

GLOBALISATION OF CHINESE ART: IMAGE, FORM, SYMBOLISM AND FIGURATIVE PAINTING AS A GLOBAL COMMODITY

SHUWEN, Z.^{1*} – HASSAN, S. A.¹ – NOH, L. M. M.¹

¹ *Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Melaka Branch, Melaka, Malaysia.*

**Corresponding author
e-mail: 2022318971[at]student.uitm.edu.my*

(Received 22nd August 2025; revised 12th November 2025; accepted 20th November 2025)

Abstract. Chinese contemporary art remains an understudied subject, especially in the context of the global art market, and its role in promoting the economic and cultural sustenance of the national memory it aims to promote. Between 1989 and 2005, Chinese contemporary figurative painting underwent a major transformation, shaped by the China/Avant-Garde exhibition, the rise of Political Pop and Cynical Realism, and the increasing role of global markets and biennales. These works existed in tension as both cultural memory objects and globally tradable commodities, raising questions about how visual strategies mediated between local specificity and international legibility. The study investigates how image composition, form, and symbolism in the works of Zhang Xiaogang, Fang Lijun, Yue Minjun, Wang Guangyi, and Zeng Fanzhi translated Chinese cultural memory into globally accessible visual codes and, in turn, enabled commodification. The paper conducted qualitative research through the comparative case study approach by combining visual semiotic analysis with archival research, literature review, and art market data. The analysis involved developing coding categories such as identity and memory, alienation or cynicism, parody and translation, consumerism and propaganda, and commodification/masking. The findings reveal that artists deployed reduction, repetition, intertextual reference, and iconic motifs to render the Chinese experience legible to international audiences. These strategies also created recognisable market ‘signatures’ that increased auction and exhibition value. The dual legacy of this period is ambivalent: artworks preserved cultural memory while simultaneously being assimilated into the circuits of global capitalism. Accordingly, the paper also presents recommendations for adopting NVivo-based research methods to increase the generalisability of the observations.

Keywords: *semiotic analysis, Chinese contemporary art, global art market, national memory, global economic asset*

Introduction

Globalisation and art

Globalisation has led to the integration of global ideals in everyday life, including art and contemporary cultural design. With globalisation, the political, social, economic, and cultural ideologies have expanded and become transfused with the blurring of boundaries, which has promoted the expansion of shared creative communication and exchange of ideas (Bay, 2023). Globalisation has strengthened the interaction between art and economy, which sustains through measures such as auctions within the cultural spaces that expand the cultural and economic dynamics of the art world (Zinchenko, 2025). Accordingly, it is important to preserve and promote art education to promote local art and artists through global trends (Schulze, 2023). This has led to the expansion of the creative space that has promoted cultural sustenance of Asian artists in the global world. Accordingly, the cultural sustenance of these artists has also emerged in the form

of economic exchange, allowing the contemporary artists to partake in the global art market.

The rise of the Chinese contemporary art market

The diffusion of cultural and national boundaries for the promotion of the global art market has led to the rise of Chinese contemporary artists. As Bay (2023) notes, the globalisation and exchange of cultural ideas have led to the emergence of many Asian contemporary artists, predominantly Chinese artists, which has fundamentally altered the global art dynamics. This has made it important for the establishment and development of private art spaces such as museums. These private art museums are deemed to have the potential to extend a global interactive space to the rising young artists to allow them the cultural expression through art and form cultural artistic circles (Kolbe et al., 2022). To that end, the contemporary and alternative art space of China, including artists, curators, and critics, has successfully repurposed the capitalist urbanisation into resonant infrastructures (Wang, 2019). This can help to foster the artistic freedom of the artists by promoting their diverse cultural expression.

Research problem

The research problem this paper investigates is how the globalised identification of Chinese contemporary art through its composition, form, and symbolic interpretation promotes its dual identity of global market asset as well as cultural memory trope. It notes how the Chinese figurative paintings of 1989-2005, which underwent a rapid political transition, revived their position of trauma, identity, and cultural memory to address the local history. It investigates the employment of the visual codes employed by these artists to serve the historical experiences to a global audience, as museums and the globalised art market transformed them into commodities.

Aim and research questions

This study investigates how image composition, form, and symbolism mediated between local cultural memory and international art markets, enabling Chinese figurative painters to achieve visibility and recognition. Accordingly, it addresses: (1) How did compositional and symbolic strategies translate local cultural memory for global audiences? (2) In what ways did globalisation transform these figurative paintings into commodified art objects?

Scope and significance

The scope of this paper expands on studying five Chinese contemporary artists, namely Zhang Xiaogang, Fang Lijun, Yue Minjun, Wang Guangyi, and Zeng Fanzhi, who were active between 1989 and 2005. It examines ten artworks, two from each (as listed in *Table 1*), to illustrate the compositional, formal, and symbolic elements to reflect their role in framing the cultural memory of global consumption. It conducts a visual semiotic analysis through globalisation that presents its significance in noting art as a mediator between the transnational market and national identity. It is significant in analysing the academic debates on building a national memory through culture and maintaining the global position of Chinese art as an economic asset.

Literature review

Theoretical framework: Semiotics and visual analysis

The theoretical framework of semiotic analysis ideates the evaluation of textual signs, either in visual, auditory, or literal form, to interpret the meanings they signify, as the signs take on the signifier forms. “Umberto Eco’s Chandler of 2007” definition of semiotics reads that “semiotics is concerned with everything that is interpreted as a sign” (Rudrakumar and Venkatraman, 2022). This is based on the theory by Ferdinand de Saussure, who noted that a sign is not limited to only verbal language, but also includes the non-verbal forms, where a signifier is its utterance in visual, auditory, or even graphic forms. To that end, Roland Barthes presents the interpretation of signs in their denotative, connotative, and ideological myths (Rudrakumar and Venkatraman, 2022). This is idealised by the three-stage sign-signifier-signified structure, where it has the literal denotation of meaning, followed by the connotation guided by the individual emotions and values of the interpreter and their sociocultural modelling of these values (Nata et al., 2025). This leads the sign-signifier-signified structure to gain a new denotative identity, which interacts with the connotative interpretation to present a new meaning in the form of the myths. Such an identification implies an ever-changing and developing model of the sign-signifier-signified system in semiotics, where the signs continue to develop the meaning and interpretation based on the individual ideals and sociocultural influences. This idea is applied in the context of the selected set of artworks by the Chinese contemporary artists (*Figure 1*) to evaluate how these artworks function as signs in the social context to communicate a meaning. Through the semiotic analysis of these signs (the artworks), this meaning is analysed, guided by the sociocultural and political influences of globalisation and the potential possible meanings that may be understood based on the individual ideals of a viewer.

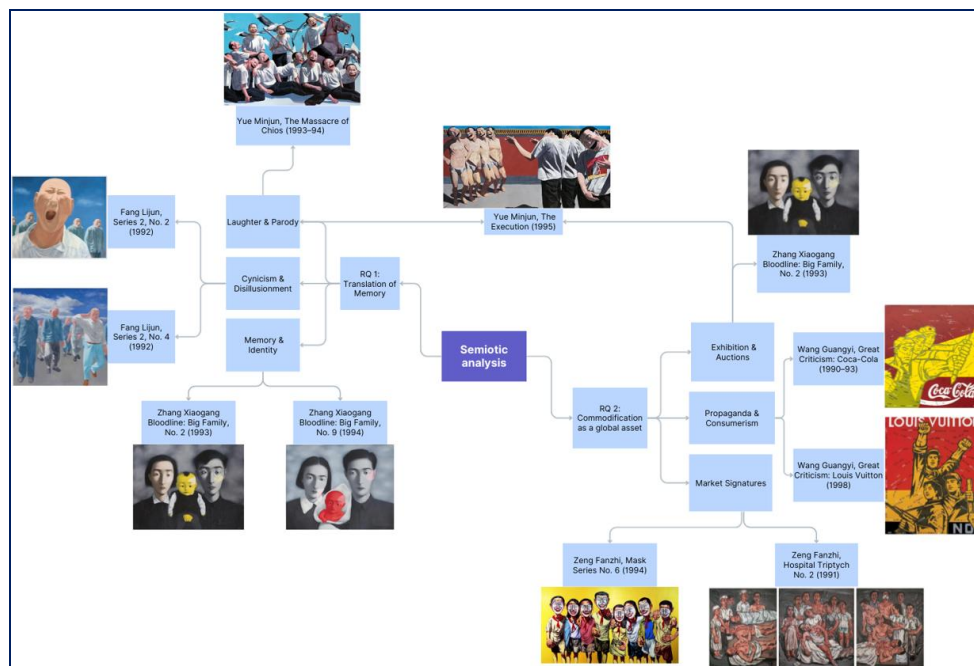


Figure 1. Visual depiction of semiotic analysis concept framework.

Globalisation and cultural translation in contemporary art

Globalisation has led to the transformation of the contemporary art market through the translation of local traditions, practices, and symbolic significances into codes for global visibility of cultural elements that negotiate meanings through diverse viewer interpretations. Artistic globalisation has led to the expansion of modern artistic practices having different degrees of cultural configuration from the Western European standards, guided by the social, economic, and political influences of the non-Western art context (Dal Lago, 2014). This allows the expansion of artistic expression through cultural influences guided by the artistic parameters of explaining their significance. To that end, “contemporary art forms created through appropriation or creative synthesis are considered to be special forms of expressive symbolism, indicating cultural identity, making social commentary with decorative motifs and creating a bridge between cultures” (Akpan, 2013). This suggests that the artists integrate the cultural elements into their artworks. This integration promotes their cultural identity as artists, presents critical commentary on the social, cultural, and political structures, and creates an artistic blend with other cultural values through visual communication. To that end, artistic adaptations reveal ethnic and cultural ambivalence and authenticity in the adaptation of cultural contexts to construct identity for assimilation into the cultural context and neutralisation of social stereotypes (Ndione and Remy, 2018). Accordingly, in the globalised space, art and philosophy bridge the cultural gaps by extending a platform for the diverse cultural expressions and “questioning individual and collective identity notions” by “fostering understanding and connection among communities” in the “interconnected world” (Pham, 2025). This makes art a cultural space of extending the individual cultural values as well as the sociocultural constructs that guide the development of art in the globalised artistic context.

Chinese contemporary Art (1989–2005): Historical context and key artists

The late 20th and early 21st century witnessed a drastic transformation of Chinese contemporary art, shaped by events such as the China/Avant-garde exhibition and the rise of political pop culture and cynical realism through the works of key figures, such as Zhang Xiaogang, Fang Lijun, Yue Minjun, Wang Guangyi, and Zeng Fanzhi. After the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the People’s Republic of China underwent a cultural and economic rethinking and reformation that opened the nation to outside economies (Gladston, 2014). This rethinking allowed artists to explore artistic practices outside the official strictures imposed during the Cultural Revolution, guided by the traditional Chinese and modern non-Chinese cultures. Consequently, 1989 witnessed the rise of artistic events and movements such as the China/Avant-garde exhibition, which constituted a collection of 293 paintings, videos, and sculptures by 186 artists, including Wang Guangyi, Xu Bing, Wu Shanzhuan, Huang Yongping and Gu Wenda (Lincot, 2004). To that end, the Chinese contemporary art that gained the most fame was that which pleased Western and foreign viewers based in China, with no superior knowledge, bringing out a very specific kind of art (Ribeiro, 2022). This led to the popularity of three different art movements, namely, the Political Pop and Cynical Realism, around 1989 to 1992, and the so-called Gaudy Art around the late 1990s. To that end, some of the most echoing names of cynical realism include Fang Lijun, Yue Minjun, and Zhang Xiaogang, among others, while political pop was promoted by Wang Guangyi. Zeng Fanzhi is also a part of the cynical realism movement influenced by the likes of Francis Bacon, Max Beckmann, and Willem de Kooning (Gaskin, 2018). These artists promoted Chinese contemporary art in the global context through their

works, which are guided by the political and cultural movements, suggesting the position of these arts as a critique of the sociopolitical culture.

The role of art markets and biennales in commodification

The global arts market and the international biennales contributed to the commodification of Chinese contemporary art, which transformed the culturally and politically influenced artworks into global tradeable assets through exhibitions and auctions. Biennials are “‘tournaments of value’ that exist apart from the exigencies of daily life while also having real economic and cultural effects beyond their life span” (Roberts, 2017). Biennales connect art with the everyday identities that explore the experiences of the individuals creating the art, guided by their cultural experiences, while promoting them in the global space. This promotes a sense of recognition of the artists within the global art discourse while ideating a cultural sustenance of non-/western art that challenges the notions of Westernised standards. However, biennales often underrepresent the non-Western artistic hemisphere. The artistic careers of the artists who are culturally marginalised begin in the Western art locales such as New York or London, in asserting the position of these marginalised artists in the global art context (Genç and Genç, 2020). This presents an ambiguous image of the biennales, which tends to promote the Western cultural arts and artists while the non-Western artists and cultures remain marginalised. Yet, biennales have also been appreciated for promoting cultural diversity in architectural discourse by fostering cultural exchange of ideas, which have revitalised heritage and historical sites (Kaur, 2023). To that end, exhibitions have also significantly promoted the visibility of artists. Artists such as Ai Weiwei have attained significant relevance outside China, especially in countries like Spain through his exhibitions like *Resistencia y tradición/Resistance and Tradition* at the Andalusian Contemporary Art Centre of Seville in 2013 *On the Table: Ai Weiwei at the Palau de la Virreina* in Barcelona (2014–2015), making these the most visited exhibitions in history (Manonelles Moner, 2016). Accordingly, these became an important measure for promoting the cultural identity of the artworks while significantly commercialising art through these commodifying sources, which makes it a global economic asset.

Materials and Methods

Research design: Comparative qualitative analysis of case studies

The current paper conducts qualitative research through a comparative case study of ten contemporary artworks from five Chinese contemporary artists active in the 1990s and 2000s through semiotic analysis. It notes how globalisation has led to the emergence of Chinese contemporary artists. It analyses how they have functioned dually to promote the cultural image through artworks to maintain the cultural sustainability and create a national memory, while at the same time, presenting these artworks as a tool of global economic asset. Comparative case study offers a comprehensive approach to the micro, meso, and macro dimensions of the case-based research (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017). These observations suggest an effective cultural implication in the signs that constitute the image of signifiers in the semiotic sense. This study examines how the cultural factors influence the way a viewer might interpret the meanings, wherein the Chinese viewers may identify an artwork through the lens of their individual

cultural, political, and social experiences, which a global viewer, with a lack of experience of the Chinese cultural ideals, would study differently. This suggests the conceptual understanding of Barthes' interpretation of semiology, which gives importance to the cultural perspectives, suggesting that the meaning evolves through time and space, making it different from the synchronic meaning-making theory proposed by Saussure (Aiello, 2020). In that sense, conducting a qualitative semiotic analysis through a comparative case study approach helped in the interpretation of the meanings of each of these artworks situated in their national, cultural, and global contexts, guided by the social and political influences that rendered these as cultural texts of political significance. Accordingly, it identified the implications of form, composition, and symbolic elements of these Chinese contemporary art pieces in promoting the national memory of collective cultural trauma as well as framing them as global assets for economic sustenance.

Semiotic Analysis of the visual signs through form, composition, and symbolism

The visual semiotic analysis of the artworks is conducted in this paper to identify the various compositional strategies, including the scale, palette, framing, and perspective, through a denotation-connotation framework. This analyses the denoted meanings by studying the various elements as a sign of the semiology to interpret the connoted meaning these signs intend to communicate. In the context of films, Utami et al. (2025) note that semiotics is a powerful tool for interpreting meanings because of the verbal and visual communication of deeper symbolic meanings, which are both implied and conveyed directly. This approach studies how the various elements of the artworks, such as the masks, bloodlines, and such, become the signs of semiotics that signify certain meanings, which are socially and culturally influenced, and communicate the ideas of cultural memory and identity. It analyses how the artworks function as parodic strategies through the formal repetitions, such as presenting the artworks within a series of common ideals, or the use of colour and textures, such as layering, or using certain logos. This can help to identify the communication of meanings from the local to the global based on the social and political influences. This method balances close reading of artworks with broader critical interpretation.

Data Sources: Archival/literature review, market data, exhibition records

The data sources for the paper are primarily internet-based, with the archival sources, such as museums and galleries, being the primary sources for the artworks. The paper also thoroughly uses scholarly and other online sources on Chinese contemporary art and artists to study the compositional and formal elements of the artworks through literary contexts. It also studies market data such as auction catalogues and curatorial museum reports to note the economic sustenance standards and benefits these artworks provide in the global art context. Furthermore, critical reviews of art and the host locations, such as exhibitions in museums and galleries, become important sources for the data, such as the themes, contexts, social and cultural environments, and meanings. These sources are also useful for finding the market reception of the artworks, such as in both local and global settings, to note their global engagement. These sources help in the data triangulation to verify their reliability, as well as identify the global position of the artists and their work based on the repeated appearances the paintings have, as well as the economic and cultural promotion they contribute to. These sources help in the

visual documentation of the artworks and the analytical intent of the artists, guided by their cultural context.

Coding of artworks through a visual semiotic framework

The coding framework for this study is derived from both semiotic theory and globalisation discourse, designed to systematise the analysis of artworks while maintaining interpretive depth. Five central categories guide the coding: Identity/Memory (explored through Zhang Xiaogang's Bloodline series and Fang Lijun's depictions of collectivist disillusionment), Alienation/Cynicism (captured in Fang Lijun's yawning figures and Yue Minjun's ironic laughter), Parody/Translation (Yue Minjun's reworking of Western art-historical icons into Chinese contexts), Consumerism/Propaganda (Wang Guangyi's juxtapositions of socialist realism with corporate logos), and Masking/Commodification (Zeng Fanzhi's repetition of masked figures as commodified visual signatures). Each of the ten selected artworks is coded across three analytical axes: composition, symbolism, and global market relevance. Although software such as NVivo or Atlas. Ti is commonly used in qualitative analysis; this study replicates such workflows manually to ensure accessibility without licensing barriers. A tabular matrix format records recurring motifs, compositional strategies, and symbolic resonances across different artists, allowing for comparative insights while preventing interpretive overreach. This framework enables a transparent and repeatable method of semiotic analysis that links visual elements to wider discourses of memory, identity, consumerism, and globalisation, ultimately highlighting how signs within Chinese figurative painting migrate from localised cultural memory to circulation as global commodities.

Limitations and reflexivity

The study is limited in its scope, which prevents it from analysing a wide range of data. It is limited to analysing only ten artworks by five artists, which prevents the paper from analysing the other contemporary artists of the time. The time frame also remains confined from 1989 to 2005, which excludes any later developments in the contemporary Chinese art market. Accordingly, it also lacks studying the implications of any form of digital integration into the art market, which may have influenced the resurgence of Chinese art in the global digital art market. Furthermore, the primary data for the analysis remains limited to reproductions through online sources and the catalogues of museums and galleries, due to the lack of first-hand access to the artworks. To that end, the paper maintains the scope of reflexivity as the analysis is conducted from a neutral perspective. This reduces the possibilities of any bias arising from the selection of Chinese artists as well as the subjective interpretation of semiotic analysis. To balance this biased perspective, the analytical framework is guided by Western concepts of semiotic analysis, which may idealise Western art parameters in assessing the global outlook of Chinese cultural standards. However, the analysis through the juxtaposition of Chinese art and Western critical frameworks maintains neutrality, thereby mitigating the methodological limitations of the research.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 below presents the thematic distribution of the artworks relating to the respective research questions. Additionally, it also presents the coded themes for each of the artworks with respect to the question they adhere to. Furthermore, *Table 2* presents the compositional and symbolism choices by the artists and their relevance in the global art market that promotes both their cultural and economic sustenance.

Table 1. *Thematic distribution of the artworks.*

	Research Questions	Themes	Artworks	Core Insights	
1	RQ1: Translation of Memory	Memory & Identity	Bloodline No. 2 (1993)	Family, collectivism, and trauma as visualised through grayscale portraits and red bloodlines	
2			Bloodline No. 9 (1994)	Uniformity and loss of individuality as commentary on socialist memory	
3		Cynicism & Disillusionment	Series 2, No. 2 (1991-92)	Disillusionment and boredom are expressed via bald, yawning figures	
4			Series 2, No. 4 (1992)	Grinning figures as symbols of alienation and cynicism	
5		Laughter & Parody		Execution (1995)	Parody of Goya; laughter as denial and reframing of trauma
6				The Massacre of Chios (1993-94)	Delacroix reworked; suffering rendered absurd through self-portraits
7	RQ2: Commodification	Propaganda & Consumerism	Great Criticism: Coca-Cola (1990-93)	Propaganda aesthetics clashing with Western branding; commodification	
8			Great Criticism: Louis Vuitton (1998)	Consumer logos as ideological shorthand; global auction appeal	
9		Market Signatures	Mask Series No. 6 (1994)	Masks as a repeatable motif; identity and concealment commodified	
10			Hospital Triptych No. 2 (1991)	Raw trauma and alienation appeal to Western collectors	
11		Exhibition & Auctions		Execution (1995)	Auction record success, making laughter a market symbol
12				Bloodline No. 2 (1993)	Biennale visibility transforming memory work into a global commodity

Table 2. *Compositional and symbolic choices for global market reception.*

	Artist	Artwork	Composition (Formal Choices)	Symbolism (Motifs/Icons)	Global/Market Relevance
1	Zhang Xiaogang	Bloodline: Big Family No. 2 (1993)	Grayscale family portraits, rigid symmetry, red bloodlines crossing figures	Bloodline = memory, family, national history, trauma of collectivism	Highly recognisable series, central in global exhibitions (Venice Biennale, auctions)
2		Bloodline: Big Family No. 9 (1994)	Similar grayscale palette, formal group arrangement, symbolic linearity	Uniform faces = loss of individuality, historical erasure	Reinforced Zhang's™ market signature, widely circulated in auction houses
3	Fang Lijun	Series 2, No. 2 (1992)	Wide open sky backdrop, bald yawning figure foregrounded	Yawning = disillusionment, boredom, generational cynicism	Became emblematic of Cynical Realism, collected by global museums
4		Series 2, No. 4 (1992)	Cluster of bald, grinning figures dominating foreground	Grinning = alienation, mockery of social/political reality	Popular among collectors for humour and the universality of alienation
5	Yue Minjun	The Execution (1995)	Stage-like arrangement of laughing figures, referencing Goya's composition	Self-portraits laughing = denial, trauma, reference to Tiananmen	Auction record-setter, instantly legible to Western audiences via Goya reference
6		The Massacre of Chios (1993-94)	Parody of Delacroix's painting, crowded figures, repetition of self-image	Grinning self-portraits in tragic history = absurdity of suffering	Translates Western art-historical canon into Chinese contemporary idiom
7	Wang Guangyi	Great Criticism: Coca-Cola (1990-93)	Bold juxtaposition of propaganda figures with Western logos	Propaganda + Coca-Cola = East/West tension, commodification	Critically acclaimed in the West, an easily legible consumer

8		Great Criticism: Louis Vuitton (1998)	Similar juxtaposition with consumer brands, poster-like layout	Propaganda + P&G brand = ideological clash, consumerism	critique Auction-friendly repetition, iconic branding meets socialist imagery
9	Zeng Fanzhi	Hospital Triptych No. 2 (1991)	Triptych format, claustrophobic interiors, distorted perspectives	Hospitals = trauma, fragility of body, alienation in modernity	Early raw works signalling China's expressive modernism, collected abroad
10		Mask Series No. 6 (1994)	Masked figures in suits, frontal poses, muted palette	Masks = concealment, false social identity, isolation	Mask series became Zeng's global market signature in the 2000s

Analysis and discussion

This section moves beyond description to a semiotic decoding of how compositional choices, formal strategies, and symbolic motifs operate as sign-systems that both translate local cultural memory for non-local readers and prepare paintings for circulation as marketable objects. The analysis is arranged around the two research questions: first, how visual strategies make local memory legible across cultural boundaries; second, how those same strategies are mobilised, intentionally or otherwise, into commodity form within global exhibition and market circuits.

Translating local cultural memory through compositional and symbolic strategies for global audiences

At stake in translation is legibility: artists reduce, amplify, or reframe signs so that unfamiliar histories become readable through transnational semiotic codes. Zhang Xiaogang's family portraits perform exactly this economising of meaning. By stripping chroma to a measured grey and introducing a single, vivid red thread, Zhang converts dense, multi-valent histories into a concise pictorial formula. The grayscale imposes archival distance while the red line functions as a modular sign: a punctum that signs lineage, rupture, and trauma without narrative detail. Formally minimal and repeatable, the motif becomes a portable emblem of "collective memory," easily indexed by curators and audiences unfamiliar with the exact historical referent. The painting thus stages a productive slippage: specificity is maintained as affect (an embodied sense of loss) while semantic content is made generic enough to travel. Fang Lijun's repeated bald figures invert individuation into typology; the yawns and frozen grins operate as paradigmatic signs for generational malaise. Their theatrical poses and open horizons articulate absence more than presence: emptiness becomes the signified. This universalised affect: boredom, cynicism, exhaustion, is recognisable across cultures, and so Fang's work works as translation by substituting socio-political particularities for broadly legible gestures of modern alienation. The semiotic mechanism is one of displacement: local causes are displaced into universal symptoms, allowing global audiences to empathise without specific historical literacy.

Yue Minjun's laughter complicates translation through intertextual mimicry. By quoting canonical Western compositions and inserting his grinning self repeatedly, he creates a double register: the familiar formal grammar (familiar to Western viewers) and a dissonant affect (a laugh masking trauma). The parody functions as a hinge: referencing the Western art-historical canon acts as a recognition shortcut, while the incongruous grin performs a cultural translation strategy that reframes political pain as an ironic, digestible spectacle. This is translation by theatrical re-casting: the foreign becomes familiar through borrowed visual scripts, even as emotional content is

recursively destabilised. Across these strategies, two semiotic devices recur: reduction and repetition. Reduction (palette, minimal symbols) produces immediate denotation and fast connotation; repetition (series, recurrent motifs) stabilises a visual lexeme that can be cited, reproduced, and circulated. Both devices optimise artworks for cross-cultural decoding while preserving affective depth for audiences who probe beyond surface legibility.

Transforming the figurative paintings into commodified art objects through globalisation

Commodification proceeds when semiotic legibility intersects with market mechanics. Wang Guangyi's juxtaposition of propaganda imagery and brand emblems is eloquent here: logos are not mere visual elements but metonyms of global capital. By grafting corporate emblems onto politically coded tableaux, Wang collapses political and commercial sign systems into a single visual economy. The effect is twofold: it naturalises the presence of global brands within Chinese historical narratives and simultaneously translates political critique into a language of commodity critique that global collectors can read. The painting thus performs a market translation, political content is reframed as an object lesson about capitalism, increasing its fit with exhibition themes and auction narratives. Zeng Fanzhi's mask and hospital motifs show how seriality functions as a branding strategy. The mask operates semiotically as both concealment and brand sign: anonymised faces allow the image to stand for a type (modern subjectivity) rather than a person, and serial repetition turns the motif into an artist's signature. The serial work, therefore, becomes eminently marketable, recognizability and reproducibility are core elements of cultural commodities. The hospital imagery, by foregrounding corporeal vulnerability, produces an affective authenticity that the market valorises as "expressive truth." Here, the effect itself becomes exchangeable currency.

Institutional paratexts (biennale placements, catalogue essays, auction provenance) act as secondary codes that recalibrate meaning. A work shown in an international biennale acquires a validation-sign that anticipates market desirability; auction provenance converts interpretive merit into financial value. Semiotic circulation is not linear but recursive: the meanings constructed by images feed institutional frames, which in turn amplify those meanings for consumption. This creates a selection logic: visual signs that are easily read by dominant curatorial and collector tastes: simplified motifs, canonical references, bold logos, repeatable formats; are preferentially amplified, while more complex, locally embedded signs are likely to be elided. A critical tension emerges between translation and flattening. Strategies that make works legible, canonical borrowing, repeated motifs, stark symbolism, also risk reducing historically specific narratives into palatable icons of "Chineseness." Laughter, bloodlines, masks, and corporate logos become semiotic shorthand that, while effective for circulation, occludes local nuance. Yet this flattening is not simply a loss: artists often deploy these devices strategically, aware of the visibility economy and using its codes to secure platforms and resources. In other words, commodification is partially an outcome of artistic negotiation as much as external market capture.

Finally, comparative patterns reveal differentiated semiotic economies among the five artists. Zhang's tactic is mnemonic condensation; Fang's is affective typology; Yue's is intertextual displacement; Wang's is ideological-commercial grafting; Zeng's is serial branding. Each strategy addresses the same market demand, legibility, narrative

hook, repeatability, but does so through distinct semiotic logics. Reading these logics together shows how Chinese figurative painting developed a repertoire of transmissible signs that could be authored, packaged, and sold across cultural boundaries. The semiotic work of these paintings is strategic: form and symbol are not mere aesthetics but technologies of translation and commodification. Artists turned memory into motifs, affect into types, and reference into recognition, operations that enabled their art to travel, be read, and be bought. The result is a doubled legacy: these paintings enact cultural remembrance even as they become exchangeable emblems within a global visual economy.

Conclusion

This study investigates how image composition, form, and symbolism mediated between local cultural memory and international art markets, enabling Chinese figurative painters to achieve visibility and recognition. Accordingly, it addressed the questions: (1) How did compositional and symbolic strategies translate local cultural memory for global audiences? (2) And, in what ways did globalisation transform these figurative paintings into commodified art objects? The paper conducted qualitative research through comparative case studies using the artworks produced between 1989 and 2005 through a selection of Chinese contemporary artists, namely Zhang Xiaogang, Fang Lijun, Yue Minjun, Wang Guangyi, and Zeng Fanzhi. For each artist, two artworks were selected which were produced during this time period to note how their emergence led to the promotion of the Chinese cultural image in the global space, while at the same time led to their commodification that promoted them as global economic assets. The analysis identified that the Chinese figurative paintings produced during this time period functioned as a cultural testimony that promoted Chinese contemporary art in the global art market, to be critiqued through Western parameters of global art discourse. These artists translated the local art histories and the cultural traumas into symbolic meanings for interpretation in the cultural space by breaking the cultural and national boundaries.

Various semiotic strategies, such as cynical gestures, corporate logos, grayscale portraiture, series productions, masked representations, and ironic laughter, all contributed to the visual grammar of art by translating the complex and nuanced cultural artistry into legible visual signs for global consumption. This led to the engagement of the artists with the global audiences who lack the detailed knowledge of the social, cultural, and political structure of China. To that end, this translation is broadly facilitated by the active role of biennales and exhibitions, which expand the cultural space for these artists to promote their cultural identity through their art. Consequently, it also leads to the socio-economic recognition of these artists and their works, which makes them economic assets for the country in the global art space. This commodification, as the analysis identified, is not a result only of the market appropriations but also of the strategic use of the artistic motifs and technical repetitions of strategies that established the signature artistic appeals of these artists in the global art economic and cultural standards. Accordingly, this formed a dual legacy for the artists and their works that promoted their cultural remembrance as well as their strategic market assimilation through its cultural addressing of the collective cultural experiences and national memory. As a result, it promoted the national identity of the artists representing the country in the global space through the commodification and

cultural acceptance of contemporary art in the global trade market. This makes these arts a trade emblem while simultaneously highlighting the ambivalent image of globalisation in the context of art that empowered the visibility of the cultural traditions of the country, the individual and national image of the artists, as well as the economic sustenance of art and culture in the global and local space.

Scope for future studies

While this research presents a comprehensive analysis of the Chinese contemporary artists and their art in the global art market through its cultural and economic promotions, there remains scope for the expansion of research in future studies. While this paper conducted a comprehensive case study through qualitative analysis, future studies can conduct empirical studies on a larger data set to track the compositional and symbolic traits and study the frequency of their appearance in Chinese contemporary art. This can be done using tools like NVivo, which can help to analyse a larger set of data than is manually possible to code. This approach can help to identify the rate of adherence to the traits and artistic approaches by the artists while tracking artworks produced during a wider time range. This can help to perform a descriptive analysis of the findings by the tool for a deeper semiotic analysis, which can help to increase the generalisability of the research as well as reinforce the observations in the context of global art analysis.

Acknowledgement

This research is self-funded.

Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involved with any parties in this research study.

REFERENCES

- [1] Aiello, G. (2020): Visual semiotics: Key concepts and new directions. – In L. Pauwels & D. Mannay (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Visual Research Methods*, SAGE Publications 13p.
- [2] Akpang, C.E. (2013): Traditionalism in contemporary art: re-contextualising African ideographs through hybrid aesthetics. – *Arts and Design Studies* 11(1): 25-36.
- [3] Bartlett, L., Vavrus, F. (2017): Comparative case studies: An innovative approach. – *Nordic journal of comparative and international education (NJCIE)* 1(1): 5-17.
- [4] Bay, A. (2023): *The Global World is Your Oyster: How Globalization Has Changed the Art World*. – *Composition Gallery* 9p.
- [5] Dal Lago, F. (2014): The “Global” Contemporary Art Canon and the Case of China. – *ARTMargins and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology* 3(3): 77-97.
- [6] Gaskin, S. (2018): 10 Artists Who Defined Chinese Contemporary Art. – *Artsy Web Portal* 24p.
- [7] Genç, E.A., Genç, R. (2020): Contemporary Art Biennials: Prospects and Problems. – *Journal of Danubian Studies and Research* 10(1): 596-602.

- [8] Gladston, P. (2014): Somewhere (and nowhere) between modernity and tradition: Towards a critique of international and indigenous perspectives on the significance of contemporary Chinese art. – *Tate Papers* 21(3): 1-20.
- [9] Kaur, H. (2023): The Role of Biennale as an Aid to Explore and Conserve the Architectural Realm-The Case of Kochi Muziris Biennale. – *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)* 11(5): 799-805.
- [10] Kolbe, K., Velthuis, O., Aengenheyster, J., Friedmann Rozenbaum, A., Zhang, M. (2022): The Global Rise of Private Art Museums: A Literature Review. – *Poetics* 95: 13p.
- [11] Lincot, E. (2004): Contemporary Chinese Art Under Deng Xiaoping. – *China Perspectives* 53: 1-9.
- [12] Manonelles Moner, L. (2016): Ai Weiwei's exhibition *On the Table* 2014/2015 in Barcelona: A review in light of its local media reception. – *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 3(1-2): 183-199.
- [13] Nata, I.G.A.K., Alfiansyah, L.E.A., Putrajip, M.Y., Qatrunnada, Q., Lazuardi, A.B. (2025): Analysing the Interconnectedness of Cultural Values in Fine Art Works with Roland Barthes' Semiotic Approach. – *Jurnal Multidisiplin Sahombu* 5(04): 606-618.
- [14] Ndione, L.C., Remy, E. (2018): Combining images and words in order to understand the cultural meaning of practices: What photo-elicitation reveals. – *Recherche et Applications en Marketing (English Edition)* 33(3): 61-84.
- [15] Pham, K.P. (2025): The Dialectical Relationship Between Philosophy and Art: The Interplay of Thinking and Creativity. – *Futurity Philosophy* 3(4): 4-19.
- [16] Ribeiro, C. (2022): Chinese contemporary art: where it comes from, where it goes. – *Asiadémica: Revista Universitaria De Estudios Sobre Asia Oriental* 13p.
- [17] Roberts, B. (2017): The politics of contemporary art biennials: spectacles of critique, theory and art. – *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 17(1): 132-134.
- [18] Rudrakumar, S., Venkatraman, R. (2022): A semiotic analysis of Saussure and Barthes's theories under the purview of print advertisements. – *Journal of Language & Linguistics Studies* 18(1): 386-396.
- [19] Schulze, M. (2023): *Global Artistic Horizons: Opportunities and Challenges*. – *Horasis: The Global Visions Community* 6p.
- [20] Utami, A.M., Samanik, S., Wahyuningsih, Y. (2025): Semiotic Analysis of Denotation and Connotation in the Movie "The Boy In The Striped Pajamas" Using Roland Barthes' Framework. – *British (Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra Inggris)* 14(1): 36-49.
- [21] Wang, M. (2019): Power, capital, and artistic freedom: contemporary Chinese art communities and the city. – *Cultural Studies* 33(4): 657-689.
- [22] Zinchenko, M. (2025): Art Auctions: Economy, Culture, and Symbolic Value in a Globalised World. – *National Academy of Managerial Staff of Culture and Arts Herald: Science Journal* 2: 279-285.