

# Conceptual Foundations and Research Methodology of Personal Memory Scene Construction in Contemporary Chinese Painting

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**Abstract:** *Beijing-based practitioners of contemporary Chinese painting, this research investigates how personal memory functions as both a cognitive process and a source material in artistic creation. While thematic and stylistic shifts in Chinese art have attracted growing scholarly attention, existing theory inadequately accounts for the cognitive and procedural mechanisms by which autobiographical memory is transformed into pictorial expression. This article addresses this gap by introducing the Personal Memory Scene Construction (PMSC) framework a process-oriented model linking memory input, cognitive reconstruction, imaginative scene formation, and artistic realization. Empirically, the research adopts a multi-method qualitative design, including in-depth semi-structured interviews with six leading Beijing artists and iconographic - iconological visual research on works representative of the art scene in Beijing. Data were coded and brought together using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke) and supported by NVivo, resulting in systematic triangulations being made between verbal accounts and the material evidence. Findings reveal that memory in contemporary Chinese painting is not passively retrieved but actively reconstructed: artists deconstruct and re-experience sensory traces, translate affective auras into compositional patterns, and use serial motifs as intermediaries between personal history and cultural identity. Through the PMSC model, three recurring generative mechanisms fragmentation and reassembly, intergenerational dialogue, and symbolic translation are identified to explain the generative capacity of memory in relation to theme, form and technique. The article is theoretically innovative in that it blends cognitive models of reconstructive memory with art-historical analysis, and methodologically in that it presents a qualitative protocol which is likely to be replicable in other studies of such internal creative processes. By centering memory as a creative force, this research establishes a parsimonious and transferable framework for understanding memory-based art across cultures, and lays a foundation for future empirical and comparative analyses.*

**Keywords:** Personal Memory Scene Construction (PMSC); Contemporary Chinese Painting; Memory-Driven Creativity; Cognitive Reconstruction; Visual Culture Analysis.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 The Evolving Narrative in Contemporary Chinese Painting

Since the late twentieth century, contemporary Chinese painting has undergone a fundamental transformation in meaning away from notions of ideological and collective modes of representation towards increasingly individualistic, introspective and experimental modes of identity expression. The reform period in the 1980s was a period of watershed change when

artists began to shift their focus from the official historical narratives and turn attention to the individual experience and psychological interior (Baldini, 2022). Within this cultural transition, memory in particular personal memory emerged as a creative resource and as a mode of self-reflection through which artists were able to negotiate a dizzying number of modern Chinese identities. What developed, though, with this movement was not just a change in style and content but an exponential change of direction for the concept of the art's purpose: painting became a medium intrinsically linked with memory, feeling, and cultural consciousness.

In the centre of the contemporary Chinese art world, Beijing, this movement was realised through a variety of image making strategies that juxtaposed the intimate and the historical. Artists such as Zhang Xiaogang, Liu Xiaodong and Zeng Fanzhi have been able to turn personal memories to perceived visual allegory, turning bits of memory into hybridized forms that merge traditional Chinese brush techniques into modern and digital sensibilities (Cheng, M2024). Their work is not just about tangible representation of lived experience, but re-enactment - layered scenes in which memory is re-experienced, re-contextualised and afforded new cultural meaning (Gu and Su, 2022). Such practices demonstrate how the notion of memory in art is a re-creation, that we do not remember something as it was but reconstruct it in the visionary imagination of the artist.

However, the narrative also represents a wider social and cultural trend. Rapid urbanization, globalization, and technological transformation have sharpened questions of belonging and authenticity, making personal memory an artistically important perspective on tensions between past and present (Liang et al., 2025). Memory is here used as both a psychological structure and an artistic device, a way to cross the gap between individual experience and collective identity. Contemporary Chinese painting is therefore a visual memory archive, one in which the self is repeatedly rewritten in a conversation with the past.

Despite the flourishing of the scholarship on Chinese contemporary art, the majority of existing research is descriptive, where innovation of style or socio-political critique are the main themes in reverse relation to the cognitive and emotive processes that are the basis of artistic production. What has not been amply researched is the relationship between memory as a reconstructive mental and cultural process and the development and evolution of artistic form (Jin et al., 2021). This research locates itself within this conceptual gap through examining PMSC as a theoretical and methodological approach towards comprehending the ways in which memory operates as both a cognitive process and an artistic tool in the studio practice of Beijing-based contemporary artists.

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

While there have been many studies done on the nexus of tradition and modernity in Chinese art, one topic that has received little systematic study is the role of personal memory as a generative force in the creative process itself. Scholarship on Chinese contemporary painting frequently acknowledges the symbolic use of historical and cultural motifs, but there rarely is an explanation of the cognitive construction by artists of memory-scenes, which is a mental picturing that changes the act of recollection into visual composition (Chen and Zhang, 2023). The lack of an integrated theoretical bridge between cognitive memory construction and artistic production has contributed to a lack of understanding of how artists bring inner experiences into material form.

This research addresses that gap by offering and applying the PMSC framework, which bridges between psychological accounts of memory reconstruction and interpretive analysis in visual

arts. Through this model memory is understood not as a static storehouse of past events but as an active and imaginative process that informs artistic choices, the selections of theme, composition, technique and symbolism (Lee, 2023). By following how Beijing-based modern artists reconstruct their own memories in paintings, the research aims to put into words the mechanisms that memory undergoes to become visible in image form.

### 1.3 Research Objectives

Accordingly, the research pursues three interrelated objectives:

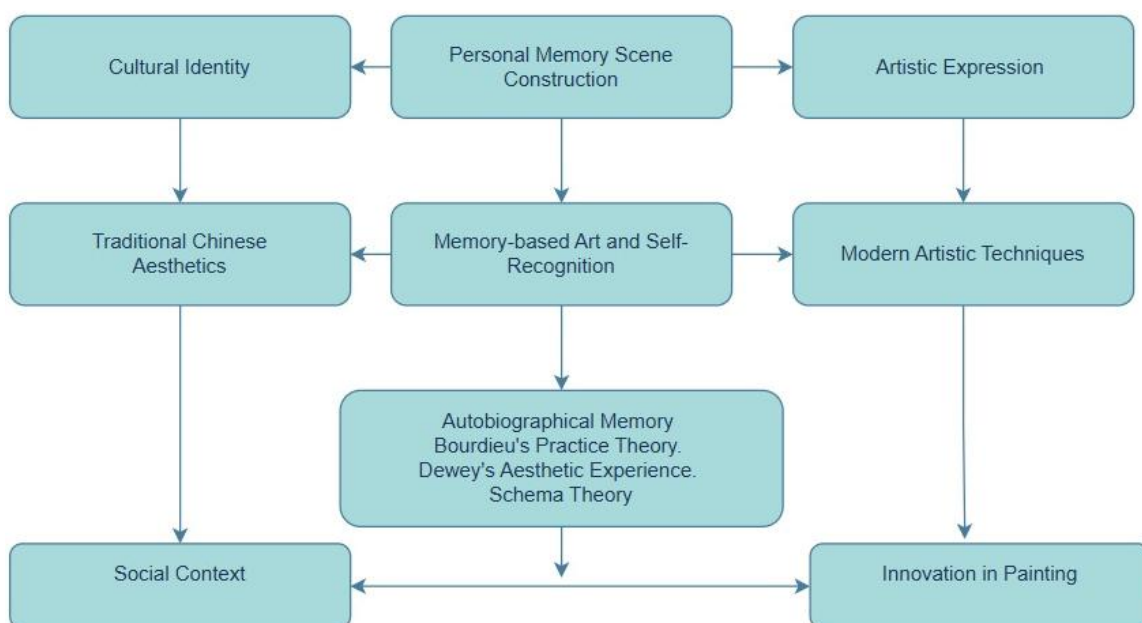
- i. To conceptualize PMSC as a theoretical lens for understanding the creation and practice of contemporary Chinese painting.
- ii. To establish a methodological framework grounded in phenomenological and interpretive inquiry capable of capturing the subjective experience of artists.
- iii. To demonstrate how personal memory functions as a mediating structure that links individual identity formation with broader cultural and aesthetic transformation.

By bridging cognitive theory with artistic practice, this article contributes to an emerging discourse in art studies that repositions memory as a central creative agent (Corsi, 2024). The investigation not only advances theoretical understanding of artistic cognition but also provides an interpretive model adaptable to wider contexts where art serves as a medium of remembering and reimagining the self.

## 2. Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

### Theoretical Foundations of PMSC

The PMSC framework established by this research unites the knowledge from cognitive psychology, philosophy of aesthetics, and Chinese art theory to explain information on how a personal recollection is visually re-imagined in the contemporary painting practice (Gani, 2022). Memory, instead of a passive reservoir of the past, is here conceptualized as a dynamic, reconstructive process, operating through imagination, emotion and embodied experience. Within this view, artistic creation is not to transcribe the events as experienced, but to recreate the affective scenes by showing through visual language.



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Diagram**  
 Source: Self-Created

## **2.1 Memory as Construction: From Cognitive Theory to Artistic Practice**

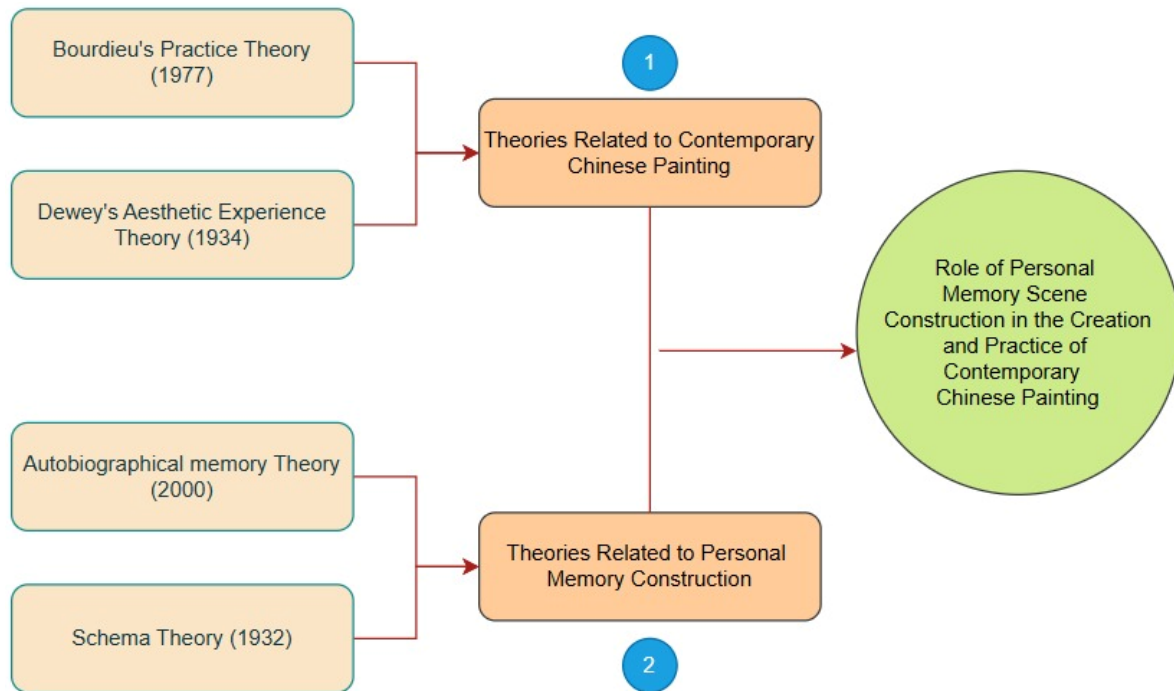
The idea of memory as a literal archive of the past has been banished from cognitive science a long time ago. Bartlett (1932), for example, first introduced the idea of schemata conceptual structures that people use to organize and reconstruct experience and Schacter (1999), and later Schacter and Addis (2007), showed that memory is a constructive process that draws on a variety of neural systems that these people use for imagination, prediction, and emotional regulation. Taken together, these studies suggest that remembering is an act of creative synthesis rather than retrieval that is influenced by context, emotion and cultural narrative.

From this perspective, there is a structural similarity between memory and creativity: they both depend on the recombination of previous knowledge in new patterns. In the artistic experience, this reconstructive power is manifested pictorially and symbolically (Zhang, 2025). This convergence is further supported by research being conducted in the field of neuroaesthetics. Addis et al. (2016) have identified the hippocampus, medial prefrontal cortex, and posterior cingulate cortex as having overlapping neural networks that are involved when humans both recall scenes in the past or imagine scenes in the future. Such findings highlight the fact that memory construction is an essentially imaginative process that operates through visual-spatial simulation.

When applied to art practice, this has meant that painters do not "represent" memories, but recreate them through the act of imaginative projection. The remembered moment is mediated through emotion, time distance, and cultural meaning. This resulting artwork therefore represents what Ricoeur (2004) refers to as the poetics of memory: a creative act that re-narrates the past in the language of the present (Chen, 2022). Within the contemporary Chinese context this process is compounded by artists' negotiation between the inherited traditions of paint aesthetics and contemporary visual languages.

This cognitive perspective is supported by empirical findings taken from China-based artists in Beijing. For these artists, memory always refers to an atmosphere, texture rather than a specific insight, meaning that their creations actually start from fragments of perception which, through painting, through the layering and working with compositional rhythms, are reassembled into an original vision (Guan, 2024). These findings support the hypothesis of a generative cognitive system for memory in art-making that mediates between perception and imagination.

Thus, PMSC situates the artist's mind as a reconstruction site, where autobiographical incidents are altered into visual "scenes." In contrast to archival notions of memory, it puts the emphasis on the performative act, on the way in which memory is re-authored through artistic agency (Hu et al., 2024). By combining the theory of cognition with artistic phenomenology, the research sets memory not just as content, but method; the structure within which creative thought becomes manifest.



**Figure 2: Theoretical Framework**  
 Source: Self-Created

## 2.2 The Function of Scene Construction in Visual Arts

According to cognitive psychology, scene construction refers to the mental creation of a coherent spatial-temporal scenario. Similarly, it involves sensory, emotional, and contextual details (Hassabis & Maguire, 2009). In artistic terms, scene construction refers to the artist's capacity to create a visual context and environment that speaks to the feeling behind a memory rather than its appearance. It is spatial synthesis through which memory becomes manifest.

Scene building has been accomplished by layering, juxtaposing at the same level, and disjointed view. Artists take parts of memories objects, figures or spatial cues and rearrange them into new orders that create something of a rupture in time and a thickening of feeling. Zhang Xiaogang's Bloodline series suggests family portraits from the cultural revolution in black and white tones and replicated images of connection. Thus, the private memory is a commentary on the universal theme of lineage (Fu, 2024). Just like Liu Xiaodong, the urban scenes aim to reconstruct the transient spaces of migration and displacement using realist brushwork. The realist brushwork not only reconstructs the transient spaces but also preserves the social memory of the moment.

From the perspective of art theory, the act of building a scene unites two processes: thinking in images and making pictures. Arnheim (1974) refers to this as visual thinking, which is the ability to change imagery in one's mind into external form through dynamic organization of line, colour and space. Dewey's Art as Experience (1934) goes on to clarify that the artwork is not a finished product that was made but rather, the continuation of experience through transformation. Scene construction serves two purposes (Peng et al., 2025). First, it offers a means of mental rehearsal. Second, it can serve as an aesthetic structure. The artist acts out memory in the decision. There, the artist is constantly negotiating between what is seen and what was not.

In this research, artists who were interviewed often spoke of painting as entering a space they remember, showing how they reconstruct things through sensory and emotional detail (Qi et

al., 2023). This explanation fits with phenomenological aesthetics, particularly Merleau-Ponty's idea of embodied perception whereby the body remembers in gesture and movement. In practice, applying the brush, choosing, layering, distorting, and correcting perspectives becomes a re-living of memory rather than a representation of it.

In the context of the PMSC framework, scene construction applies between thought and making (Wang and Wang, 2025). It turns episodic memories into a spatial story that one can see and feel. The process of changing visual space into painting facilitates monumental and original meaning: painting is a reconfiguration of memory.

### **2.3 Personal Identity and Subjectivity in Contemporary Chinese Aesthetics**

The rediscovery of subjectivity in the art of China post 1980 came together with wider social changes: the economic reform, exposure to global forms of modernism and the re-evaluation of individual expression in a previously collectivist culture (Wang et al., 2024). Scholars like Gao Minglu (2011) and Wu Hung (2014) have observed that in recent times Chinese painting focuses much more on the artist's personal experience as a location for cultural negotiation. Identity, once defined by collective ideology is being spoken out introspection, memory and emotional authenticity.

The narrative coherence that autobiographical memory provides gives a sense of self over time (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). The word culture is often a mediator between private life and public history. Within Chinese aesthetics memory refers to the intertwined concepts of heritage, filiality and temporality of cycles (Xu et al., 2023). In this context the translated text is meaningful. The memory of traditional landscapes, interior spaces, or ceremonies is a way of regrounding identity during a time of rapid modernisation.

The artistic practices in Beijing reveal how we manipulate memory to construct identity. In his Mask series, for instance, Zeng Fanzhi makes use of deformed faces to express the post-Socialist person's psychological disintegration (Geng, 2023). The mask is, indeed, both covering and revealing, as its resultant stresses the duality of social demands and self-exposure and is a visual metaphor for social conflict. Wang Guangyi's Great Criticism uses images from the Cultural Revolution and West advertising to explore the re-scripting of collective memory in an era of ideological hybridity (Zhu and Zhu, 2022). The artists make use of memory not as nostalgia but as a strategy to relocate the self amid history and culture. These works are an excellent example of the same.

In China, this means that the emergence of personal memory art is not just a style development, but also a redefinition of artistic agency. The artist is both partner and narrator; in bringing together fragments of experience and reconstructing them in aesthetic form, he asserts authorial rights over her history. The process has a parallel in Foucault's notion of "technologies of the self," where people produce an identity through practices of reflection and creation. The technologies available to artists within the framework of the PMSC perspective, particularly those of construction of personal memory scenes, constitute just such an imaginative operation, by which artists negotiate selfhood in common with the continuities of our culture.

Furthermore, the dialogic relationship between individual and collective memory offers an insight into a very Chinese aesthetic sensibility. Whereas Western modernity often places an emphasis on rupture, in recent Chinese painting it is more a mediating between continuity and transformation. Personal memory becomes the medium for artists to maintain connections to tradition while testing new things. This dual orientation - rooted but exploratory - is

characterizes of the subjectivity of the contemporary Chinese artist, and places their work within a larger humanistic context of imagining remembrance and identity.

## **2.4 Proposed Conceptual Model of PMSC**

Building on the above discussion, this work presents The PMSC model that builds a conceptual framework for interpreting the process of translating memory into art form. The model outlines the following four phases that are interrelated:

- i. Memory Input - the repository of life and cultural autobiographical and cultural memories shaped both through experience and emotion and environment.
- ii. Cognitive Reconstruction - Internal process by which disorganized recollections are re-organized into coherent mental imagery; based on schema theory and research of the reconstructive memory.
- iii. Scene Construction Process - the creative visualization and materialization of memory in terms of compositional planning, spatial organization and symbolic selection.
- iv. Artistic Expression Output - the creation of the artwork, which is a manifestation of reconstructed memory, in tangible visual form, which at one and the same time preserves and transforms the memory's meaning.

Visually, these phases create a cyclical continuum, and not a linear sequence (see Figure 1). The finished artwork often creates new memories and reflections, which are fed back into the artist's store of experiences and begin the whole process of creative reconstruction all over again.

The PMSC model makes three contributions to existing scholarship. First, it combines cognitive science and aesthetic theory as a source of a psychologically informed explanation of artistic creation. Second it offers a methodological scaffolding for qualitative art research, in providing a possibility of empirical enquiry into the description and visualization of memory as presented to artists (Liu, 2025). Third, it situates Chinese painting in the present as part of a universal discourse of creative cognition in a way that places memory not as an accessory force but as the prime creative force.

By articulating the movement that goes from internal recollection to external representation, the model of memory-driven art practice in Beijing's scene today. It locates the painter as a subject and an object of memory - a subject who creates, through the act of painting, spaces in which a personal history and a cultural imagination meet.

## **3. Research Methodology and Design**

### **Methodological Framework: An Interpretive and Qualitative Approach**

This research employs an interpretive approach, a qualitative framework, and is guided by a phenomenological inquiry in order to describe and explicate the nature of the creation and practice process of contemporary Chinese painting in light of one's self-constructed memory. The interpretative paradigm was selected because it is able to engage with subjective phenomena and processes of meaning formation at a detailed level compared to measurable variables (Xu, 2024). Within this orientation, artistic production is no longer understood as a measurable product but as the emergent rhetoric of the interaction between thinking, feeling and seeing.

The interpretive framework is consistent with the central thesis of the PMSC - that artistic expression is an embodiment and recreation of lived experience. The phenomenology of Husserl (1931) and of Merleau-Ponty (1962) and the extension of it into the aesthetic domain provide a philosophical underpinning for this investigation with their appeal to perception as an act of body and interpretation. It allows for the research of memory in the sense of how artists "live through" it-in the creative process, bringing to visibility the cognitive and emotional structures that make up the shape of artistic form.

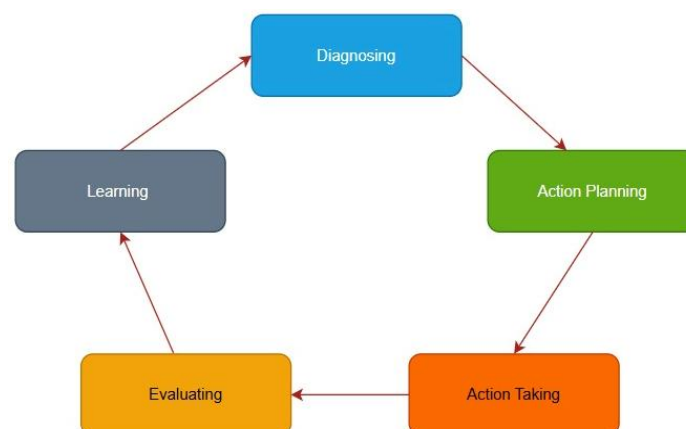
In addition, analysis follows a hermeneutic interpretation (Gadamer 1975). Artistic meaning is deemed to be emergent and dialogical and is created on the engagement between the artist, the artwork and the researcher. Considering the fact that memory driven creation is informed by the social context, cultural codes, and introspection, this orientation is sensitive to the multiplicity of perspectives inherent in the practice of art.

The qualitative nature creates an intricate understanding of the transformation of private memories into visual scenography. It is deep not superficial, so it is not a question of generalizing across populations but of trying to understand lived experience. Semi-structured interviews and visual analysis of selected artworks was used for data collection and triangulation between verbal accounts and material expressions was possible. In this way the practice of art is located in the context of the cognitive activities and the culture, the fruit of which belongs as much to the affective dimension of the process of creation as to the aesthetic fruit.

### 3.1 Research Paradigm and Justification

The philosophical foundation of the research is mainly phenomenological and is strengthened by the hermeneutic interpretation. Phenomenology offers a way to explore the inner consciousness of artists' reconstructive reminiscence in their visual process (Xu and Shen, 2022). It would be especially suited to researching the lived and represented character of experiences rather than simply what is produced. This convergent with the central enquiry of the research, which is the working of PMSC in the creative act of Beijing-based designers.

The mental imagery and lived memory foundations of the PMSC model are theoretically compatible with the phenomenology's focus on subjective experience placing creativity within the interplay between these two. The artist's memory of past experiences is not used as a factual piece of information but as phenomenological evidence of the manner in which the past is constantly being re-interpreted in the act of creation in the present moment.

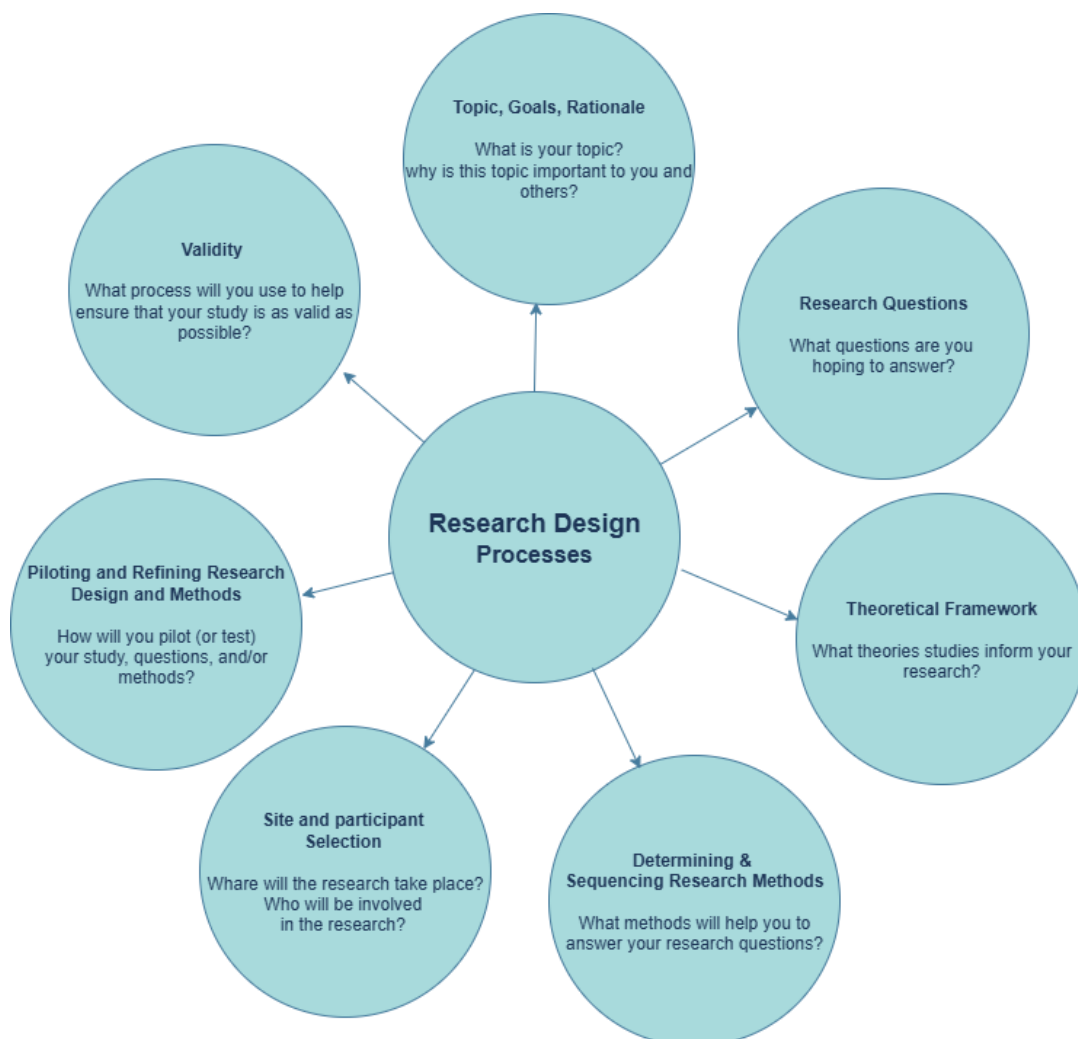


**Figure 3: Interpretive Research**  
 Source: Self-Created

Hermeneutics reinforces this orientation - the dimensions of meaning-making by including the interpretive dimensions of meaning making. Michael Gadamer's theory of fusion of horizons emphasises the generation of understanding through dialogic interaction of the world of lived experience (participant) and the horizon of the enquiry (observer). Within this research, the researcher acts as an interpreter that draws artists' reflections and artworks as texts, revealing strata of significance that disclose the functioning of memory as an aesthetic principle.

This paradigm is also consistent with current art research practices where reflexivity and contextual awareness are the preferred approaches (Sullivan, 2010). Rather than forcing preconceived patterns of analysis, the research conditions allow meanings to emerge inductively from interaction with data. This adjustable methodology is characterized by recognition of the heterogeneity of artistic practices and the fact that the creative process is veritably non-linear, emotional and contingency driven.

Ultimately, the interpretative-phenomenological paradigm offers the requisite epistemological versatility for asking nuanced, multi-dimensional questions about personal memory, cultural identity, and artistic innovation (Yu et al., 2024). As a result, it justifies the subjective as a form of empirical knowledge, and therefore the artist's introspection is justified as data and as theory in itself.



**Figure 4: Research Design**  
 Source: Self-Created

### 3.2 Selection of Case Studies: Contemporary Chinese Artists in Beijing

The research utilized a purposive sampling approach to identify six prominent recommendations artists in Beijing who have engaged directly with the remembrance, identity, and cultural mirror (XUAN, 2023). Beijing has been selected as the geographical focus since it is the intellectual and artistic center of China's contemporary art scene, the home of the 798 Art District, educational academies and major galleries that promote interchange between tradition and experimentation.

The case selection was based on three factors:

- i. Connected with Memory-Based Practice: Artists must prove constant involvement in memory of personal or public as a subject of their work.
- ii. Generational Representation: The sample should include artists who have matured in diverse socio-political environments, which can be understood as artists formed in different periods (post-Cultural Revolution, the reform era, and the globalization era).
- iii. Artistic Diversity: Selected artists should use different media and artistic language to make possible the cross-reference of memory as it is represented by different visual languages.

According to these prerequisites, the final sample consisted of six artists: Zhang Xiaogang, Liu Xiaodong, Zeng Fanzhi, Wang Hui, Zhang Litao, and Wang Guangyi. Each represents a different path within contemporary Chinese art but one unifying thread is their focus on memory as a source of creation.

Through symbolic portraiture, Zhang Xiaogang's Bloodline series is both a reflection of and a way to cope with the collective memory and familial trauma.

In his documentary-styled works of social observation, Liu Xiaodong reconstructs the images of displacement and migration, turning social observation into a personal interpretation of them.

- Zhang Xiaogang's Bloodline series engages with collective memory and familial trauma through symbolic portraiture.
- Liu Xiaodong's documentary-style works reconstruct scenes of displacement and migration, transforming social observation into personal reflection.
- Zeng Fanzhi's Mask paintings visualize the alienation of urban life as an internalized psychological memory.
- Wang Hui's watercolour installations reflect personal meditations on transience and emotional states.
- Zhang Litao explores spiritual and autobiographical memory through experimental ink and pigment techniques.
- Wang Guangyi juxtaposes socialist iconography with commercial symbols, transforming collective memory into critical commentary.

Artists were recruited on the basis of availability for interview, their established position in the art community and interest in participating in self-reflective discourse about their creative practice (Zhang, 2024). Those artists whose paintings were not explicitly engaged with the memory of the personal experience or with history or could not meet the requirement of presenting their data were excluded from the final sample.



**Figure 5: Madonna Mazu Artwork**  
 Source: Zhang et al. (2024)

The diversity of this sample ensured a holistic investigation into the role that memory plays in stylistic and ideological terms. While the results do not purport representativeness for all Chinese artists, there is in the research a rich, qualitative understanding of the way in which memory works as both personal archive and creative mode in Beijing's contemporary art ecology.

**Table 1: Notable Contribution of Artist**  
 Source: Self-Created

No.	Artist Name	Rewritten Notable Contribution
1	Zhang Xiaogang	Critically acclaimed for his Bloodline series, which uses the stiff, formal style of Cultural Revolution-era family portraits to explore the tension between collective history and private, often traumatic, memory.
2	Wang Hui	Known for her delicate and introspective watercolor works that capture the transient, poetic moments of everyday urban life, often focusing on themes of solitude and personal space within a rapidly changing society.
3	Liu Xiaodong	A leading figure in the Chinese Neo-Realist movement, known for his large-scale, documentary-style paintings created on-site that capture the lives of marginalized communities affected by social and economic change.
4	Zeng Fanzhi	Famous for his emotionally charged Mask series, which explores themes of social alienation and existential anxiety in modern society, as well as his later, highly expressive abstract landscape paintings.
5	Zhang Litao	Focuses on atmospheric paintings that delve into spiritual and emotional introspection, his work exemplifies how artists visually express subjective memory scenes and identity through abstraction.
6	Wang Guangyi	A founder of the "Political Pop" movement, known for his Great Criticism series that juxtaposes heroic imagery from Cultural Revolution propaganda with famous Western consumer brand logos.

### 3.3 Data Collection Methods and Protocol

In order to delve deeply into the phenomenon of the construction of personal memory scenes, two complementary approaches were used to investigate the topic in this research: In-depth semi-structured interviews with the artists under research and visual content analysis of representative artworks (Zeng, 2024). The combination of these methods allowed for triangulation between the verbal and visual data which improved the rigor of interpretation.

### 3.3.1 In-depth Semi-Structured Interviews

The interview design was informed by the PMSC framework using phenomenological principles of inquiry. Questions were designed to elicit full and rich descriptions of lived experiences, memory processes and creative decisions of the artists (Qu, 2025). Rather than asking people to provide factual recounting, the interviews were also encouraging reflective narration - nudging people to provide ways of understanding how memory is perceived and visualized, and how memory is made different from when painted.

Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted either in-person in Beijing studios or the interviews were conducted through secure digital conferencing (Yang, 2022). Participants were asked using open-ended questions that fell under three thematic clusters:

- **Memory and Inspiration:** "What effect do personal memories or past experiences have on your selection of theme or subject matter?"
- **Visualization and Process:** How do memories come or develop as you work on a painting? Are there ways in which you consciously reconstruct scenes, emotions or symbols?
- **Identity and Expression:** What impacts does engagement with memory have on your sense of self, culture, or artistic identity?

Follow up questions were adaptive, so that they could explore unique concepts brought up by each artist. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated from Mandarin to English with idiomatic nuances where needed.

### 3.3.2 Visual Content Analysis

Complementing the interviews, the visual content analysis was performed on a selection of the key works of each artist. This analysis adopted an iconographic - iconological approach (Panofsky, 1955), which follows the direction of proceeding from the surface description to the deeper interpretation of the symbolic meaning. The analysis examined:

- **Formal Elements:** composition, space layout, colour, brush stroke, materiality;
- **Symbolic Motifs:** repeating figures, objects, or visual metaphors denoting memory or identity;
- **Thematic Patterns:** emotional tone, narrative structure, and references to culture;
- **Contextual Integration:** how the work responds to socio-political, historical, or biographical conditions.

Each work of art was treated as a "memory text" that would allow for cross comparison with verbal accounts from interviews (Zhang, 2025). This dual-layered method of data collection tends to capture and capture the meeting of mind and materiality, the mental image and its material visualization that is at the heart of the PMSC model.

All data was stored and organized within NVivo software to facilitate the systematic coding, annotation and retrieval of the data. Ethical approval and informed consent were secured for data collection to prevent anyone from accessing the intellectual property and privacy of the participants.

### 3.4 Data Analysis Procedures and Rigor

The analytic process used was thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006), based on iterative cycles of coding, interpretation, and synthesis (Zhao and Sedon, 2025). This approach was selected because of its flexibility and compatibility with phenomenological research, so that the emergence of meaning is within the data, rather than using pre-existing categories.

### **3.4.1 Coding and Thematic Development**

The approach to the analysis included familiarization, including transcript multiple readings and detailed viewing of the artworks to determine recurring motifs and metaphors (Yang, 2023). Initial codes were then generated, representing things like fragmentation, reassembly, emotional resonance, temporal layering, and symbolic transference (Zhang, 2024). These codes were applied to both the interview and visual data, which allowed for consistency across modalities.

Subsequently, themes were explored from the clustering of similar codes. Four primary themes emerged:

- i. Fragmented Memory Reconstruction - the memory of selected past events in a non-linear fashion and their translation into visual disjunctions;
- ii. Embodied Memory and Emotion - the physical nature of painting as a practise for reciting emotional experiences;
- iii. Cultural Continuity through Personal Memory - remaking of traditional motifs as vehicles of cultural inheritance;
- iv. Innovation and Identity Formation - of the transformation of memory into distinctive stylistic or symbolical language.

### **3.4.2 Ensuring Trustworthiness and Validity**

Triangulation was used between data sources, with the aim that narrative accounts would be compared against visual analyses in order to provide a high degree of confidence in interpretation. For example, compositional fragmentation was considered in relation to the way in which the interviews were characterized as "fragmented recollection."

Member checking - where summaries were returned to participants for their reactions to ensure accuracy of participants' views Peer debriefing with other researchers and art scholars further clarified on the definition of themes and eliminated interpretive bias.

Rigour was enabled by in-depth audit trail of analytical decisions and coding revisions and rationale of choice of themes (Jieqiong,2023). Confirmability was addressed through reflective journaling whereby the researcher reflected critically on his and her own assumptions, stance, and possibility of interpretation.

Finally, the concepts of transferability were underlined by the detailed account of contexts, allowing the reader to make judgments about the applicability of the findings to other cultural/artistic contexts (Zou and Yeo, 2022). While generalization is not the object of qualitative inquiry, the analytical depth and methodological transparency of the current research provides the foundation for comparative research between the art traditions.

### **Summary of Methodological Rigor**

Through the use of this interpretive-phenomenological design, the research achieves methodological coherence: between theory, data and analysis. The PMSC framework spanned each stage from the sampling process to the data interpretation process, ensuring that methods were true to the epistemological commitments of the inquiry (Liu et al., 2024). By bringing together artist testimony and visual analysis through a rigorous interpretive framework, the research captures the complex processes through which the personal memory is constructed, reconstructed and finally made visible on the canvas.

## 4. Conclusion

### 4.1 Conceptual Contribution Synthesis

This research can define PMSC as a coherent conceptual perspective to the research of memory in its role as an active creative process in contemporary Chinese painting. Instead of the static source material view of memory, PMSC highlights memory as a reconstructive, imaginative process that converts autobiographical and cultural information into a spatialized visual scene. Interviewing practitioners based in Beijing, this research found that artists do not 'mirror' remembered events; they fragment, recombine and re-compose sensory and affective traces into pictorial arrangements which play the dual role of remembrance and re-creation.

Theoretically, PMSC makes two complementary contributions. First, it brings together cognitive models of reconstructive memory (schema-based synthesis, scene projection) and art-historical descriptions of form and symbolism, as it demonstrates how cognitive-neural-phenomenological mechanisms have tangible aesthetic implications (material layering, motif reworking, compositional fragmentation). Second, it shifts the artist to the active position of a cultural memory builder: a negotiator to negotiate particular kinds of private memory and public histories through strictly controlled formal decision-making (ping and Yang, 2021). This redefinition contributes to art history as it implies a process lexicon memory input cognitive reconstruction scene construction art output that can be deployed in the hermeneutic interpretation of artworks from various media and cultural contexts.

Practically, PMSC creates new possibilities of interdisciplinary inquiry (creative cognition, memory studies, visual culture) as well as offers a normative explanation of the articulation of identity by contemporary Chinese painters in the midst of radical social change (Qin, 2022). By focusing directly on the reconstructive dynamics of memory, the framework explicitly puts into the context the interconnections between internal experience and external form and provides a parsimonious, and yet open, model for future theoretical and empirical investigations on memory-based artistic practice.

### 4.2 Methodological Significance

Methodologically, this research shows a strong and replicable route that can be used to explore internal creative processes - through the integration of phenomenological interviewing and systematic visual analysis. The interpretive-phenomenological paradigm was adopted with a focus on the depth of understanding: semi-structured interviews were used to obtain artists' lived memories and descriptions of their process, and iconographic-iconological analysis of selected artworks in relation to the artists' lived memories (Li et al., 2025). Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke), employed across verbal and visual datasets, facilitated with NVivo enabled coding, permitted themes to be cross mode compared and refined.

Triangulation of accounts and pictorial representations of artistic returns; member-checking; peer-debriefing with art scholars; and an accessibly traceable audit trail of coding decisions and reflexive notes were employed to establish credibility, dependability, and confirmability - all central to qualitative trustworthiness - and provide transferability and defensibility.

Importantly, the multi-method protocol can be suitably modular. They also imply that sampling frames, interview questions, or analytic nuance can be easily modified for different arts, cultural spaces, or scale (e.g. case studies in small-n or larger comparative projects). The model is also large enough to allow for methodological expansions - mixed methods approaches that incorporate audience reception studies or neuroaesthetic measures, for example - without

sacrificing interpretive value (Liu and Chen 2025). On the whole, the research offers a viable research agenda for those scholars interested in tracing the process by which internal cognitive-affective processes are externalized in the expressive act of art making, and it balances the need for methodological rigor in an appreciation of the non-linear subtleties of creative work.

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### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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