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\*Corresponding Author: sarifah.hasan@mmu.edu.my

## **THE EVOLUTION OF CONTEMPORARY WATERCOLOR PAINTING IN CHINA: A DOCUMENT AND VISUAL ANALYSIS**

Huang Xiaolian<sup>1</sup>, Elis Syuhaila binti Mokhtar<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Faculty of Art, Sustainability and Creative Industry, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris,  
Tanjong Malim, Perak, Malaysia

puhui4511@gmail.com<sup>1</sup>, elis.mokhtar@fskik.upsi.edu.my<sup>2</sup>

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study explores the recent development of contemporary watercolor painting in China through document analysis and visual analysis. By reviewing the literature, the aim of this study is to establish a detailed chronology of Chinese contemporary watercolor painting, tracing its evolution from traditional techniques to modern innovations. The research method integrates document analysis with visual analysis that scrutinizes representative artworks from each developmental stage. The findings highlight significant trends, influential artists, and pivotal moments in the transformation of contemporary watercolor painting in China. Through a chronological framework, this paper presents a curated collection of watercolor paintings, illustrating the stylistic and thematic shifts that characterize each period. This two-key method analysis will reveal how Chinese contemporary watercolor painting integrates traditional techniques with modern influences, reflecting broader cultural and social transformations. The results of this paper will enhance the understanding of watercolor painting art in contemporary China.

**Keywords:** Watercolor painting, contemporary, China, document analysis, visual analysis

### **INTRODUCTION**

In general, the main feature of watercolor painting is the use of a mixture of water and color (Merriam-Webster, 2022). Watercolor is defined as “a paint that is mixed with water and used to create pictures, or a picture that has been done with this type of paint” (Cambridge, 2024).

Famous British artists and watercolor experts London Vladimir (2021) and Chaplin (2001) believe that the earliest watercolor paintings can be traced back to cave paintings during the Stone Age. The miniatures in the papyrus scrolls found in ancient Egypt (3100 BCE–30 BCE) were drawn with transparent watercolor paintings (see Figure 2), which can be considered an early form of watercolor based on the characteristics of watercolor (Parramón, 1985, p. 12; Autran et al., 2023).

In addition, in medieval Europe (5th–15th century), where illustrators drew illustrations for book manuscripts, they used more or less opaque colors when drawing vignettes on parchment, which became the origin of contemporary watercolor painting (Cornelia, 2019, p. 5). Salé (2020) pointed out in the book “Watercolor: A History” that watercolor was widely used in natural history research, maps, engineering design, decoration, and clothing design during the Renaissance (14th–16th centuries) (p. 38). In the 18th and 19th centuries, watercolor was promoted as an independent medium (Wistar, 1983), first in England and then in France, Italy, etc. (Yunusaliev, 2023).

The use of water to mix colors in ancient China can be traced back to the Neolithic period (Dang, 2018; Yuan, 2009). Watercolor painting was introduced to China by Western missionaries in the 16th century (Pan, 2013). In the mid-18th century, “export paintings” made with watercolor appeared in Guangzhou (Yuan, 2009; Qu, 2020).

Modern Chinese society (1840-1978) was full of turmoil and change (Song, 2020), and due to the influence of the West and the Soviet Union, the style of watercolor paintings in this period was primarily realistic (Wu, 2024). Although individual watercolor artists differed, the overall style of watercolor paintings during this period was similar to and less diverse than western forms (Cheng-Khee Chee, 2007).

Contemporary watercolor painting began to recover in 1978 (Pan, 2013, p. 105). The exhibition, status, theory, and research of watercolor painting have gradually increased (Jin, 2020; Zhang, 2022), and the style of contemporary watercolor painting has become rich and diverse (Cheng-Khee Chee, 2007).

Despite the growing popularity and significance of contemporary watercolor in China, there is a shortage of detailed studies that track its growth and identify changes in style and subject matter (Zhu, 2023). While there have been several studies on the Chinese art genre, the distinctive trend of contemporary Chinese watercolor has received little attention. This study aims to fill this research gap by tracing the evolution of contemporary Chinese watercolor through a thorough chronology and analysis of major artworks. This article seeks to provide new insights into how contemporary Chinese artists are recreating watercolor to represent their changing cultural identity by tracking the medium's evolution from its traditional roots to current inventive methods.

The innovation of this study lies in its comprehensive approach, combining document analysis with visual analysis to provide a multifaceted exploration of contemporary Chinese watercolor painting. We will use the document analysis to trace the historical and theoretical foundations of watercolor painting, providing a context for the social, cultural, and artistic changes that have influenced its development. On the other hand, the visual analysis will focus on major representative works of art from different periods, carefully examining their stylistic, thematic, and technical elements. This comprehensive approach will provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject not only from a historical perspective but also from the perspective of artistic expression and innovation.

The main purpose of this study is to construct a detailed timeline of contemporary Chinese watercolor painting, highlighting significant trends, influential artists, and key moments in its transformation. By doing so, this paper will identify the factors influencing the evolution of this medium and provide a platform for a deeper analysis of how traditional Chinese ink painting techniques have been integrated into contemporary watercolor works. Additionally, this study aims to explore how contemporary watercolor painting reflects broader cultural and social changes in China.

The findings of this study are significant because they will contribute to a deeper understanding of contemporary Chinese watercolor painting as an evolving art form. By documenting the stylistic and thematic changes at different stages of its development, this research provides valuable insights into the broader context of contemporary Chinese art, reflecting how tradition and innovation coexist in modern Chinese society.

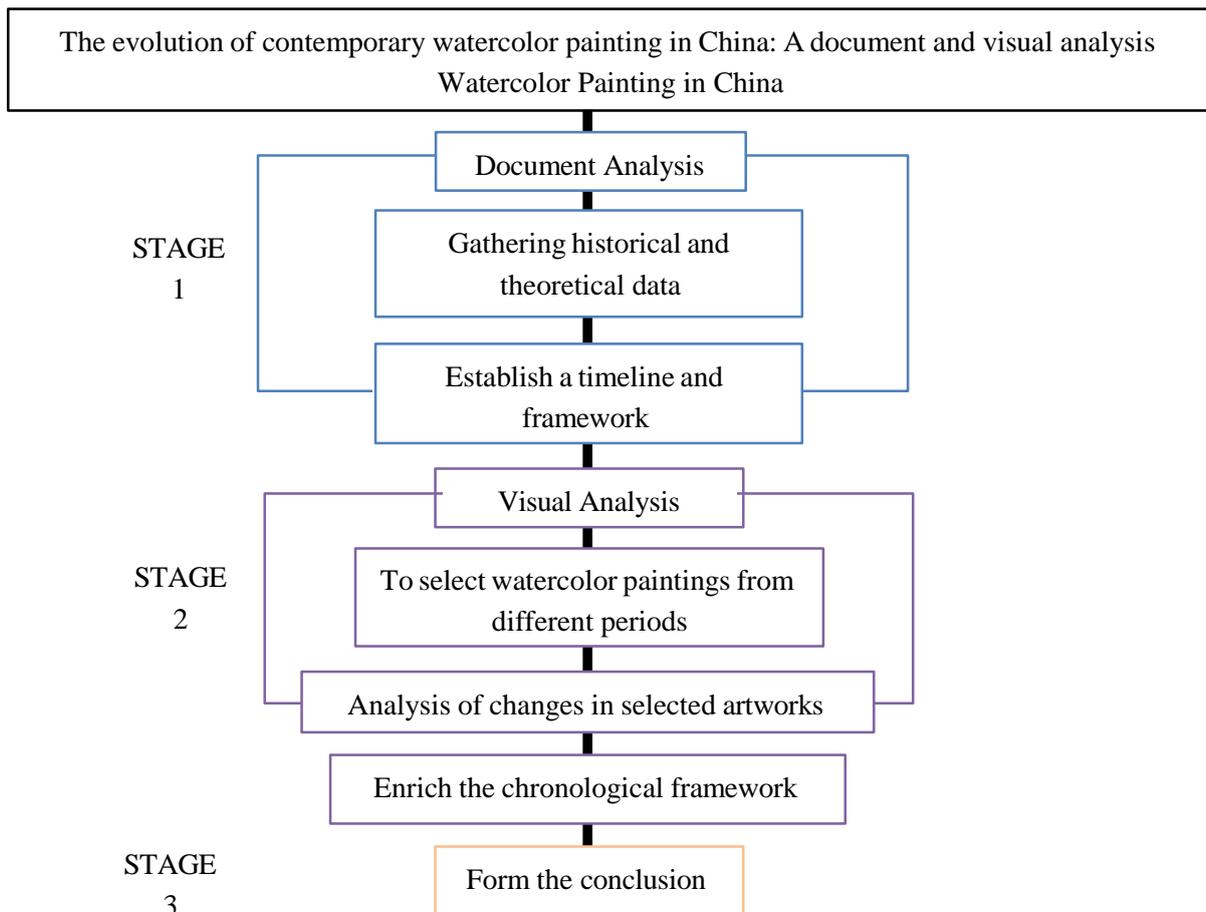
## **METHODOLOGY**

This study uses a combination of document and visual analysis to thoroughly investigate the evolution of contemporary Chinese watercolor painting. These methods enable the investigation of historical background and theoretical foundations, as well as a thorough evaluation of stylistic and thematic shifts

in watercolor painting. By combining these two methods, this study creates an extensive chronology and analyses essential works, revealing insights into the evolution of current Chinese watercolor painting.

### Research Design

Research design is the overall plan for research work (Samsiah, 2018). The research design (see Figure 1) of this study includes three stages. The first stage is document analysis, focusing on collecting historical and theoretical materials to establish a timeline and framework for understanding the evolution of Chinese watercolor painting. The second stage involves analyzing selected watercolor artworks to examine the stylistic, thematic, and technical changes across different developmental periods, further enriching the chronological framework established in the first stage. The third stage involves discussion based on the first two.



**Figure 1** Research design of the evolution of contemporary watercolor painting in China: A document and visual analysis.

### Document Analysis

Document analysis is a research method that involves analyzing various types of documents, including books, newspaper articles, scholarly journal articles, and institutional reports (Morgan, 2022).

Document analysis is used to track the chronological evolution of modern Chinese watercolor painting. This method enables the examination of existing literature, exhibition catalogues, artist interviews, and other documented sources that provide historical context and theoretical insights into the art form. By studying these records, this study creates a timeline that emphasizes important moments, notable individuals, and significant trends that have formed contemporary Chinese watercolor painting.

The document analysis is based on both primary and secondary sources, including art historical materials such as books, journal articles, and academic papers that examine the history of watercolor painting in China and its relationship to traditional Chinese ink painting. It also includes exhibition catalogs and museum records from major domestic and international Chinese watercolor painting exhibitions, which provide information about key works and artists. Furthermore, statements by modern watercolor painters offer genuine insights into their creative processes, influences, and philosophical perspectives. Finally, the analysis includes research on broader cultural, socioeconomic, and political trends in China that affect contemporary art.

### **Visual Analysis**

Visual analysis examines the stylistic, thematic, and technical aspects of representative watercolor artworks from various developmental periods. Artwork analysis is a complex task that generally involves understanding aspects like form, content, and meaning (Cetinic, Lipic, & Grgic, 2018). This method allows for a thorough evaluation of how specific works reflect larger trends as well as individual artists' unique ideas. The selected artworks are examined to see how traditional Chinese painting techniques are combined with modern watercolor approaches, as well as how these works respond to changing cultural and socioeconomic circumstances in China.

The visual study focuses on a carefully selected group of representative works from crucial stages in the growth of contemporary Chinese watercolor painting. The selected artworks represent many stages of development, ranging from the early use of Western watercolor techniques into Chinese painting to more modern experimental and abstract works.

In summary, develop a chronological framework based on document and visual analysis. This framework organizes the development of Chinese watercolor painting into three distinct periods: Period 1: The Origin of Watercolor (before 1840); Period 2: The Spread of Watercolor (1840-1978); Period 3: The Prosperity of Watercolor (after 1978). Each period has specific artistic trends, key artists, and pivotal moments.

## **RESULTS**

This study combines document and visual analysis to provide thorough study results on the evolution of contemporary Chinese watercolor painting (see Table 1). The chronology of Chinese watercolor painting can be divided into three major periods of development, each with different events and representative artists. The features of watercolor painting development also vary in each period.

**Table 1** The chronology of watercolor painting in China

<b>Period</b>	<b>Events</b>	<b>Representative</b>	<b>Features</b>
<b>Period 1</b>  <b>Origin (Before 1840)</b>	Discovery of the earliest painting using water to mix ink in China.	“Stork fish stone axe painted pottery tank” (Neolithic)	Used water as a medium.
	After 1580, missionaries introduced watercolor to China.	Castiglione (1688-1766)	To spread their doctrines.
	1757-1842: Guangzhou appeared "export painting" used watercolor.	Tinggua (1809-1870)	Used watercolor to paint Chinese customs.

*continued*

<b>Period 2 Spread (1840–1978)</b>	In 1852, watercolor classes were offered at the Tushanwan.	Xu Yongqing (1880-1953)	Learn from the West.
	After 1900, established Western-style schools and sent students abroad.	Li Tiefu (1869-1952)	
	After 1949, watercolor painting activities increased.	“National Watercolor Sketch Exhibition” was held (1954).	Influenced by China's political environment.
	1966-1976: Chinese Cultural Revolution.		Stagnate Phase.
<b>Period 3 Prosperity (After 1978)</b>	In 1978, Watercolor resumes development.	“Watercolor exhibition” was held in Shanghai (1978).	Watercolor resumes development.
	After the 1980s, the status of watercolor improved.	In 1984, “The sixth National Art Exhibition” has set up a separate area for watercolor.	Watercolor styles are diverse.
	The system of watercolor was gradually improved and watercolor entered the prosperous period.	In 1993, China watercolor Art Committee was established	

### **The origin of watercolor painting: Before 1840**

Ancient Chinese watercolor painting spread to some areas but did not have a wide impact. The use of water to mix colors in ancient China can be traced back to the Neolithic period (Yuan, 2009). Watercolor painting was introduced to China by Western missionaries in the 16th century (Pan, 2013). In the mid-18th century, "export paintings" made with watercolor appeared in Guangzhou (Yuan, 2009; Qu, 2020).

Watercolor can be traced back to ancient China, where the first paintings used water to blend colors (Dang & Shang, 2018, p. 2). Professor Yuan Zhenzao, an watercolor expert, (2009) pointed out in his book *History of Chinese Watercolor Painting* that the first paintings using water to combine colors appeared in China during the Neolithic period, such as "Stork fish stone axe painted pottery tank" (see Figure 2, p. 1).

Furthermore, Professor Pan Yaochang (2013), a Chinese history expert, stated in his book *History of Chinese Watercolor Concepts* that since 1580, Western missionaries have traveled to China to spread their doctrines, and the illustrations in the Bibles carried by these missionaries were painted with watercolors (p. 28). Castiglione (1688-1766), an Italian missionary, utilized watercolor tools to paint on silk (see Figure 3), which had some influence in China (Dang & Shang, 2018, p. 5).

Guangzhou was established as a foreign trading port in 1757, resulting in the development of "export paintings" in watercolor (Yuan 2009; Qu 2020). Due to commercial trade, many local painters

in Guangzhou specialize in creating rice paper watercolor paintings that depict Chinese style and local customs and sell their works abroad (Qu, 2020). According to Cai (2019, p. 14), Tingqua (1809-1870) was a well-known painter in both China and the West, having created numerous works (see Figure 4).

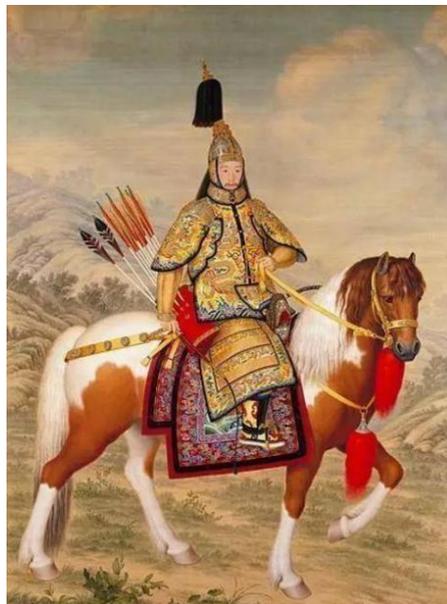


**Figure 2.** “Stork fish stone axe painted pottery tank” (Neolithic)

White, brown and water, 47 cm x 32.7 cm x 20.1 cm

National Museum of China Collection

**Source:** <https://www.chnmuseum.cn/>

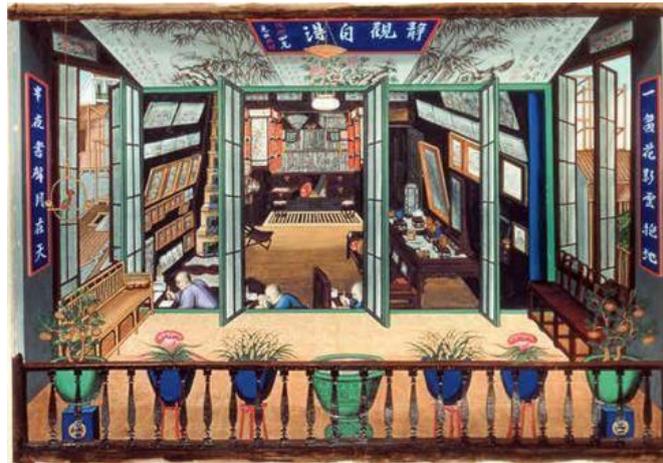


**Figure 3.** “The Qianlong Emperor in Ceremonial Armour on Horseback” (1758)

Coloured on silk, 322.5 cm x 232 cm

Palace Museum collection

**Source:** <https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/>



**Figure 4.** "Tinggua Studio" By Tinggua (about 1855).

Gouache on paper

Hong Kong Museum of Art collection

Source: <https://www.takungpao.com/culture/>

### **The spread of watercolor painting: 1840-1978**

Since China entered the modern era in 1840, the government and intellectuals advocated learning from the West (Wu, 2024). After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Chinese watercolor paintings were influenced by China's political environment (Yuan, 2009, pp. 96-97).

Before 1949, the development of modern Chinese watercolor painting was primarily affected by Western missionaries' activities, the teaching methods of Western-style schools in China, and the experiences of students studying abroad (Dang & Shang, 2018, p. 8). In the mid-19th century, French missionaries created the Tushanwan Art Museum in Shanghai, where they trained various artists, including Xu Yongqing (1880-1953) (see figure 5), who is considered as the "first person to spread Chinese watercolor painting" (Shen, 2023; Li & Chen, 2017).

After 1900, China established various schools based on western model of education, which included basic watercolor courses (Yuan, 2009, p. 39). It is worth noting that some modern Chinese youth studied in Britain, the United States, and Japan, and upon their return, they significantly influenced the development of Western watercolor paintings in China (Hong et al., 2010). When watercolor was spread to China, some artists, such as Li Tiefu (1869-1952) and Li Jianchen (1911-2002), applied Chinese painting tools and materials to watercolor (Yang, 2018). Li Tiefu, who studied in the United Kingdom and the United States, used Chinese painting brushwork to fully utilize the effect of the blending of water and color in his watercolor painting "Vase Chrysanthemum" in 1933 (see Figure 6), achieving a similar charm to that of ink painting (Wang & Qi, 2019).

After, 1912, the increase of watercolor is mostly shown in the number of watercolor painters and exhibitions, the publication of watercolor publications and magazines, and the development of relevant art societies (Kang, 2015). For example, the "Oriental Painting Society" was founded in 1915, and Ni Yide (1901-1970) wrote "Introduction to Watercolor Painting" in 1927 (Ni, 1927). The advancement of watercolor painting provided the groundwork for its success after 1949.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 (Guiheux, 2023), watercolor painters used drawing and creation to illustrate the new face of socialism, focusing on China's landscape,

working people, and ethnic minorities (An, 2019). The subject matter of watercolor painting grew, and national watercolor exhibitions and academic activities became increasingly common, including the "First National Watercolor Sketching Exhibition," the "Gu Yuan (1919-1996), Zhou Lingzhao, Wu Biduan Watercolor Sketching Exhibition," and the "British Watercolor Bicentennial Exhibition" (Hu, 2020).

Cheng-Khee Chee (2007), a watercolor artist and assistant professor emeritus at the University of Minnesota, stated that Soviet painting styles heavily affected Chinese watercolor painting around the 1950s and 1960s. China employed Soviet painters as teachers and sent students to study in the Soviet Union. However, watercolor painting experienced a fall from 1966 to 1976 as a result of China's political upheaval known as the "Cultural Revolution" (Wang, 2017).



**Figure 5.** The cover of "Woman's Hour magazine" No. 8 (1912)

Watercolor on paper

**Source:** <https://www.163.com/dy/article/>



**Figure 6.** "Chrysanthemum in a Vase" by Li Tiefu (1933)

Watercolor on Paper, 38.1cm x 58.3 cm

Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts Art Museum collection

**Source:** [https://www.sohu.com/a/371309791\\_658178](https://www.sohu.com/a/371309791_658178)

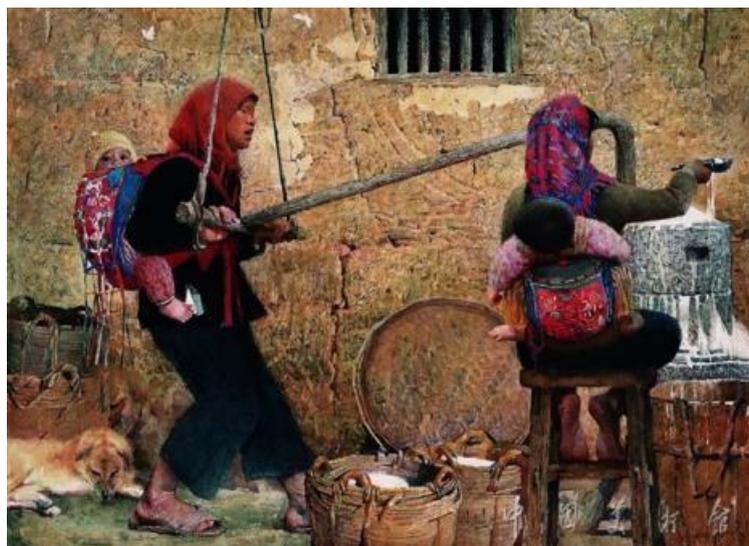
### **The prosperity of watercolor painting: After 1978**

After 1978, the development of watercolor painting in China entered an innovative contemporary age with China's reform and opening-up policy (Li, 2018). Watercolor painting flourished during this time. Watercolor exhibitions were held frequently, watercolor's status was improved, watercolor organizations were founded across the country, and watercolor theories were increased (Jin, 2020; Zhang, 2022).

In 1978, the "Watercolor Exhibition" in Shanghai marked the beginning of the recovery and development of watercolor painting in China (Pan, 2013, p. 105). Then, in 1984, "The sixth National Art Exhibition" established a special exhibition area for watercolor painting, giving it the same status as traditional Chinese painting and oil painting (Wang, 2017; Kang, 2015). The system of watercolor painting was gradually established, for example, the Watercolor Art Committee of the Chinese Artists Association was established in 1993 (Zhang, 2018).

The research and theory of watercolor painting increased during this period. Some colleges have established bachelor's and master's degrees in watercolor painting, which promotes watercolor research, such as Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts (Long & Xu, 2018). Several books about the history of watercolor painting have been published. Yuan Zhenzao's "The History of Chinese Watercolor Painting" was originally published in 2000 and revised in 2009. Wang Shuangcheng and Zhang Kegrang and Jiang Zhenli also edited "The History of Chinese Watercolor Painting", which was published in 2000. Pan Yaochang released "The History of Chinese Watercolor Painting Concepts" in 2013.

In addition, contemporary watercolor painting has transformed from a traditional model to a diverse contemporary art form (Yuan, 2009, p. 269). In the early 1980s, Chinese watercolor painting was influenced by Western modern art (Gao, 2021). In terms of techniques, watercolor painters are also constantly advancing with the times, creating new creative techniques and experimenting with new media materials (Doluda et al., 2018). The style of watercolors have diversified, encompassing both realism and abstract deformation (see Figure 7-9) (Cheng-Khee Chee, 2007).



**Figure 7.** "Childhood Song" by Huang Zhongyang (1984)

Watercolor on paper, 64 cm x 89 cm

National Art Museum of China collection

Source: <https://www.namoc.org/zgmsg/>



**Figure 8.** “Blue in Memory” by Wang Yong (1994)

Watercolor on paper, 80 cm x 70 cm

National Art Museum of China collection

**Source:** <https://k.sina.cn/article>



**Figure 9.** “Early Shift Miners” by Zhou Gang (2021)

Watercolor on paper, 150 cm x 105 cm

National Art Museum of China collection

**Source:** <https://www.namoc.org/zgmsg>

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

As an imported medium, watercolor painting faces challenges such as acceptance and rejection, integration, and transformation in China (Wang & Qi, 2019). In the process of diversification, contemporary watercolor painting combines elements of traditional Chinese ink painting, which helps to achieve the localization of Chinese watercolor painting (Liang, 2022). Before 1980, watercolor painting primarily used the tools and materials of ink painting. After the 1980s, watercolor painting began to incorporate the aesthetics of traditional Chinese ink painting (An et al., 2022).

Moreover, this study indicates that contemporary Chinese watercolor painting is a vibrant and continuously evolving art form, reflecting the process of integration of Western art into China. The research results emphasize the relevance of watercolor painting to contemporary social and cultural changes.

This study is of great significance in enriching the theory of contemporary watercolor painting and provides academic guidance for artists seeking to enhance their practice through different media. By exploring contemporary watercolor painting in conjunction with the development history of Chinese watercolor painting, this study contributes to the academic research of contemporary watercolor painting. Understanding the evolution of contemporary Chinese watercolor painting helps enrich artists' artistic practice and inspires the exploration of new avenues in media creation.

## CONCLUSION

This study successfully traces the development of contemporary Chinese watercolor painting, revealing how Western watercolor paintings have been skillfully integrated with Chinese artistic innovation. By combining document and visual analysis, this study provides a detailed chronological sequence that depicts the development of Chinese watercolor painting at various key periods. This framework significantly contributes to understanding how contemporary Chinese watercolor painting responds to socio-political and cultural changes.

Through some visual analysis, this study highlights important trends in the evolution of watercolor painting. Notably, watercolor painting has integrated with Chinese art and culture since its introduction to China. The study also covers the artworks of certain watercolor artists, whose innovations have propelled the development of watercolor painting in China.

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