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Meaning of Exaggeration: Visual elements in contemporary Chinese painting

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Abstract

In recent years, contemporary Chinese arts have developed rapidly, with the visual element becoming a research focus. This study employs qualitative methods, including interviews with five artists and analysis of six works by three renowned artists, using Panofsky's iconographic theory and thematic analysis. It finds that exaggeration is a key tool in contemporary Chinese painting, enhancing visual impact, conveying emotions and ideas, and reflecting on society, environment, and culture. This research offers a new perspective, contributing to cultural studies and arts criticism.

Keywords: Contemporary Chinese Painting, Exaggeration, Qualitative Research, Visual Elements

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1.0 Introduction

Under the dual impetus of globalization and cultural revival, contemporary Chinese painting has developed a distinctive visual language that integrates Western modernist and postmodernist influences with traditional Chinese aesthetics (Yang, 2023). Visual elements such as color, line, composition, and spatial relationships, play a fundamental role in shaping viewer perception and emotional resonance (Ma, 2017). Among these, exaggeration serves as a critical technique that amplifies or distorts visual features to evoke emotion, disrupt conventions, and construct surreal or symbolic meanings, often carrying rich emotional and cultural implications (Yang & Suchan, 2009). Despite its prevalence, scholarly research on the specific manifestations and functions of exaggeration in contemporary Chinese painting remains limited. Existing studies often address broader stylistic developments but lack focused analysis on how exaggeration interacts with visual elements to convey meaning.

The aim of this research is to explore how exaggeration techniques affect the use of visual elements in contemporary Chinese painting to express emotion, critique, or philosophical reflection. The study focuses on the interplay between exaggeration and elements such as color, line, and form to analyze their role in constructing artistic meaning. The specific objectives of the study are: To identify how exaggeration is visually manifested in contemporary Chinese painting. To determine the impact of exaggeration on the formal composition of visual elements. Theoretically, this research enriches visual arts discourse by reframing exaggeration as a key communicative strategy in Chinese painting. Practically, it offers insights to support artistic creation, critique, and audience interpretation of aesthetic and cultural meaning.

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2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Definition and History of Exaggeration in Arts

Exaggeration, as an artistic technique, has evolved over centuries into a vital tool for expressing emotions and ideas. Düttmann (2017) traces its origins to ancient Greece and Rome, where amplified human proportions, gestures, or expressions conveyed heroism or divine power. Over time exaggeration developed from antiquity's idealized forms to modernism and postmodernism, reflecting societal issues and individual artistic pursuits (Getashvili, 2022). In the Renaissance, artists combined realism with exaggeration to evoke emotional resonance (Wang, 2022; Vila, 2022). The Baroque period amplified its use through dramatic compositions, light contrasts, and intensified emotions (Ferraris & Segre, 2020). Ritter (2022) highlighted its diverse applications in 20th-century arts. Expressionism and Surrealism extensively employed exaggeration to distort reality, exploring inner conflicts or critiquing societal issues (Yang & Omar, 2025). German Expressionists used exaggerated forms and colors to depict war's horrors and survival struggles (Gordon, 1987; Stewart, 1980; Washton et al., 1995), conveying cultural narratives and emotional depth (Gelado, 2007).

2.2 Characteristics of Contemporary Chinese Painting

Since the Reform and Opening-Up, contemporary Chinese painting, influenced by Western modern arts movements, has retained its traditional cultural roots, developing a style marked by visual exaggeration (Bianchi, 2005; Yang, 2023). Movements like Expressionism, Symbolism, and Surrealism introduced tools for addressing societal issues and complex themes (Libin et al., 2023). Exaggeration expresses social challenges, emotions, and reflections (Wang, 2022; Rong, 2013; Li, 2025), with artists intensifying colors and distorting forms to convey personal struggles and cultural critique. Xing et al. (2023) and Yang (2023) note this visual language transcends realism to depict shared cultural contexts.

2.3 Theories of Visual Element Analysis

Visual elements, including color, line, shape, proportion, and space, are fundamental to painting, shaping both visual effects and viewer experience (Selivanov, 2024; Liu et al., 2025). Understanding these elements is vital for interpreting artistic intent, with frameworks like iconography providing guidance (Zhao et al., 2014; Zuo et al., 2025). Iconography analyzes composition, color, line, and space to uncover emotional and social significance (Hook & Glaveanu, 2013; Puttfarken, 2000). Within this context, exaggeration functions as a visual intensification technique that deliberately distorts these elements, such as heightened color saturation, exaggerated proportions, dynamic or fragmented composition, and expressive linework, to produce surreal, symbolic, or emotionally charged effects (Yao et al., 2022; Thakur, 2023). Klink (2014) emphasizes that exaggeration transforms perception into a form of visual epistemology, allowing deeper engagement with abstract or critical ideas beyond conventional realism.

Although existing research has examined theories of visual elements and the general use of exaggeration, few studies have systematically investigated how contemporary Chinese artists use exaggeration to express cultural identity, critique, or psychological tension. This study aims to fill this gap by focusing on how exaggeration alters visual elements in Chinese painting, combining visual analysis with artist interviews to provide new perspectives on the cultural meaning and impact of exaggeration.

This study framework centers on the interaction between the independent variable (exaggeration techniques) and the dependent variables (visual element representation, as well as the expression of artistic thoughts and emotions). Exaggeration techniques, as the core independent variable, refer to how artists enhance, distort, or reshape visual elements—such as color, line, shape, proportion, and space—to achieve specific artistic effects. The focus of the research lies in exploring how different exaggeration techniques influence visual effects and artistic expression. In terms of dependent variables, the study examines the impact of exaggeration techniques on visual elements and their role in expressing ideas, emotions, and social critique, revealing their deeper artistic expression (figure 1).

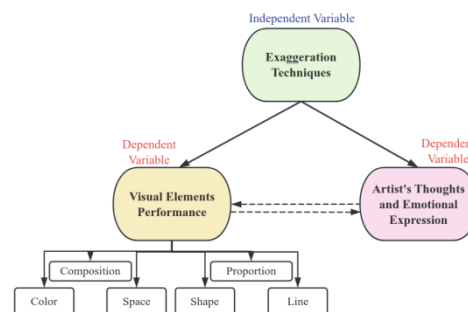


Fig. 1: Conceptual framework
(Source: Developed by the researcher)

3.0 Qualitative Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative approach, combining Panofsky's iconographic theory with thematic analysis to investigate exaggeration techniques in contemporary Chinese painting. Six representative paintings were selected based on their visibility in significance exhibitions and the clear use of exaggeration techniques. Five contemporary Chinese artists were chosen for interviews due to their professional influence and frequent application of visual exaggeration in their works. The analysis of artworks focuses on the expression

of visual elements such as color, line, proportion, space, and how these elements are transformed through exaggeration. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather insights into the artists' creative intentions and emotional motivations. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring ideas and meanings in the interviews. At the same time, iconographic analysis interpreted the symbolic and formal aspects of the artworks. These two methods complement each other by linking the artists' verbal reflections with visual content, offering a deeper understanding of the emotional, critical, and cultural meanings of exaggeration in Chinese painting.

3.1 Study Design

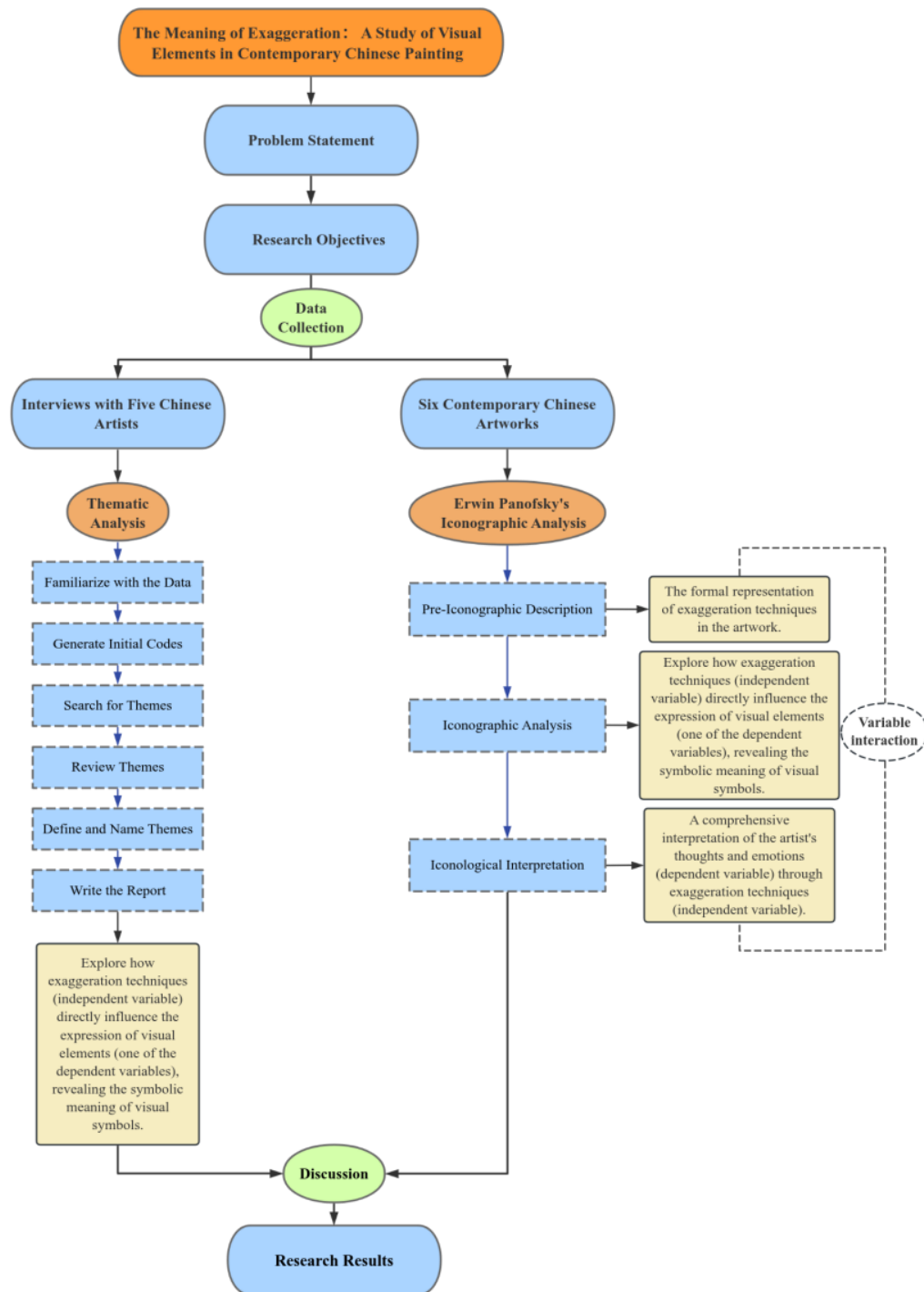


Fig. 2: Study design framework
(Source: Developed by the researcher)

This study constructs a framework based on Panofsky's iconographic theory to analyze the interaction between exaggeration techniques (independent variable) and the representation of visual elements, as well as the expression of creative thoughts and emotions (dependent variables). At the pre-iconographic description stage, the study examines visual elements such as color, line, and shape, revealing how exaggeration techniques enhance or distort their visual effects. Iconographic analysis explores the impact of these techniques on the representation of visual elements and the transmission of emotions and ideas. Iconological interpretation, incorporating cultural context, delves into the deeper meanings of social critique and ideological expression conveyed through exaggeration techniques. Thematic analysis, through the coding of interview data, uncovers the influence of exaggeration techniques on visual elements and artistic expression, elucidating their significant role in contemporary arts (figure 2).

3.2 Data Analysis

Panofsky's iconographic theory is divided into three levels: pre-iconographic description, iconographic analysis, and iconological interpretation. Pre-iconographic description focuses on identifying the surface visual elements of a work such as figures, colors, and composition, without engaging with cultural context (Abdullah et al., 2020). Iconographic analysis explores the symbolic meanings of motifs, images, and themes, relying on cultural, historical, or religious knowledge to interpret specific symbols (Džalto, 2023; Sartini et al., 2023). Iconological interpretation integrates the artist's background and cultural environment to uncover the social, historical, and cultural significance of the work (Bühren & Jasiński, 2024; Konečný, 2023). These three levels provide a comprehensive framework for deeply analyzing the visual elements of artworks and their underlying meanings (Džalto, 2023).

Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns or themes within data (Rosairo, 2023). Through processes such as coding and categorization, researchers uncover key concepts or themes (Roldugin, 2023). The steps include familiarizing oneself with the data, generating codes, reviewing and defining themes, and composing a report (Garrydiger, 2022). Widely applied in social sciences, psychology, and arts research, thematic analysis can reveal core themes such as emotions, thoughts, and social critiques present in artist interviews or artworks. While highly flexible, it requires researchers to possess sharp analytical skills to ensure accurate theme identification (Williams & Moser, 2019).

4.0 Findings

4.1 Exaggeration Techniques

Exaggeration techniques, as the core independent variable, reshape visual elements to create surreal atmospheres or convey ideas through abstraction, breaking visual conventions, amplifying impact, adding depth, and achieving profound emotional expression and social critique.

4.2 Visual Element Performance

Exaggeration techniques amplify visual elements through intensified colors, distorted forms, bold lines, and extreme compositions, conveying emotions, breaking reality, creating Surrealism, and disrupting balance. While enhancing visual impact, they emphasize themes and deepen emotional and conceptual expression. For example, vivid red symbolizes passion or anger. At the same time, dark tones express loneliness and oppression.

4.3 Artist's Thoughts and Emotional Expression

Exaggeration techniques not only enhance the visual impact of artworks but also serve as powerful tools for artists to express emotions and ideas. Through amplification and distortion, they convey emotions such as joy or sorrow, evoking resonance while deepening emotional expression and highlighting social issues and cultural critiques. By magnifying internal sentiments, these techniques explore societal tensions, cultural conflicts, and the complexities of human psychology, enriching the audience's emotional experience.

4.4 Interaction between Visual Elements and Expression of Thoughts and Emotions

This study highlights the cyclical relationship between visual elements and artists' thoughts and emotions. Exaggeration techniques amplify emotional transmission, as seen in *Red Shapes* and *Fallen Tree*, where visual elements convey collective memory and critique environmental destruction. This interaction enhances visual expressiveness and deepens emotional resonance and social critique.

5.0 Discussion


5.1 Analysis of 6 Artworks

In the artwork analysis phase, the study selects Wang Huaqing's still-life paintings, Yan Bing's landscape paintings and Zhao Peizhi's portrait paintings. These works are widely recognized in the contemporary Chinese arts scene and represent high levels of artistic achievement.

a. Artist Wang Huaqing


Wang Huaqing, born in 1944, is a renowned Chinese artist blending traditional culture and modern arts. Influenced by Ming furniture and ancient architecture, he transitioned to abstract styles. His works have been widely exhibited, achieving significant influence.

Table 1. Analysis of Wang Huaqing's "Homeless Furniture"

Artwork		
Artwork Information	Title of the Artwork: "Homeless Furniture" Dimensions: 200×480 cm Medium: Oil on Canvas, Mixed Media Year: 2001	
Erwin Panofsky's Iconographic Analysis of Artwork	Pre-Iconographic Description	This painting uses large areas of black graphics to form a broken array of "furniture", which is twisted and overlapped to form a chaotic and disordered scene. The light gray background creates a desolate and silent atmosphere. These visual elements constitute the basic form of the painting.
	Iconographic Analysis	The distorted black "furniture" symbolizes societal unrest, family disintegration, or cultural loss, using exaggerated forms to critique social issues and evoke substantial visual impact.
	Iconological Interpretation	Created in 2001 during rapid social change in China, the broken furniture reflects the artist's anxiety about family, social stability, and identity, using exaggerated symbols to critique societal issues and convey emotional impact.

(Source: Developed by the researcher)

Table 2. Analysis of Wang Huaqing's "Two Chairs"


Artwork		
Artwork Information	Title of the Artwork: "Two Chairs" Dimensions: 99×130 cm Medium: Mixed Media Year: 1989-1991	
Erwin Panofsky's Iconographic Analysis of Artwork	Pre-Iconographic Description	This work depicts two twisted, irregular black chairs against a plain grey background with a rough texture, creating a simple, silent, and even desolate atmosphere.
	Iconographic Analysis	"Chairs," symbols of stability, are simplified, exaggerated, and broken in this painting, reflecting social or personal instability. Their distorted forms and incompleteness evoke insecurity and cultural rupture, amplifying emotional impact through exaggeration.
	Iconological Interpretation	Created between 1989 and 1991 amid China's social and political upheaval, the destroyed chair symbolizes family instability, reflecting the artist's anxiety and unease while metaphorically critiquing social changes and expressing emotional alienation.

(Source: Developed by the researcher)

b. Artist YanBing


Yan Bing, born in 1980 in Tianshui, Gansu, graduated from the Central Academy of Fine Arts and resides in Beijing. Using objects like potatoes and farm tools, he blends realism and symbolism to reflect life's simplicity and his bond with nature, earning acclaim in prominent exhibitions.

Table 3. Analysis of Yan Bing's "Fallen Tree"

Artwork		
Artwork Information	Title of the Artwork: "Fallen Tree" Dimensions: 165×340 cm Medium: Oil on Canvas Year: 2019	
Erwin Panofsky's Iconographic Analysis of Artwork	Pre-Iconographic Description	The work portrays a chopped tree trunk on a dark brown background resembling soil or rocks. With muted gray tones, orange-yellow hints, and textured scars, it evokes loneliness and forms a striking visual symbol.
	Iconographic Analysis	The exaggerated tree trunk conveys life's interruption, with scars and truncated branches symbolizing vitality despite cessation. Its horizontal form retains tension through light and shadow. Exaggeration in form, color, and metaphor expresses irreversible damage and lingering vitality, evoking the weight of interrupted life or history.
	Iconological Interpretation	Created in 2019 amid rapid urbanization, the tree trunk symbolizes environmental decline caused by human activities. Its exaggerated form reflects nature's withering, urging reflection on environmental issues. The truncated trunk also suggests cultural or historical interruption and individual powerlessness during societal changes.

(Source: Developed by the researcher)

Table 4. Analysis of Yan Bing's "Tree Trunk Under Treatment"


Artwork		
Artwork Information	Title of the Artwork: "Tree Trunk Under Treatment" Dimensions: 70×50 cm Medium: Oil on Canvas Year: 2016	
Erwin Panofsky's Iconographic Analysis of Artwork	Pre-Iconographic Description	This painting depicts a section of a tree trunk with bright red smears on it, as if it is a sign of healing or repair. The rough and irregular shape of the trunk and the dark gray background create an isolated and quiet atmosphere. The red contrast is prominent, as if it symbolizes scars or signs of recovery.
	Iconographic Analysis	The distorted tree trunk symbolizes life's fragility. At the same time the red smear emphasizes injury and hope for recovery. The exaggerated red highlights regeneration, using color contrast and shape deformation to convey the fragility and renewal of life.
	Iconological Interpretation	Created in 2016 amid ecological crises, the tree trunk symbolizes nature's fragility and regeneration. At the same time, red paint signifies restoration. The artist reflects on humanity's destruction and recovery efforts, using exaggerated forms and colors to express environmental struggles and hope.

(Source: Developed by the researcher)

c. Artist Zhao Peizhi


Zhao Peizhi, born in 1971 in Xinjiang, blends Chinese freehand and Western modern styles. A National First-Class Artist and director at the China National Academy of Painting, his award-winning works focus on Xinjiang figures and are housed in significance collections.

Table 5. Analysis of Zhao Peizhi's "Red Shapes"

Artwork		
Artwork Information	Title of the Artwork: "Red Shapes" Dimensions: 220×360cm Medium: Oil on Canvas Year: 2023	
Erwin Panofsky's Iconographic Analysis of Artwork	Pre-Iconographic Description	"Red Shapes" depicts figures in vibrant clothes against a red-dominated abstract background, using exaggerated forms, sharp contrasts, and extensive red for substantial visual impact.
	Iconographic Analysis	The excessive red and abstract shapes break realism, intensifying emotions and suggesting cultural metaphors. Exaggerated proportions and postures symbolize group consciousness or rituals. At the same time, the red background and figures evoke deeper audience reflection on the theme.
	Iconological Interpretation	Red symbolizes revolution, passion, and cultural identity in Chinese culture. Exaggerated colors and shapes reinterpret collective memory, emphasizing social groups and interactions. The red background reflects social, cultural, or political critique, highlighting individual-group dynamics in societal change.

(Source: Developed by the researcher)

Table 6. Analysis of Zhao Peizhi's "The Stage"

Artwork		
Artwork Information	Title of the Artwork: "The Stage" Dimensions: 220×360cm Medium: Oil on Canvas Year: 2023	
Erwin Panofsky's Iconographic Analysis of Artwork	Pre-Iconographic Description	"Stage" features abstract backgrounds, uncoordinated colors, and exaggerated lines. Figures with vague expressions and stiff movements are disproportionate to the background. The distorted spatial structure disrupts perspective, creating an unreal stage-like atmosphere.

	Iconographic Analysis	Clumsy, exaggerated figures on an unreal stage symbolize individuals in confined environments. Blended colors unify figures and backgrounds, suggesting inseparability. Exaggerated proportions and lines critique societal imbalance, expressing identity loss and disconnection within society.
	Iconological Interpretation	"Stage" critiques societal role-playing, portraying individuals as passive actors shaped by modern structures. Exaggerated visuals reflect social criticism, exploring complex interactions between individuals and their environment, emphasizing formalized existence and societal influence on identity.

(Source: Developed by the researcher)

In these artworks, exaggeration functions not only as a visual technique but as a tool for deepening social, emotional, and environmental critique. For example, "Homeless Furniture" conveys anxiety about social unrest and family disintegration by distorting and fragmenting everyday objects. At the same time, "Two Chairs" uses simplified and broken forms to symbolize instability in family and societal structures. These reflect the unique metaphorical approach in Chinese painting, where exaggerated forms often carry symbolic meaning rooted in cultural context, in contrast to Western practices that more often emphasize individual perception or stylistic innovation. In "Fallen Tree" and "Tree Trunk Under Treatment," natural imagery is exaggerated to address ecological concerns. The fractures in "Fallen Tree" symbolize irreversible environmental decline. At the same time, the red paint in "Tree Trunk Under Treatment" suggests hope and urgency in response to the ecological crisis. Such symbolic use of natural elements aligns with the Chinese tradition of embedding social messages in landscape and botanical forms. Similarly, "Red Shapes" and "The Stage" explore collective identity and individual struggle through visual distortion. The heavy use of red and abstraction in "Red Shapes" reflects reinterpretations of group consciousness and cultural continuity. At the same time, the exaggerated spatial structure in "The Stage" highlights the individual's limitations within rigid social roles. These works demonstrate how exaggeration in contemporary Chinese painting is used not merely for aesthetic effect, but as a strategic means to challenge visual norms and engage critically with society and the environment.

Beyond the selected cases, this study highlights exaggeration as a culturally grounded visual language in Chinese painting, offering broader implications for understanding how artists negotiate tradition and modernity. It also invites cross-cultural comparison, positioning exaggeration as both a universal expressive tool and a culturally specific strategy of critique.

5.2 Artists Interviews

The researcher conducted online interviews (30 – 45 minutes) with five contemporary Chinese artists to explore the application and impact of exaggeration techniques in their creative processes. The data were coded and analyzed, and the themes are summarized in Table 7.

Table 7. Interview content analysis code description

Code	Category	Verbatim Data from Interviews with Informants (Inf.)
Exaggeration Techniques	Application of Exaggeration Techniques	Inf 1: 'Exaggeration is not only a deformation or enhancement of form, but also expresses a unique understanding and interpretation of reality through the exaggeration of color, line, shape, and space.' Inf 2: 'Exaggeration helps artists convey complex emotions and thoughts by strengthening visual elements and breaking conventional visual experience.' Inf 4: 'Exaggeration breaks the conventional visual order and triggers stronger emotional resonance and thinking.'
Exaggerated Visual Elements	Expression of Visual Elements	Inf 1: 'Through exaggerated techniques such as intensified colors, distorted lines, and deformed shapes, the artist conveys emotional states such as anxiety, loneliness, anger, or hope.' Inf 2: 'Exaggerated visual symbols are an important means for me to express my anxiety about cultural loss and social change.' Inf 3: 'Exaggerated visual expressions allow viewers to more deeply feel the complex emotions and thoughts behind the picture.' Inf 5: 'Through distorted forms and exaggerated proportions, the inner conflicts and social dilemmas of the characters are expressed, and the emotional tension of the picture is enhanced by strengthening the color contrast.'
The Meaning of Exaggeration	Social Significance of Exaggeration	Inf 1: 'By exaggerating the natural landscape, I hope to convey the pain and helplessness of environmental destruction.' Inf 2: 'The artists discussed the social and cultural significance of exaggeration in their works.' Inf 3: 'Exaggeration is not only a tool for artistic expression, but also can be expressed through visual extremes.' Inf 4: 'Exaggeration reveals social contradictions and criticizes social phenomena or cultural status quo.' Inf 5: 'Exaggeration often carries irony or reflection, and artists use this method to express their concern and criticism of social changes, cultural ruptures or environmental crises.'

(Source: Developed by the researcher)

Through interviews with five artists, four core themes were identified: the diversity and functionality of exaggeration, its connection with emotional expression, social and cultural criticism, and its role in personal style. Theme 1 highlights exaggeration as a tool for

expressing emotions, thoughts, and social critique, breaking conventional visual experiences by amplifying color, shape, and space. Theme 2 focuses on how exaggeration guides audience emotions, conveying states like anxiety or loneliness while deepening emotional understanding. Theme 3 emphasizes exaggeration as a medium for social critique, reflecting on issues like family disintegration, urban alienation, and environmental degradation. Theme 4 explores its integration into personal style, with artists using exaggerated proportions to create surreal atmospheres or abstract effects, expressing philosophical ideas and cultural exploration.

6.0 Conclusion

This study examined the use of exaggeration techniques in contemporary Chinese painting through visual analysis and artist interviews, revealing the influence of exaggeration techniques on visual elements and emotional or intellectual expression. Amplification, distortion, asymmetry, spatial shifts, and intense color use enhance visual impact and function as tools for conveying meaning. Exaggeration proves central to expressing complex emotions, addressing social themes, and producing surreal experiences. The interaction between visual elements and artistic intention shapes the overall expressive effect, merging visual intensity with conceptual depth. However, this research is limited to Chinese contemporary painting, without examining exaggeration in other cultural contexts. This cultural scope limits broader generalization and invites future comparative studies across different artistic traditions. In addition, reliance on artist interviews may introduce subjective bias or overlook sociopolitical complexities (Grant & Kestner, 2017). Future studies should incorporate audience-based research to explore how exaggeration is perceived and emotionally processed by viewers, or employ mixed methods to triangulate interpretation. These steps would strengthen the understanding of exaggeration's communicative power and expand the scope of visual analysis in global arts contexts.

7.0 Research Contributions

Theoretically, this study provides a refined perspective on exaggeration in Chinese painting, contributing to frameworks for visual and emotional analysis. Practically, it offers references for artists to apply exaggeration flexibly, encouraging diverse approaches in creation and informing arts education and criticism.

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