived as the Western counterpart to Socialist Realism. They both eschew the complexities of contemporary challenges in favour of a more unidimensional perspective.

Cynical Realism, on the other hand, despite its surface engagement with the allegorical, also reduces its narrative to simplistic slogans or one-liner narratives within the context of fragmented modernity

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criticised the Family Planning Policy in China and traditional Chinese education. However, like Zhang Yimou's movie, Ma's main aim was not to make any public protest but to raise discussions on Chinese culture and traditional education.

[134] During the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese government effectively utilised binary oppositions to simplify complex social, economic, and political issues into stark contrasts between what was considered revolutionary (good) versus what was considered reactionary (bad). This dichotomy was employed to galvanise mass support for the Cultural Revolution's objectives and to identify and persecute perceived enemies of the revolution. The binary oppositions were not just ideological but were manifested in every aspect of life, from literature and art to education and personal relationships.

and unfulfilled postmodernity. While ostensibly invoking the structure of allegory and the allegorical impulse, this genre falls short of genuinely embodying its essence. It presents an illusion of allegory without offering the viewer the essential component of choice, instead pre-empting decision-making by presenting preconceived conclusions. This approach still mirrors the methodology of Socialist Realism, where the CCP dictates moral direction and decisions, positioning itself as the arbiter of truth and ideological conformity. Similarly, Cynical Realist artists, influenced significantly by the Cultural Revolution, inadvertently adopted the CCP's role from Socialist Realism, dictating interpretations and limiting the scope of visual and moral exploration. This act of control reveals a latent desire for the power of representation, aiming not to liberate the allegorical potential of their work but to constrain it within predefined bounds. Thus, while Cynical Realism may superficially appear allegorical and invite such readings, its inherent directive nature and the artists' control over interpretation betray its allegorical promise, rendering it a form of allegorical Socialist Realism rather than a genuine engagement with allegory's depth and complexity.[135]

Whether in Socialist Realism, dissident art, or even Cynical Realism, realism is always the fundamental element, which emphasises revealing the underlying reality of social conflicts and human relationships shaped by political structures, exposing the dynamics of class struggle and educating viewers through the deterministic stance inside, no matter whether it is praising or opposing. However, those political arts seem to become didactic tools, making viewers understand the expressions in artworks, leaving viewers no choice but to accept. In this case, the realism inside becomes too limiting and fails to appreciate the autonomy (Adorno, 1997) of art and its potential to challenge social expectations because the realism in those genres eschews provoking critical reflection and resists easy absorption into predefined categories.[136] Even before reading those works, the expressions had already been delivered because realism inside is actually a political stance. In this case, art loses its independence and autonomy and becomes a simple tool of expression.

The autonomy of art is not about being disconnected from society; instead, it is about art maintaining a degree of separation that allows it to critique and reflect on society from a unique vantage point. Through this autonomy, art becomes a form of critique, resisting closure and resolution. Instead of affirming the status quo, whether praising or opposing Socialism, autonomous political art challenges it, presenting contradictions and complexities that compel viewers to think critically and question the

[135] For example, Yue Minjun's *The Sun* (Figure 22, 2000), discussed in Chapter 2, exemplifies how Cynical Realism, while ostensibly engaging with allegory, often betrays the openness and multiplicity inherent in true allegorical practice. While the imagery is layered—satirising the visual uniformity and ideological conformity of Maoist propaganda—the closed eyes introduce a passive resistance, interpreted as an instinctive shielding from the sun's oppressive rays. However, this double narrative, critiquing conformity while implying passive resistance, ultimately limits the viewer's interpretive agency by guiding them toward a singular conclusion: the disempowerment and futility of resistance under totalitarian authority. By presenting such deterministic meanings, *The Sun* aligns more closely with Socialist Realism's directive narrative style, where the viewer is not invited to question but rather to accept a predefined critique. Unlike Benjamin's concept of allegory, which thrives on fragmentation and interpretive openness (2009), Yue's work employs allegory to reinforce a single ideological stance. Thus, while *The Sun* adopts allegorical structures, it constrains the viewer's interpretive freedom, reducing the potential for multiplicity and rendering it a more didactic, allegorical form of Socialist Realism.

[136] Adorno develops his ideas about the autonomy of art and its resistance to being a tool for political ends, directly challenging Lukács's advocacy of realism as a revolutionary artistic form. Adorno argues that by prescribing what art must represent and how it must do so, Lukács's approach reduces the complexity and autonomy of artistic expression, turning it into an instrument for depicting social realities in a way that serves specific political objectives. For Adorno, this diminishes the critical potential of art to challenge and question the very foundations of those realities.

representation raised from the art. In this case, art resists its reduction to mere function or commodity as well as the demands and functions imposed by society, remaining as a mirror of the contradictions and issues within the contemporary world.

By revisiting and integrating allegorical practices from various periods of the history of both Chinese and Western art, my work eschews simplistic narratives and one-liner interpretations, thereby fostering a complex dialogue between political and ethical dimensions that defies resolution. In other words, I never aim to resolve the intricate relationship between these dimensions but rather to open up a space for exploration and interpretation, where choices are not predetermined, thus outside subjectivity. It places objects in a different relationship to themselves instead of forcing a reading. Meanwhile, my paintings do not always show viewers how the world is but how it might not be. This potential is realised through my painting's capacity to envision alternatives to embody non-conformity and negation. Artistic autonomy in my painting, therefore, is not merely about being separate from society but also about engaging with it critically and profoundly.

My paintings offer an alternative means to discuss politics by relating it to ethics. I endeavour to establish ethics for aesthetic practice that encompasses ethical issues, allowing for nuanced political arguments rather than aligning with a specific ideology. This approach is neither pro-communist nor Western; it represents a distinct path. Specifically, it advocates for the autonomy of art within a framework that embraces a fluid relationship between ethics and aesthetics, one that is not predetermined. This is not about adhering to a set ideology or programme but about championing freedom of expression that is independent of both Chinese and Western political discourses, rejecting prescribed and doctrinaire ideological positions. In fact, my practice does not seek to align with Western liberalism, nor does it mirror the debate between Socialist Realism and pre-autonomous art.[137] It transcends these categories. What I truly argue in my practice is an allegorical approach to painting, as it allows for the inclusion and nuance of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, thereby opening up closed and limited political practices. In this case, my painting does not conform to the statements of other political artists who explore political opposition solely as a stance against autocratic regimes. Instead, it challenges the limitations imposed on painting as an art form.[138]

Consequently, my practice marks a departure from late modernity such as Cynical Realism or anti-modernity such as Socialist Realism. It proposes a new possibility within the context of Chinese contemporary art, which is not totally based on Western contemporary art but comes back to the Chinese tradition of Western modes with classical Chinese, echoing the memory system of Chinese literati.[139] My artistic practice, while mindful of Chinese censorship, leverages the conceptual void

[137] The debate between Socialist Realism and pre-autonomous art revolves around the function and purpose of art. Socialist Realism, prominent in the Soviet Union from the 1930s, advocates for art that serves socialist ideals, depicting heroic workers and promoting Communist Party values. In contrast, pre-autonomous art, and later autonomous art, prioritize artistic freedom, personal expression, and independence from political or social agendas. This debate, peaking during the early to mid-20th century, highlights the ideological clash between art as a tool for political propaganda and art as an autonomous form of creative expression.

[138] My statement on art resonates with the Platonic concern (2008) that poets are dangerous. Art inherently carries a potential threat to the moral or political regime. This danger is something that must be acknowledged and carefully managed.

[139] There are some Chinese artists, such as Hao Liang (b. 1983) and Mao Yan (b. 1968), who are turning back to Chinese tradition. Perhaps they have realised the issues remain in Chinese modernity and try to seek answers from the tradition. The innovation of my practice is to transcend the merely visual appropriation and provide a

inherent in traditional Chinese literati painting to create a space for contemplation and interpretation, potentially circumventing censorship through the use of allegorical narratives. It also transcends mere appropriation of late modern Chinese paintings, dissident art, or allegorical Socialist Realism. By rejecting direct and simplistic binary oppositions in favour of presenting serious political inquiries as choices within fictional yet relatable fables, my paintings diverge from other political artworks in contemporary China that tend to offer direct responses to the issues they explore. My practice is not confrontational but understated, discovering a new form of painting to discuss political discourses where politics is not allowed to be talked about. Through the methods I have proposed and the research I have conducted, my practice has become a post-contemporary statement based on Chinese tradition, incomplete modernity and socialist contemporary. The essence of it, and I believe this should be a guiding principle for Chinese political artists, is to bring out the complexity for reflection rather than impose political stances or definitive answers. In fact, the ultimate answer lies in the reflection of people reading political allegorical paintings, through which a new contemporary will be finally established.

This dissertation suggests the enduring relevance of allegory in art, demonstrating its capacity to adapt to and reflect upon the conditions of modernity and postmodernity. It also explores the unique position of contemporary Chinese artists, who must navigate a complex cultural terrain marked by historical legacy, different memory systems, and the pressures of current censorship. By bridging these diverse elements, my work contributes to a broader understanding of how allegory can serve as both negotiation and resistance in pursuing artistic truth and social commentary. Moreover, this research reaffirms the power of art to challenge, reflect, and transform the political and cultural narratives that shape our world. As we look forward, the insights gained from this exploration of allegory will continue to resonate, informing both the practice and interpretation of art in culturally complex and politically charged environments. Through this research, allegory is not only reasserted as a fundamental component of artistic expression but also reimagined as a critical tool for engaging with the nuanced realities of contemporary life. By revisiting and reinterpreting the allegorical tradition within Chinese painting, this dissertation sets the stage for future explorations into the role of art as a mediator of personal and collective experience, offering a new framework for understanding the intersections of art, politics, and society through allegory.

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theoretical framework for other artists to utilise the allegorical and implicit nature in traditional Chinese painting.

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