

Investigating Thematic Narratives in Chinese Watercolour and Pastel Art: Insights from the 14th National Art Exhibition in China

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ABSTRACT: This article investigates the narrative capacities of watercolour and pastel works exhibited at the 14th National Art Exhibition and its dedicated Watercolour and Pastel Works Exhibition (14th NAE & WPWE) in China. The study analyses thematic clusters—rural revitalisation, cultural-educational development, and daily life—and how artists employ material fluidity, chromatic symbolism, expressive brushwork, and spatial composition to construct affective and ideologically resonant narratives. Situating these artworks within the broader context of cultural confidence, aesthetic governance, and global visual discourse, the paper demonstrates that watercolour and pastel have been revalorised as strategic media through which contemporary Chinese identity, values, and aspirations are visually articulated.

KEYWORDS: Chinese Contemporary Art; Watercolour and Pastel; Thematic Narratives; Cultural Confidence; 14th National Art Exhibition (NAE & WPWE).

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

The National Art Exhibition (NAE, 全国美术作品展览) represents one of the most comprehensive and authoritative platforms for the exhibition and evaluation of visual art in the People's Republic of China. Jointly organised by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, and the China Artists Association, the NAE has been held quinquennially since its inaugural session in 1949. Throughout its fourteen iterations, it has developed into a large-scale national cultural initiative that reflects the aesthetic achievements of contemporary Chinese art and the evolving contours of state-endorsed cultural ideology (Ju, 2007). The exhibition functions as a dynamic site of artistic production, negotiation, and dissemination, through which visual culture is mobilised to express, affirm, and, at times, reimagine dominant narratives of national identity, collective memory, and socio-political transformation (Baker, 2008).

As a state-led exhibition, the NAE showcases individual creativity and performs a symbolic role in articulating and reaffirming China's cultural confidence (文化自信). This concept has become central to China's national discourse in the post-reform era. Therefore, the works exhibited at the NAE intersect with aesthetic innovation and ideological function. They serve as the product of artists' interpretive engagement with their lived realities and curated expressions of national values and aspirations. In this way, the NAE is deeply embedded in policy, pedagogy, and cultural diplomacy mechanisms. It offers a critical lens through which to observe the interplay between artistic practices and the broader ideological structures that shape them within the contemporary

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Chinese context.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite the NAE's comprehensive scope, watercolour and pastel works have long occupied a relatively marginal position within China's contemporary artistic ecosystem. This peripheral status stems from historical, classificatory, and theoretical factors. Historically, watercolour and pastel were introduced into China in the late 19th century, placing them at a notable temporal and cultural remove from the deeply rooted traditions of Chinese ink painting. Consequently, these media have often been perceived as supplementary rather than autonomous artistic forms. Categorically, watercolour and pastel are frequently referred to as "minor genres" (小画种), which refers to art forms deemed peripheral within China's institutional art hierarchy, the canon of 20th-century Chinese art history, a label that has contributed to their diminished standing in comparison to oil painting and traditional Chinese painting (国画) (Hung, 2010). This has been reflected in their limited representation within major exhibitions, scholarly discourse, and the art market. Furthermore, existing scholarship on Chinese watercolours and pastels has predominantly centred on formalist and technical analyses, while critical engagement with their thematic narratives and cultural meanings remains strikingly underdeveloped.

In this context, it becomes imperative to interrogate how thematic narratives are constructed and expressed within Chinese watercolour and pastel painting. A closer examination of narrative forms and subject matters in these works contributes to a more nuanced appreciation of the media themselves. It offers a robust framework for reassessing their cultural significance within China's broader aesthetic and ideological landscape.

1.3 Research Objectives

This study investigates the narrative strategies and thematic configurations of works exhibited at the 14th National Art Exhibition and its dedicated Watercolour and Pastel Works Exhibition (14th NAE&WPWE). Within the framework of state-organised cultural display, these artworks reflect contemporary artistic practices and reveal the embedded ideological, social, and aesthetic values negotiated through visual language. This study pursues three interrelated objectives:

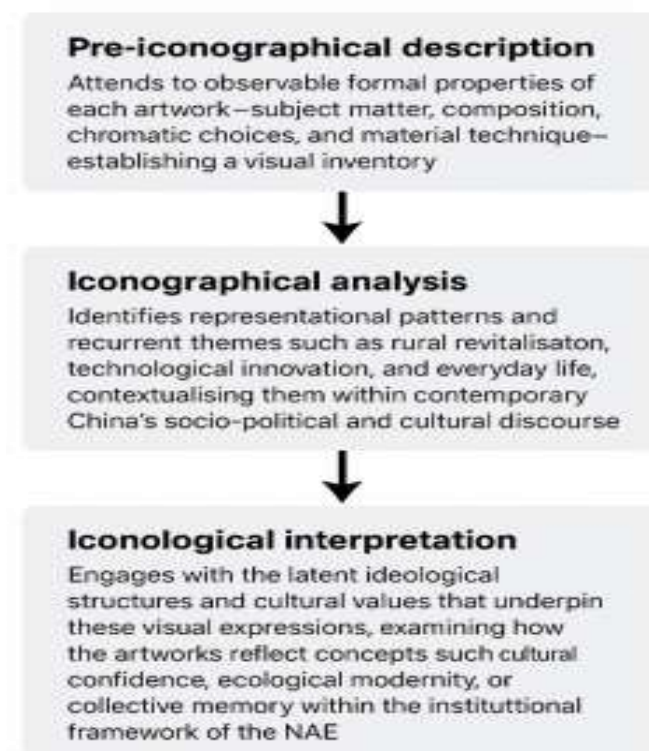
- (1) To identify and classify the dominant thematic clusters present in the exhibited works.
- (2) To examine how artists employ watercolour and pastel media's intrinsic materiality and expressive potential to construct symbolic and affective narrative spaces.
- (3) To interpret these thematic narratives within the larger context of China's contemporary cultural discourse, particularly through the lenses of cultural confidence, aesthetic governance, and global artistic dialogue.

1.4 Method

This study adopts an iconological approach to investigate the thematic narratives in Chinese watercolour and pastel works showcased at the 14th NAE&WPWE. As developed by Panofsky (2018), iconology provides a multi-layered analytical model that interprets artworks as cultural texts, progressing from formal observation to symbolic interpretation. This methodology is especially pertinent to the present research, which seeks not merely to catalogue visual motifs but to uncover how artists construct meaning in alignment with or negotiate against state-curated thematic frameworks. The analysis proceeds in three stages, as shown in

Figure 1.

Figure 1 The analytical processes of the study.



Source: Authors' own work.

This study selected a purposive sample of 30 works from the 399 entries exhibited at the 14th NAE&WPWE, which ensured representativeness across regional, thematic and stylistic dimensions. Primary sources included official exhibition catalogues and press releases published by the China Artists Association (2024), artist interviews, curatorial essays, and institutional commentary, which provided further insight into the artistic intentions and curatorial rationale. It situates watercolour and pastel as artistic media and discursive tools that shape visual governance and national identity in the post-reform era. The iconological method enables a nuanced understanding of how “minor genres” articulate major cultural narratives within China’s evolving aesthetic system.

2. THEMATIC NARRATIVES IN CHINESE WATERCOLOUR AND PASTEL PAINTING

Thematic narrative expression in visual art typically refers to how artworks convey core ideas or affective meanings through specific scenes, compositions, or symbolic elements. Such narrative strategies are generally purposeful, often aiming to explore multidimensional relationships between human beings and nature, society, or culture. The works exhibited in the 14th NAE & WPWE reflect Chinese artists’ creative engagements with various subjects, including rural revitalisation, cultural-educational and scientific development, and daily life and social landscapes.

2.1 Rural Revitalisation

A central thematic current within the watercolour and pastel works of the 14th NAE & WPWE is the visualisation of rural transformation in contemporary China. Artists engage with this theme through two distinct narrative modes. On the one hand, many

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artworks embrace an aesthetic strategy that foregrounds the Chinese countryside's poetic serenity and revitalised charm. These works rely heavily on a neo-pastoral visual vocabulary that synthesises traditional rural imagery with a utopian vision shaped by contemporary socio-political aspirations. This strategy is nostalgic and ideologically charged, reflecting a broader national effort to reconstruct rural identity as part of China's integrated development agenda.

A representative example is Li Shijun's *Looking Back at Qinglan: Spring Light Infinite* (回望青岚春光无限好, see **Figure 2**), which captures a tranquil spring scene through luminous washes of green and subtle compositional balance. The work is notable for its ethereal treatment of foliage, the soft undulation of hills, and fields interspersed on the hillside that hints at vernacular traditions. Rather than depicting rural life as isolated or impoverished, Li constructs an image of spatial harmony and natural abundance, offering a vision of the countryside as a site of aesthetic renewal and cultural continuity. This aligns with recent scholarly observations that Chinese contemporary rural representation is increasingly concerned with cultural dignity and rural place-making (Yang & Chang, 2025).

Figure 2 Li Shijun's work: *Looking Back at Qinglan: Spring Light Infinite* (回望青岚春光无限好).



Source: China Artists Network (2024, July 12)

Similarly, in *New Countryside Happy Homeland* (新农村·幸福家园, see

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Figure 3), Chen Shuzhong focuses on intimate scenes of everyday interaction—children playing, elderly figures conversing, and neighbours enjoying leisure moments under blooming trees. Watercolour lends a softness to the scene, enhancing its emotional warmth and rendering the space simultaneously familiar and idealised. This portrayal of intergenerational harmony and social integration documents aspects of rural life and advances a vision of a cohesive and modernised rural community, echoing national development rhetoric found in state policy documents such as the Rural Revitalisation Strategic Plan (2018–2022) (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council, 2018).

Figure 3 Chen Shuzhong's work: New Countryside Happy Homeland (新农村·幸福家园).



Source: China Artists Network (2024, July 12)

Beyond their compositional elegance, these works serve as what could be termed “affective cartographies” of the new countryside—maps of feeling that inscribe hope, stability, and belonging into the physical and symbolic terrain of rural China. The aesthetic choices—balanced framing, fluid brushstrokes, and restrained colour palettes—work together to produce an affective atmosphere that counters dominant narratives of rural backwardness historically associated with modernisation discourse.

On the other hand, a distinct strand of work adopts a more documentary and socially engaged visual rhetoric that foregrounds the physical labour underpinning China's ecological modernity. A paradigmatic case is Pang Zongchao's Desertification Control Workers II (大漠治沙人系列之二, see **Figure 4**), which presents a collective portrait of environmental labourers engaged in sand control and afforestation projects. The composition is grounded in realism, yet it transcends mere observational depiction through symbolic gestures. Each figure's stance and gesture—bending to sow, lifting sand, shielding the face from the sun—becomes a codified marker of purposeful action and ecological responsibility.

Figure 4 Pang's work: Desertification Control Workers II (大漠治沙人系列之二).



Source: China Artists Network (2024, July 12)

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The workers' attire—functional gloves, sun hats, and plain uniforms—signals their socio-economic position while marking them as collective agents of transformation. Pang's visual idiom draws on socialist realist techniques but reconfigures them within a contemporary environmental context, thus turning ecological labour into a symbol of national resilience and civic virtue. As such, the painting engages with the ecological subject, a figure inhabiting and actively producing China's green modernity through embodied effort.

The dialectical pairing of these modes—pastoral enchantment and ecological labour—constructs a nuanced visual discourse around rural transformation. Rather than presenting a monolithic or uncritical view, these artworks form a complex narrative assemblage wherein the landscape is revered and remade, and nature is aestheticised and instrumentalised. These dual modalities symbolically negotiate the tension between heritage and development, stillness and productivity, idealisation and realism.

Such a dual vision notably diverges from the treatment of rural life in early 20th-century European modernism, particularly within the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) movement. Whereas artists like Otto Dix or Georg Schrimpf rendered rural scenes with existential disillusionment or stark critique of social decay, the 14th NAE & WPWE artists privilege constructive engagement, emotional optimism, and aspirational aesthetics. Their works advance a counter-narrative to rural decline, one that affirms the future-oriented vitality of rural China as a cultural and ecological project.

Crucially, the use of watercolour and pastel media plays a central role in shaping the narrative tone of these works. Known for their translucency, subtle layering, and atmospheric qualities, these media enable the articulation of complex emotional registers—from the gentleness of rural affection to the solemn dignity of environmental effort. Their physical properties, such as the capacity to blend seamlessly or produce controlled opacity, allow for nuanced visual metaphors of interdependence, fragility, and renewal. In this sense, the choice of medium is not incidental but thematically integral, mirroring the ethos of care, sustainability, and cultural continuity at the heart of rural revitalisation discourse. These visual strategies document rural China's lived realities and aspirational visions and construct a new symbolic order that reframes the countryside as a dynamic site of aesthetic, ecological, and national significance. Through the lens of watercolour and pastel, the rural is no longer peripheral but central to China's contemporary visual culture and future-facing narratives of civilisation.

2.2 Cultural-Educational and Scientific Development

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the fields of culture, education, and science have undergone profound and sustained transformation. These domains have played foundational roles in China's nation-building process and have become central to articulating national identity and collective modernity. In the context of the 14th NAE & WPWE, these themes emerge as key visual arenas through which artists explore contemporary China's cognitive, cultural, and technological imaginaries. The artworks addressing these subjects reflect a notable shift from material representation to spatialised thinking, constructing what may be termed visual epistemologies of national progress (Stanczak, 2007). Broadly, these works can be categorised into three recurring visual typologies: cultural-educational interiors, performative heritage scenes, and chronotopic representations of industrial and scientific development.

The first category centres on depictions of reading, studying, and research—spaces of cultural production and intellectual formation. Works such as Huang Dingfeng's *Purity in Conduct, Virtue in Substance* (洁白立身, 厚德载物), Ren Hui's *Scholarly Ambition* (书香明志, see **Figure 5**), and Gao Junwei's *Nurturing Youth through Reading* (书香润青年, see **Figure 6**) portray individuals immersed in quiet educational environments. These compositions often feature carefully constructed interiors: bookshelves, writing desks, soft lighting, and composed figures engaged in solitary reflection or collaborative learning. Watercolour's soft gradients and delicate detailing evoke atmospheres of moral clarity and inner cultivation. These visual grammars mirror longstanding Confucian ideals about education for personal and civic betterment. In this sense, the paintings do more than

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document scholarly settings—they construct moralised cognitive topographies in which knowledge acquisition is spatialised and idealised. The domestic and institutional spaces portrayed become visual synecdoches for a larger ideological framework that aligns personal development with national advancement.

Figure 5 Ren Hui’s work: Scholarly Ambition (书香明志).



Source: China Artists Network (2024, July 12)

Figure 6 Gao Junwei’s work: Nurturing Youth through Reading (书香润青年).



Source: China Artists Network (2024, July 12)

A second group of works foregrounds traditional performance culture, particularly regional theatrical forms, as repositories of collective memory and expressions of cultural continuity. Xu Xiaoxia’s *Backstage Notes: Taizhou Luntan* (台州乱弹·后台散记, see **Figure 7**) and Qu Yansong’s *Village Performance at Xiangyangtun* (向阳屯的村晚, see **Figure 8**) exemplify this genre. These artworks depict scenes of actors applying makeup, rehearsing, or performing on makeshift stages, often set against richly textured vernacular backdrops. The emphasis here is not on spectacle but on process—the labour of cultural embodiment and transmission. The choice of pastel, with its grainy texture and chromatic warmth, lends these images a sense of tactility and immediacy, as though

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the viewer were themselves embedded in the scene. These works articulate a vision of embodied heritage, wherein the human figure serves as both a cultural transmitter and a subject of aesthetic inquiry. Moreover, the performative nature of theatre itself resonates with the reflexive dimension of art-making—both involve the reconstruction of identity through symbolic action.

Figure 7 Xu Xiaoxia's work: **Backstage Notes: Taizhou Luntan** (台州乱弹·后台散记).



Source: China Artists Network (2024, July 12)

Figure 8 Qu Yansong's work: **Village Performance at Xiangyangtun** (向阳屯的村晚).



Source: China Artists Network (2024, July 12)

A third and increasingly prominent category of visual narrative engages with the *longue durée* of industrialisation and scientific progress. These works reflect a temporal arc that begins with craftsmanship and evolves toward high technology and cosmic exploration. On a smaller scale, paintings such as Lu Hongyu's *Red Imprint* (红色烙印), Wu Cuiying's *Craftsmanship* (匠心), and Wang Yuzhen's *Monument* (丰碑) depict tools of manual labour and artisan production—scissors, spades, chisels, and gears—rendered with meticulous realism. These objects function as metonymic markers of historical continuity, linking past modes of production to present aspirations for national strength.

Figure 9 Lu Hongyu's work: Red Imprint (红色烙印).



Source: China Artists Network (2024, July 12)

At the larger scale, paintings such as Kong Lingfa's *Construction at Dawn* (晨光中的建设, see **Figure 10**), Gao Jincheng's *Iron Backbone* (铁骨铮铮), and Li Xuesong's *Five Stars Arise from the East* (五星出东方) shift the visual focus toward expansive industrial landscapes, mechanised spaces, and architectural grandeur. These images are structured around monumental verticality and spatial depth, symbolising the vertical integration of the Chinese state's industrial ambition. The interplay of metallic greys, saturated reds, and luminous whites constructs a chromatic regime that suggests technological precision and ideological conviction. Perhaps most striking is Jin Sengfu's *Ask the Sky* (问天, see **Figure 11**), a watercolour depicting astronauts performing extravehicular activities in orbit. The image juxtaposes the fragility of the human body with the vastness of space while subtly invoking a futuristic vision of posthuman agency. Here, the traditional material delicacy of watercolour is repurposed to suggest technological sublimity and transhuman possibility.

Figure 10 Kong Lingfa's work: *Construction at Dawn* (晨光中的建设).



Source: China Artists Network (2024, July 12)

Figure 11 Jin Sengfu's work: Ask the Sky (问天).



Source: China Artists Network (2024, July 12)

Collectively, these visual narratives operate as both documentation and projection: they record lived and aspirational dimensions of China's cultural-educational and scientific evolution while simultaneously projecting future possibilities. The consistent interplay between human figures, constructed environments, and symbolic artefacts suggests a visual logic grounded in relationality—between tradition and innovation, between the individual and the collective, and between material reality and ideological vision. Moreover, using watercolour and pastel as media for these themes is particularly meaningful. Often associated with fluidity and nuance, these materials enable complex representations of effect, temporality, and spatial density. The soft layering of colour, the blurring of edges, and the alternation between transparency and opacity articulate the complex transitions between historical memory and technological imagination. The result is a set of works that are neither merely didactic nor purely expressive. Instead, they function as the visual schema of contemporary Chinese modernity—at once grounded in the particularity of cultural experience and expansive in their vision of national transformation.

2.3 Daily Life and Social Landscapes

In recent years, depictions of daily life and social landscapes have emerged as a significant thematic current within Chinese watercolour and pastel painting. These works reveal a heightened sensitivity to the mundane, the local, and the socially resonant, constructing a rich visual lexicon of contemporary Chinese experience. Rather than simply documenting lived realities, these artworks actively participate in the aesthetic shaping of a “social imaginary” (Taylor, 2004), a shared set of meanings through which citizens visualise themselves within the evolving cultural landscape of modern China. The visual narratives associated with daily life and social environments in the 14th NAE&WPWE can be broadly grouped into three interconnected thematic modes: depictions of popular public life, representations of regional identity and ethnographic intimacy, and portrayals of urban leisure and commuting culture. Each reflects different facets of China's rapidly transforming social fabric, and together, they offer a composite image of the nation's cultural rhythms and collective aspirations.

The first thematic mode involves portraying community life in public and semi-public spaces: bustling markets, festivals, teahouses, and streets. In works such as Huang Zhigang's Morning (早, see Figure 7) and He Yuanyuan's Spring Festival Market No. 7 (春社·七), the viewer encounters richly textured scenes of local activity—vendors setting up stalls, villagers exchanging goods, and

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families navigating crowds. These images are characterised by a vivid chromatic palette and layered composition that foregrounds collective dynamism and life rhythm. Similarly, Shen Hongquan's *Sunday Afternoon on Pingtan Island* (平潭岛的星期天下午, see **Figure 13**) captures the leisurely atmosphere of domestic tourism. Shen offers an idealised vision of emotional ease and social enjoyment through soft light, relaxed figures, and fluid brushstrokes. In Li Xiangbing's *Tea Narrative: Harmony* (茶语叙事·和美), the focus shifts to smaller-scale interactions: friends or neighbours engaged in conversation over tea, set against a stylised interior of quiet elegance. These works are distinctly "local" in sensibility yet resonate with a broader symbolic framework emphasising harmony, hospitality, and cultural continuity.

Figure 12 Huang Zhigang's work: Morning (早).



Source: China Artists Network (2024, July 12)

Figure 13 Shen Hongquan's work: Sunday Afternoon on Pingtan Island (平潭岛的星期天下午).



Source: China Artists Network (2024, July 12)

The second mode presents visual ethnographies of minority life and peripheral geographies. These include scenes drawn from China's grasslands, plateaus, and highlands. These regions often positioned at the cultural and spatial margins of the Han-centric mainstream. Xiong Libin's *Afternoon on the Plateau* (高原午后, see **Figure 14**) offers a compelling example. The painting depicts a woman gently pouring water over her child's head, rendered in realistic detail and executed with great attention to bodily gestures

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and environmental texture. The work evokes physical tenderness and deep-seated human dignity through watercolour's inherent softness and transparency. These ethnographic scenes are not framed as exotic or Othered but rather as repositories of affective depth and national inclusivity. The emphasis on domestic labour, family intimacy, and elemental landscapes suggests a shared humanity that transcends regional distinction while aligning with broader narratives of ethnic harmony and cultural plurality encouraged in official discourse.

Figure 14 Xiong Libin's work: *Afternoon on the Plateau* (高原午后).



Source: China Artists Network (2024, July 12)

A third and more contemporary category of imagery addresses life in the urban present: commuting, working, studying, and relaxing in cosmopolitan environments. Xu Yingzi's *Station Memory* (车站记忆, see

Figure 15) adopts a cool colour palette to depict individuals waiting in a train station, lost in thought or immersed in digital devices. The work captures a liminal temporality, a transition state that echoes late modernity's psychological atmosphere. In He Wenqing's *Afternoon in a Popular Café* (网红咖啡馆的午后) and Zhou Tao's *Coffee Time* (漫咖时光), the focus is on new forms of leisure and social interaction among urban youth. These paintings reflect the café as a transformed social site: no longer merely a space for consumption but for study, networking, digital production, and informal labour. Pastel and watercolour techniques—through their

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capacity to blend form and dissolve edges—prove especially apt to convey such contemporary spaces’ fluidity and permeability.

Figure 15 Xu Yingzi’s work: **Station Memory** (车站记忆).



Source: China Artists Network (2024, July 12)

Taken collectively, these three visual modes articulate a shared orientation toward the affirmative representation of contemporary Chinese life. Rather than foregrounding alienation or systemic critique, as one might find in many global contemporary art platforms, such as the Venice Biennale or Documenta, the WPWE artists favour subjects and compositional strategies that align with state-endorsed visions of national vitality and cultural cohesion. In this sense, the exhibition operates within what can be described as a regime of aesthetic governmentality (Lee, 2006). The artworks are not simply creative expressions but instruments of cultural policy that visualise social harmony, inclusivity and modernisation.

This curatorial logic is not without complexity. While it may eschew overtly critical stances, it does not preclude nuance, subtlety, or interpretive richness. Indeed, many featured works employ refined visual languages—ambiguous colour shifts, partial figuration, compressed spatial planes—to suggest moments of introspection, longing, or quiet disruption. Moreover, by focusing on

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daily life in its myriad forms, the artworks recover the experiential richness of the present, proposing a cultural aesthetic grounded in the everyday. This is especially significant given the historical tendency in Chinese art history to privilege the monumental, the symbolic, and the ideologically grand. In contrast, the watercolour and pastel artists represented in the WPWE elevate the ordinary to a meaningful status.

The choice of medium is also inseparable from these narrative tendencies. With their properties of ephemerality, softness, and tactility, watercolours and pastels are ideal for capturing fleeting moments, subtle emotions, and the diffuse textures of social life. Their visual modesty resists overstatement, aligning well with the thematic orientation toward modesty, intimacy, and shared space. Daily life is not simply represented in these works; it is the condition of their representational logic. These paintings contribute to a broader redefinition of the social landscape of China, one in which the people, the places, and the practices of daily life are restored to the centre of visual culture.

3. NARRATIVE CAPACITIES OF CHINESE WATERCOLOUR AND PASTEL ARTS

In the context of the 14th NAE & WPWE, the narrative potential of watercolour and pastel is powerfully demonstrated through material fluidity, chromatic symbolism, expressive brushwork, and spatial composition. These formal elements enable artists to construct thematically coherent and affectively charged visual stories that reflect China's evolving social and cultural landscape.

3.1 Material Fluidity

Material fluidity is a foundational attribute of watercolour and pastel media, serving as a physical characteristic and a conceptual vehicle for narrative development (Flinn, 2016). In the context of the 14th NAE & WPWE, artists repeatedly mobilised this inherent fluidity to convey themes of transformation, impermanence, and cultural memory.

Water-based media such as watercolour and pastel are defined by their capacity to diffuse, blend, and absorb into paper or support surfaces. This interaction between pigment and substrate enables forms to emerge through transparency rather than density and accumulation rather than abrupt delineation. Unlike the fixed, impermeable surface of oil or acrylic, watercolour's material logic is rooted in its responsiveness to moisture, gravity, and evaporation. As pigment disperses and settles, it generates organic gradations and transitional zones that resist the hard edges of closure. This physical openness enables narrative ambiguity and interpretive multiplicity, allowing artists to imply rather than dictate meaning.

In traditional Chinese aesthetics, notions of emptiness and transience are often valorised as pathways to philosophical reflection. The qualities of watercolour—its susceptibility to flow, fading, or dissolution—closely parallel these ideals. The “reserved space” (involves deliberately leaving portions of the composition unpainted) allows the paper to function as atmosphere, silence, or spatial pause (Wang, 2013). Similarly, “colour bleeding” (exploits the natural migration of pigment into wet areas), producing indeterminate contours and chromatic halos that embody temporal fluidity. These interactions are not merely decorative but ontologically bound to the shifting nature of experience, which is suited to visualising states of memory, emotional instability, or environmental transformation.

Works presented at the 14th NAE & WPWE clearly demonstrated this principle. For instance, compositions that employed overlapping tonal fields and gradient diffusion often conveyed a narrative of gradual emergence or dissolution (Yu, 2004). The visual softness created by these effects contrasts the declarative realism of other media, making watercolour particularly adept at staging liminality—the space between presence and absence, past and present. The subtle interplay of pigment flow and material resistance creates a simultaneously temporal and topographical surface, charting not only forms but the duration and movement of their becoming.

Material fluidity also introduces a temporal dimension to the viewing experience. As it washes dry or blends unpredictably, the

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image acquires a dynamic temporality miming lived experience. This temporality aligns with broader narrative strategies, enabling the visual field to serve as both record and remainder, form and flux. Within this framework, watercolours and pastels emerge not as neutral carriers of content but as active participants in constructing narrative space. They make visible the movement of matter, the passage of time, and the instability of meaning, all central elements in the thematic articulation of contemporary Chinese visual culture.

3.2 Chromatic Symbolism

The symbolic deployment of colour emerged as another crucial strategy through which artists constructed and conveyed thematic narratives. Colour in watercolour and pastel media is not merely an aesthetic embellishment but a semiotic system through which ideological, emotional, and cultural signification is encoded.

Watercolour and pastel possess a unique chromatic delicacy due to their pigments' translucency and capacity for tonal gradation (Richmond & Littlejohns, 2017). This chromatic subtlety allows for a highly nuanced manipulation of mood and symbolism. In the Chinese cultural context, colour is not a neutral element but is historically and culturally imbued with meaning. Red, for instance, evokes revolution, vitality, and collectivist fervour, while grey often connotes labour, memory, or emotional restraint (Duan, 2024). These associations are neither arbitrary nor decorative; they establish a visual syntax that binds formal decisions to thematic imperatives.

At the 14th NAE & WPWE, several works demonstrated how chromatic choices were intentionally synchronised with thematic content, producing a homology between colour and narrative. In Wang Yuzhen's *Milestone* (丰碑, see **Figure 16**), a restrained grey palette is used to render corroded industrial tools, producing an atmosphere of solemnity and introspection. The heavy use of greys and blacks, diffused with subtle gradations, becomes a vehicle for exploring themes of labour history and collective resilience. Here, chromatic austerity is not a stylistic constraint but a conscious decision to evoke emotional sobriety and historic sedimentation.

Figure 16 Wang Yuzhen's work: *Milestone* (丰碑).



Source: China Artists Network (2024, July 12)

Similarly, Lu Hongyu's *Red Imprint* (红色烙印, see section 2.2

Figure 9) exemplifies the symbolic power of colour in constructing a dual narrative of industrial transformation and ideological legacy. The central use of red, a hue deeply embedded in Chinese visual and political culture, functions as an index of revolutionary memory and a metaphor for the affective force of collective labour. The work, layering red backgrounds with intricately rendered

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mechanical parts, not only visualises the material apparatus of industrial production but also embeds these components within a broader symbolic framework of national pride and technological ambition. The chromatic intensity heightens the emotive valence of the image, creating a resonance between the medium and the message. Another instructive example can be found in Wang Guofu's *Home Beautician* (家居美容师, see

Figure 17), where chromatic restraint becomes a site of conceptual experimentation. Through a monochromatic palette dominated by titanium white and grey variations, the artist constructs a domestic scene that appears at once ordinary and dignified. The hue modulation within a limited chromatic spectrum suggests the quiet perseverance of everyday life and elevates mundane objects into symbols of aesthetic and ethical endurance.

Figure 17 Wang Guofu's work: *Home Beautician* (家居美容师).



Source: China Artists Network (2024, July 12)

These works illustrate how Chinese artists strategically employ chromatic symbolism to reinforce the affective dimensions of their subject matter and articulate broader socio-political narratives. Colour in this context is not simply applied to the surface of representation. It is woven into the logic of visual storytelling, enabling watercolour and pastel to function as both expressive and discursive media. Through this integrated chromatic approach, artists at the 14th NAE & WPWE transformed water-based colouration into a narrative engine capable of capturing contemporary Chinese society's emotional textures.

3.3 Expressive Brushwork

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The expressive capacities of brushwork significantly shape the narrative agency of watercolour and pastel art in contemporary China. The brushwork is a gestural and psychological language through which artists mediate subjectivity, atmosphere, and thematic depth. Handling the brush in water-based media, including its speed, pressure, rhythm, and direction, creates visual traces that function both as representational devices and as expressive indices of emotion, ideology, and spatial consciousness (Richmond & Littlejohns, 2017).

Watercolour and pastel demand a form of immediacy and irrevocability. Every stroke carries the potential to fix or destabilise the image. This precariousness endows brushwork with heightened narrative power. Brushwork's expressive potential is further expanded when it intersects with Chinese ink traditions. Many artists in the exhibition drew from the principles of freehand style, which is characteristic of classical Chinese painting. This approach prioritises emotional resonance and conceptual clarity over optical fidelity, allowing brushstrokes to serve as vehicles for visual dynamism and integrating dry-brush techniques, calligraphic lines, and spontaneous washes allowed for a layering of temporal and psychological registers within the pictorial field.

A particularly compelling example of expressive brushwork can be found in Huang Xiaohua's Peach Blossom Land (桃源, see **Figure 18**), where short, vigorous brushstrokes animate the surface with a sense of movement and luminosity. These energetic marks are juxtaposed against more restrained forms in the background, producing a rhythm of tension and repose. The juxtaposition evokes the fantastical notion of taoyuan—a utopian escape from reality—through a choreography of brushstrokes that suggests vitality and distance. Here, the brush does not merely describe the landscape; it enacts its inner pulse, its layered temporality. Similarly, in works such as Jiang Shan's Dew-Greened Garden at Dawn (晓园绿沾衣), delicate gradations achieved through fine layering and gentle, continuous strokes evoke the hushed emergence of morning light. The brushwork materialises not just the appearance of a garden at dawn but its humid, expectant, and quietly alive sensation. This performative use of the brush endows the work with a temporal dimension, allowing the viewer to engage with the image as an unfolding moment rather than a static depiction.

Figure 18 Huang Xiaohua's work: Peach Blossom Land (桃源).



Source: China Artists Network (2024, July 12)

Figure 19 Jiang Shan's work: Dew-Greened Garden at Dawn (晓园绿沾衣).



Source: China Artists Network (2024, July 12)

The expressive brushwork in Chinese watercolour and pastel art acts as a narrative conduit, translating emotional states and ideological reflections into visible form. Painting becomes a form of storytelling, where every stroke is imbued with intentionality, and every texture is a residue of thought and feeling.

3.4 Spatial Composition

Spatial composition constitutes a fundamental mechanism through which narrative structures are constructed in visual art. In watercolour and pastel, spatial strategies are not merely devices for organising pictorial elements but become narrative agents that guide perception, establish thematic focus, and embed symbolically loaded spaces.

Distinct from the perspectival coherence typical of Western oil painting traditions, many exhibited works reflect a spatial logic closer to that of Chinese landscape painting, where simultaneity, multifocality, and atmospheric voids prevail over strict realism. This alternative compositional system enables artists to fragment or expand narrative space, accommodating temporal or thematic reference layers within a single visual frame (Yu, 2004). For instance, the traditional concept of “floating perspective” allows for the co-existence of various narrative elements without necessitating linear sequencing. This spatial openness facilitates associative storytelling, inviting viewers to visually and cognitively navigate the scene.

At the same time, many works demonstrate deliberate compositional asymmetries that resonate with the rhythms of everyday life. Artists frequently position figures or objects off-centre, employ diagonal tensions, or stage visual pauses through blank space, creating dynamic narrative flows rather than static illustrations. These strategies foster a form of narrative suggestion wherein meaning unfolds not through overt linearity but through visual metaphor and spatial implication.

Spatial compartmentalisation is also instrumental in shaping thematic contrasts. In Guo Xuguan’s *Ordinary Yet Brilliant World* (平凡而灿烂的世界, see

Figure 20), for example, the division of the pictorial field into chromatically distinct zones—sky, cultivated land, and labouring bodies—does not merely delineate the setting. It articulates a layered productivity, dignity, and sensory richness narrative. Such arrangements act as structural analogues of socio-economic discourse, encoding land, labour, and aspiration interdependence within a single spatial schema. Moreover, spatial disjunction and juxtaposition serve to reflect psychological or ideological ambivalence. In Dong Zhehuang’s *Urban Blue Rhapsody* (都市蓝色狂想, see **Figure 21**), abstract planes intersect with representational elements, fragmenting the picture space and evoking the alienation and compartmentalisation of contemporary urban life. Here, spatial design becomes a proxy for emotional landscape, converting pictorial organisation into a metaphorical critique.

Figure 20 Guo Xuguan’s work: *Ordinary Yet Brilliant World* (平凡而灿烂的世界).



Source: China Artists Network (2024, July 12)

Figure 21 Dong Zhehuang's work: Urban Blue Rhapsody (都市蓝色狂想).



Source: China Artists Network (2024, July 12)

The spatial composition in watercolour and pastel does more than stabilise form; it animates meaning. Whether through suggestive openness, rhythmic imbalance, or symbolic zoning, compositional choices in the 14th NAE & WPWE articulate narratives that exceed surface representation. They allow artists to visualise external realities, internal sensibilities, and collective imaginations,

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situating spatiality as an active narrative device deeply embedded in the cultural logic of Chinese visual art.

4. CULTURAL CONFIDENCE, AESTHETIC GOVERNANCE AND GLOBAL DIALOGUE

The thematic narratives embedded in the watercolour and pastel works exhibited at the 14th NAE & WPWE must be within the broader context of China's evolving cultural discourse. As China promotes cultural confidence as a cornerstone of national rejuvenation, artistic production has become increasingly instrumental in articulating a collective identity grounded in historical continuity, socio-economic transformation, and ideological coherence. Watercolour and pastel, once peripheral in the hierarchy of art media, are being repositioned as vital tools in this cultural project for their capacity to visualise the values and aspirations of contemporary China.

4.1 Cultural Confidence and the Revaluation of Medium

Including watercolours and pastels in a major state-endorsed exhibition, such as the 14th NAE & WPWE, represents a strategic revaluation of these media within the framework of cultural confidence. Traditionally regarded as subordinate to oil painting or ink painting, these water-based forms are now elevated as important modes of cultural expression. This reassessment challenges entrenched, Western-centric hierarchies of medium and genre, asserting the autonomy and dignity of indigenous or hybridised artistic practices.

This revaluation is not confined to form; it is also thematic. Many of the works in the exhibition address topics aligned with national priorities, such as rural revitalisation and cultural-educational and scientific development. Their treatment through watercolour and pastel enacts a powerful symbolic gesture: strength articulated through softness and permanence expressed via transience. The ephemerality inherent in these media resonates with traditional Chinese aesthetics while enabling a visual language capable of capturing the complexity of contemporary life. The materials' inherent fluidity, luminosity, and capacity for layering serve to visualise change, resilience, and cultural rootedness.

Within this framework, narrative functions not as individual introspection alone but as a gesture of alignment with the national ethos. Everyday scenes—urban expansion, agricultural toil, or domestic spaces—are rendered emblematic through the poetics of visual understatement. The oscillation between precision and diffusion in watercolour and pastel produces a rhetorical structure attuned to the nuances of a “confident modernity”, which is an emotionally grounded, materially modest, yet conceptually expansive cultural vision.

4.2 Aesthetic Governance and the Structuring of Meaning

The 14th NAE & WPWE also demonstrates the workings of aesthetic governance—a system through which artistic production operates and contributes to an evolving ideological consensus. Far from imposing a rigid formula, aesthetic governance in the Chinese context encourages a dialectic between creative autonomy and collective aspiration. Within this structure, artists emerge as cultural agents, crafting visual narratives that resonate with state-endorsed ideals while retaining individual interpretive agency.

Curatorially, the exhibition advances a symbolic economy that reinforces shared values: harmony, diligence, endurance, and national pride. Pastoral scenes, manual work portrayals, and urban life glimpses are presented not as isolated vignettes but as fragments of a larger ideological mosaic. These artworks function performatively, asserting a vision of Chinese society in which tradition and modernity are not in opposition but are interwoven through visual metaphor. Several works in the exhibition employ expressive abstraction, fragmented perspectives, or layered materiality, yet these formal innovations are carefully calibrated to align with broader thematic cohesion.

Deploying traditional techniques such as reserved space, tonal modulation, and brush diffusion derived from ink painting traditions further underscores the continuity with China's aesthetic heritage. By integrating classical visual logic into the portrayal

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of contemporary realities, artists reinforce a sense of cultural rootedness. This synthesis of innovation and tradition exemplifies aesthetic governance principles, which structure aesthetic meaning in ways that reflect and shape national discourse.

4.3 Global Dialogue and Visual Sovereignty

Beyond national boundaries, the 14th NAE & WPWE articulates China's aspiration to redefine its role in the global cultural sphere. The exhibited watercolour and pastel works demonstrate a conscious refusal to adopt Western idioms or exoticised self-representations. Instead, they assert a form of visual sovereignty: an insistence on speaking from, rather than to, Chinese cultural logic. This assertion does not preclude dialogue; instead, it proposes a new framework for global engagement in which local values are presented as universally legible without requiring translation into Western norms.

Watercolours and pastels are uniquely suited to this transnational function because their technical lineage spans Eastern and Western traditions. Their adaptability, material modesty, and historical familiarity make them effective cross-cultural communication conduits. However, within the 14th NAE & WPWE, these media are mobilised not as neutral tools but as vehicles for narrating the Chinese experience in a distinctly Chinese visual idiom. The recurrence of thematic elements such as familial labour, communal transformation, or industrial heritage—expressed through nuanced colour palettes, structured compositions, and symbolic motifs—constitutes a semiotic grammar of national identity. These works propose an alternative aesthetic and epistemology: a different way of seeing, knowing, and valuing the world.

They redefine the parameters of artistic legitimacy. Rather than seeking validation through Western critical frameworks or institutional gatekeeping, the works affirm the relevance of Chinese values—balance, continuity, perseverance, and harmony—as legitimate artistic principles. This confident self-positioning allows Chinese watercolour and pastel artists to engage in global dialogue not from a place of mimicry but mutual recognition.

Indeed, precisely, this synthesis—of visual restraint and conceptual ambition, of tradition and innovation—positions the works of the 14th NAE & WPWE as significant contributors to global aesthetic discourse. As soft power artefacts, they invite international audiences to view Chinese contemporary art and see through it to understand a nation narrating itself with confidence, complexity, and creative integrity.

5. CONCLUSION

The 14th National Art Exhibition and its dedicated Watercolour and Pastel Works Exhibition have provided a uniquely rich platform to examine the narrative capacities of watercolour and pastel media within contemporary Chinese visual culture. This study has demonstrated that these works articulate thematically layered and materially sophisticated responses to China's evolving social, political, and cultural landscape. Through their engagement with themes such as rural revitalisation, cultural-educational development, social life, and national modernity, the selected artworks illuminate the profound narrative potential embedded within media historically regarded as marginal or secondary.

Crucially, this narrative capacity is realised not merely through subject matter but through the formal and material properties of the media themselves. The fluidity of watercolour, the chromatic subtlety of pastel, the expressive range of brushwork, and the spatial logic of composition each play a critical role in shaping the viewer's interpretive experience. These formal strategies enable artists to construct visual languages that are simultaneously personal and political, ephemeral and monumental, affective and ideologically resonant.

Moreover, the exhibition must be understood as a cultural apparatus that operates at the intersection of aesthetic production and state discourse. Within the framework of cultural confidence, the revaluation of watercolour and pastel as "minor genres" reflects a broader ambition to reposition Chinese artistic traditions and hybrid practices as equal participants in global aesthetic conversations.

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Aesthetic governance, as manifested in the curatorial logic of the 14th NAE & WPWE, demonstrates how individual creativity is channelled into articulating a coherent national ethos while allowing room for experimentation, introspection, and affective nuance.

The global significance of these works lies not in their conformity to international styles but in their assertion of visual sovereignty—a claim to narrate the contemporary Chinese condition through locally situated values, aesthetics, and epistemologies. Rather than aspiring to fit within existing global paradigms, these works offer an invitation to reimagine the very terms of artistic dialogue. In this regard, the watercolour and pastel paintings of the 14th NAE & WPWE embody a confident vision of Chinese modernity and actively participate in reshaping the global aesthetic imaginary from a distinctively Chinese standpoint.

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