

EVOLUTION OF PEASANT-THEMED FIGURE PAINTING IN CHINA'S 12TH-14TH NATIONAL ART EXHIBITIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on peasant-themed figure painting presented in the 12th to 14th National Art Exhibitions of China, aiming to explore the creative orientation, thematic evolution, and stylistic characteristics of peasant imagery in contemporary Chinese art. Through a systematic review and visual analysis of selected and award-winning works from these three exhibitions, the research examines expressive techniques, formal language, subject matter, and their underlying socio-cultural contexts. The findings indicate a shift from grand, collectivist narratives to individualized storytelling, with artists placing greater emphasis on the realistic circumstances and spiritual presence of rural people. The works show a warmer emotional tone and stronger sense of humanistic concern. In terms of artistic language, realism coexists with expressionism, while traditional brushwork techniques are interwoven with contemporary visual strategies, resulting in a diverse range of styles. The study concludes that peasant-themed figure painting is not only an artistic response to rural social realities but also reflects broader cultural concerns and aesthetic values in the context of China's societal transformation. It represents a key component of the realist tradition in the National Art Exhibition and opens new directions and possibilities for the development of contemporary Chinese figure painting.

Keywords: Peasant-themed figure painting, National Art Exhibition, Contemporary Chinese art, Image analysis, Value orientation

INTRODUCTION

In the system of contemporary Chinese painting, peasant-themed figure painting has long held a highly significant position. As an important component of traditional realist art, the peasant theme carries the dual cultural missions of “people-oriented” and “realism,” while deeply reflecting the trajectory of China’s social transformation and the adjustment of its cultural structure. Since the early years of the founding of the People’s Republic of China, peasant imagery has served as a core subject of artistic expression, becoming a crucial medium for presenting national ideology and social realities. Especially in the National Art Exhibition (hereafter referred to as the “National Exhibition”), a top-level national art platform, peasant-themed figure paintings have consistently maintained a stable representation rate and vigorous

artistic vitality, making them an essential window for understanding contemporary Chinese rural imagery and shifts in social ideology. The National Exhibition is not only a barometer of trends in China's art world but also a reflection of national cultural policies. The sustained prominence of peasant-themed works on this platform highlights the deep-rooted social and cultural significance and enduring value of this subject matter.

With the development of the times, China's social structure has undergone profound changes, particularly with the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy, which has brought new opportunities and challenges to rural society. Against this backdrop, artistic expressions focusing on peasants and rural themes have exhibited increasing diversity in both content and form. Traditionally, peasant-themed figure paintings were often used as symbols of class and as tools of political narrative, emphasizing collectivist spirit and the dedication of laborers, with a focus on the hardships and social value of rural life. However, in the new era, the perspectives of these works have become more diversified and nuanced. Artists are no longer satisfied with single-dimensional political narratives; instead, they increasingly focus on individual life experiences, cultural memory, and the delicate depiction of rural spirit (Jiang, R. X., 2007). This shift not only reflects artists' deepening concern with the "three rural issues" (agriculture, rural areas, and farmers) but also exemplifies the broader trend in contemporary Chinese art of moving from traditional realism toward pluralistic modes of expression.

Regarding thematic content, peasant-themed figure paintings no longer simply depict traditional farming life and rural scenery but actively incorporate emerging topics such as modern rural construction, ecological protection, and rural education, demonstrating the complexity and diversity of rural society. The artistic techniques employed have also become richer, with traditional realist methods blending with expressionism and contemporary painting languages to form diverse artistic styles (Zhu, Q. X., 2009). This dual expansion of content and form enables peasant-themed works to maintain their realist heritage while also embracing broader aesthetic possibilities and deeper cultural significance.

The problem statement of this study is as follows:

1. The peasant-themed figure paintings in the most recent three National Art Exhibitions have undergone significant transformations, yet the underlying cultural logic, historical context, and aesthetic mechanisms have not been systematically analyzed.
2. The profound transformations in rural society have reshaped the ways in which farmer images are produced. However, how these changes are specifically reflected in figurative painting remains insufficiently explained.
3. Current research on peasant-themed artworks primarily focuses on art-historical narratives or case studies, lacking a comprehensive analytical framework centered on iconographical methods that also incorporates socio-cultural context and the structural logic of images.

The research objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To systematically analyze peasant-themed figure paintings from the 12th to the 14th National Art Exhibitions, tracing the evolution of their visual structures, narrative patterns, and thematic logic.
2. To investigate how social transformations in the new era shape the visual representation of farmer figures, thereby revealing the cultural values and ideological implications embedded in these works.
3. To establish an integrated research approach grounded in iconography and iconology, providing a sustainable theoretical framework for the study of rural-themed subjects in contemporary Chinese figure painting.

Therefore, studying the development trends of peasant-themed figure paintings in the 12th to 14th National Art Exhibitions is not only an essential path to understanding the continuation

and innovation of contemporary Chinese realist art traditions but also a crucial entry point for grasping rural cultural changes and the reconstruction of artistic values. Through in-depth analysis of representative works from this period, we can better understand the characteristics and cultural meanings of peasant-themed figure paintings within the new social context, further enriching the theoretical framework of contemporary Chinese figure painting and promoting innovation and development in rural-themed art creation. This research holds significant academic value and practical relevance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The National Art Exhibition, as a top-tier national art platform, has long maintained a keen focus on peasant-themed figure paintings, and the continuous presence of this subject matter in the exhibition has attracted broad scholarly attention. Gao Z. (2025), in the paper “Painting the Era, Depicting Peasants: Constructing Peasant-Themed Chinese Painting in the New Era—A Discussion Based on the 13th and 14th National Art Exhibitions,” points out that in recent years, peasant-themed Chinese paintings at the National Art Exhibition have gradually moved beyond traditional realism to present new cultural contexts and visual construction paths. This study directly informs and inspires the focus of this paper on the twelfth through fourteenth editions of the exhibition.

From a historical-structural perspective, in the article by Zhang Z. (2024), “The Holding of ‘The Rural and the Real: A Research Exhibition on Rural-Themed Artworks Since 1949’,” the author systematically examines the evolution of peasant-themed figure painting in the National Art Exhibitions through the exhibition catalog and visual analysis of the works. The study emphasizes that this subject serves as an important visual vehicle for conveying national ideology and cultural identity. It concludes that the peasant theme in the National Art Exhibitions exhibits remarkable continuity and carries a significant responsibility for cultural expression.

Scholarly research on the transformation of peasant imagery has become increasingly in-depth. Chen M. S. and Yang G. Y. (2015) conducted a focused analysis on the evolution of three representative figures—“the old peasant,” “the migrant worker,” and “the new farmer”—within national oil painting platforms, pointing out that the peasant role has been shifting from a traditional class symbol to characters embedded within more contemporary narrative relationships. Moreover, in the most recent three sessions of the National Art Exhibition, a focus on real life and public livelihood has become a primary theme in oil painting. Jing H. J. (2022), through a study of rural-themed oil paintings in the past three exhibitions, examined the development and transformation of Chinese rural-themed oil painting in the new era, exploring its artistic value and contemporary significance.

In terms of pictorial language and narrative structure, in-depth studies of specific works have become increasingly rich. For example, Zou Y. L. (2023) focused on rural-themed oil paintings from the 13th National Art Exhibition. By classifying these paintings and systematically analyzing the compositional elements of their stylistic characteristics, she concluded that rural-themed oil painting, along with its realist style, holds an important position in the current and future development of oil painting in China.

Zheng H. M. (2012) conducted a comprehensive study of rural-themed oil paintings in the 21st-century National Art Exhibitions, analyzing their current status, stylistic traits, existing problems, and spiritual connotations. He argued that the nostalgic sentiment embedded in these works reflects both a social psychological phenomenon and a cultural expression, representing real-life situations while embodying strong contemporary, national, and humanistic qualities. Additionally, Cao Y. (2024) selected outstanding individual cases for in-depth analysis, aiming to uncover the artists’ thematic intentions, creative experiences, and

distinctive visual language, and to explore the aesthetic value and real-life significance of this genre.

Attention to the review mechanisms and art policies is also highly representative. Yu Y. (2019) analyzed the award patterns of paintings in the National Art Exhibitions and found that the jury tends to value both traditional realist skills and the integration of new narrative structures, reflecting a continuity and innovation within the realist tradition.

Additionally, scholars such as Jian J. J. (2024) and Wei X. S. (2024) have approached the study from perspectives of cultural studies and aesthetic theory, analyzing the symbolic systems and contextual meanings of peasant-themed works in the National Art Exhibitions. Their research explores how figurative symbols construct a sense of rural identity, while also discussing the cultural positioning and aesthetic value of peasant imagery within the context of rural revitalization.

Based on the above literature review, the following key points emerge:

1. Platform and policy context: The sustained focus on peasant-themed paintings in the National Art Exhibitions reflects the visual intervention of national cultural policies within the broader context of rural revitalization.
2. Image identity and narrative transformation: The depiction of peasants has shifted from hierarchical symbols to diversified expressions, including individualized narratives and representations of the "new farmer."
3. Pictorial language and symbolic research: The integration of regional symbols, narrative fragments, and poetic structures in the artworks drives innovation in visual expression.
4. Interaction between folk art and national platforms: Folk peasant paintings have been incorporated into national exhibition platforms, forming a mechanism of policy-driven cultural construction.
5. Review mechanisms and artistic practice integration: The evaluation standards have evolved from emphasizing traditional techniques to embracing the transmission of contemporary discourses, facilitating a redefinition of realist art.

Although existing studies explore the presentation mechanisms of peasant-themed works in the National Art Exhibition from multiple perspectives—including policy platforms, narrative transformation, symbolic construction, and evaluation systems—they generally lack an in-depth, integrative analysis of image structure, narrative logic, and cultural implications. In particular, a systematic examination of peasant-themed figure paintings from the 12th to the 14th National Art Exhibitions remains insufficient. There is still a lack of methodological inquiry grounded in iconography and iconology to address how farmer imagery is visually reshaped under the context of rural revitalization and what deeper ideological structures underpin these representations. Moreover, theoretical discussions on how such imagery visually reflects the cultural reconstruction, identity renewal, and value shifts occurring in contemporary rural society are notably scarce. This dissertation aims to fill this research gap by conducting a systematic investigation of peasant-themed figure paintings from the most recent three National Art Exhibitions, thereby revealing their internal logic and contemporary significance at the level of visual culture and offering new theoretical perspectives and research paradigms for understanding the imagery system of rural China today.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study aims to review and explore the creative phenomena, artistic characteristics, and socio-cultural implications of peasant-themed figure paintings in the 12th to 14th National Art Exhibitions of China. To achieve these research objectives, this paper primarily employs literature review and image analysis as core methods, supplemented by comparative case studies and contextual observations. (Baayen, R. H., 2008) The goal is to establish an organic connection between theory and visuality, as well as between text and image, thereby systematically presenting the position and significance of peasant-themed figure painting in the development of contemporary Chinese art.

Literature review method

The literature review method forms the theoretical foundation and research premise of this study. Through systematic searches of authoritative academic databases such as China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) and Web of Science (WoS), this paper has collected research literature related to keywords including "National Art Exhibition," "peasant-themed," "figure painting," "realism," and "rural imagery" within the context of the 12th to 14th National Art Exhibitions of China. These sources not only provide historical trajectories and theoretical backgrounds for the development of peasant-themed figure painting but also reveal emerging issues, phenomena, and trends that have appeared in recent years within the country's mainstream art exhibition platforms.

A comparison of the literature reveals that scholarly research on peasant-themed painting generally falls into three main directions:

1. First, from an art historical perspective, exploring the evolution of the "peasant" image within the framework of modern Chinese art;
2. Second, from cultural and sociological viewpoints, focusing on the relationship between rural spirit, agrarian culture, and visual expression;
3. Third, specifically examining peasant-themed works in the National Art Exhibitions, analyzing their thematic composition, aesthetic trends, and symbolic structures.

By integrating these sources, this study preliminarily constructs a theoretical framework and research context for understanding the development of peasant-themed figure painting within the National Art Exhibitions, providing a solid foundation for subsequent visual analysis and empirical investigation.

Image analysis method

Image analysis serves as the core methodology of this study, (Fan, Z. B., 2022) aiming to uncover the cultural meanings and artistic language embedded in visual representations through the interpretation of specific artworks. This research selects representative shortlisted and award-winning works closely related to peasant themes from the 12th (2014), 13th (2019), and 14th (2024) National Art Exhibitions, focusing on the categories of Chinese painting, oil painting, and printmaking. (Condorovici, R. G., 2015) A research sample of images is established and analyzed in conjunction with textual materials such as exhibition catalogs, critical reviews, and artists' statements.

The image analysis is carried out across the following dimensions:

1. Structure of human figures, including age, gender, identity roles, and emotional states;
2. Narrative and scene settings, such as agricultural labor, village landscapes, and intergenerational interactions;

3. Visual language and style, encompassing composition methods, brushwork and texture, color vocabulary, and media application;
4. Symbolism and metaphor, focusing on the use and cultural significance of recurring motifs like land, hoes, red cloth, sunlight, and other emblematic symbols.

To enhance the depth and systematic nature of image analysis, this study adopts Erwin Panofsky's three-tiered model of iconographical analysis, "pre-iconographical description," "iconographical analysis," and "iconological interpretation." Building on this structure, the dissertation moves from the examination of visual form to a deeper exploration of the socio-cultural context and value orientations embedded within the images. In terms of the number of peasant-themed figure paintings exhibited in the three most recent National Art Exhibitions, according to incomplete statistics, 17 works won awards and 98 works were selected in the 12th National Art Exhibition; 19 works won awards and 162 works were selected in the 13th National Art Exhibition; and 23 works won awards and 206 works were selected in the 14th National Art Exhibition. This indicates a high level of attention to, and broader participation in, peasant-themed figure painting among contemporary artists (Jian, J. J., 2024).

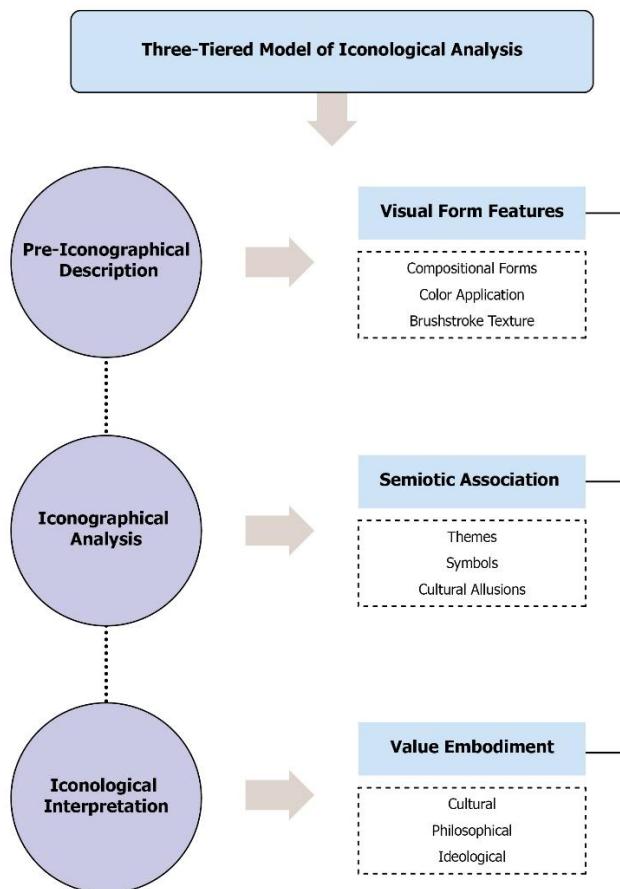


Figure 1: Three-tiered model of iconographical analysis

Furthermore, by comparing peasant-themed figure paintings across the 12th, 13th, and 14th National Art Exhibitions, the study identifies a developmental trajectory in image evolution—from grand narratives to individual experiences, from class-based representations to social roles, and from traditional realism to integrated visual languages. This analysis not only facilitates a deeper understanding of the image construction and narrative strategies of peasant-themed works within the context of the National Art Exhibitions, but also sheds light on the creative transformation of contemporary Chinese figure painting within the realist tradition.

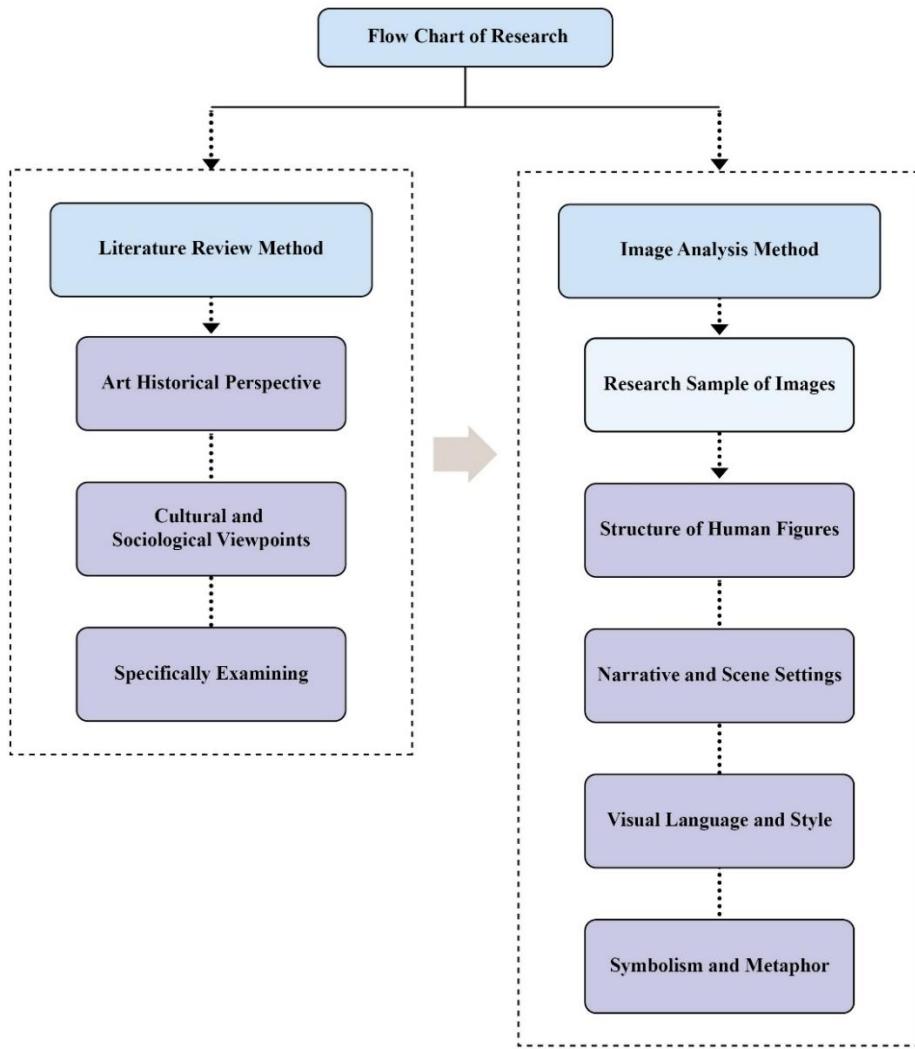


Figure 2: Flow Chart of Research

This study combines literature review to build a theoretical foundation with image analysis to conduct empirical investigation (Figure 2). By integrating these two approaches, it aims to reconstruct the multiple dimensions and evolutionary logic of peasant-themed figure painting within the National Art Exhibitions, thereby revealing its significance as an artistic expression within the social structure and cultural value system of contemporary China.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Through systematic review and image analysis of peasant-themed figure paintings in the 12th to 14th National Art Exhibitions, clear aesthetic evolutions, narrative reconstructions, and cultural shifts within this period can be observed. The study shows that this category of works not only maintained a stable selection ratio in terms of quantity but also demonstrated multidimensional expansion in both content and formal language. These developments can be summarized into four main changes and characteristics.



Figure 3: Zhang Wenping, August, Oil Painting, 138cm×200cm, 2014

Source: <https://www.caanet.org.cn/>

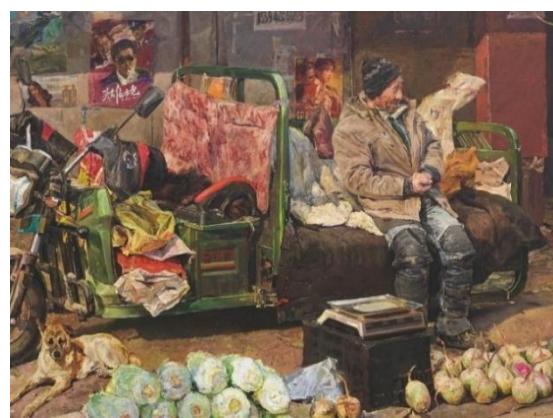


Figure 4: Cui Xiaodong, A Distant Friend Across a Thousand Miles, Oil Painting, 239.5cm × 184.5cm, 2024

Source: <https://www.caanet.org.cn/>

Firstly, in terms of thematic structure and narrative type, peasant-themed figure painting has gradually shifted from the previously politicized and formulaic “collectivist narratives” toward more life-oriented “individual experience narratives.” In the 12th National Art Exhibition, works such as August (Figure 3) still depicted scenes of collective agricultural labor, emphasizing a state-centered narrative framework. However, by the 13th and 14th editions, artists increasingly focused on the daily lives and inner worlds of individual peasants, as seen in the work like A Distant Friend Across a Thousand Miles (Figure 4), using a more straightforward visual language to reflect their authentic conditions. This transformation marks a shift in the peasant image from a political “symbol” to a “social role,” placing greater emphasis on cultural identity and humanistic value.

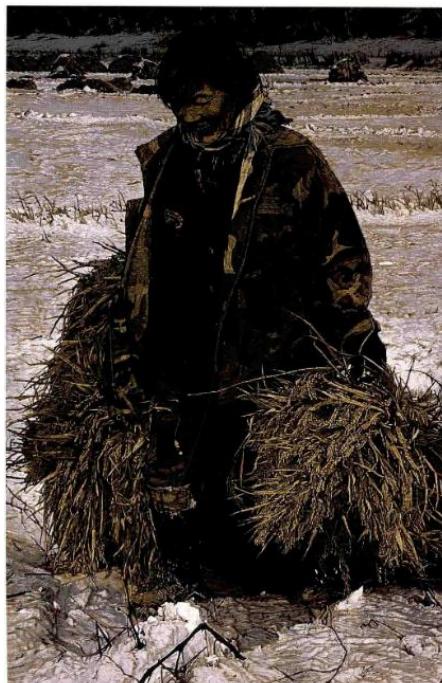


Figure 5: Ji Shicheng, Ripe Rice, Engraving Painting, 100cm × 68cm, 2014
Source: <https://www.caanet.org.cn/>

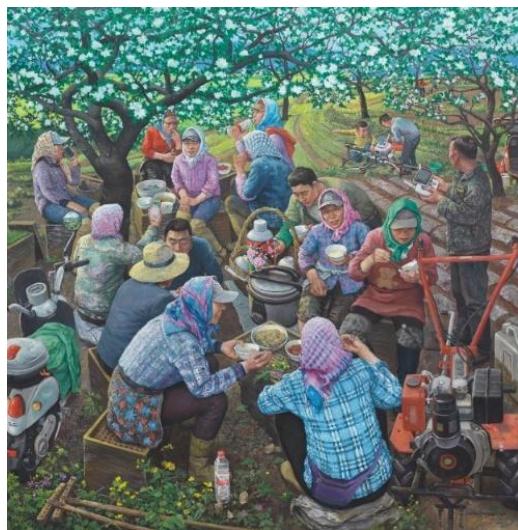


Figure 6: Chen Shuzhong, Spring Noon - Blossoms, Oil Painting, 230cm × 226cm, 2024
Source: <https://www.caanet.org.cn/>

Secondly, in terms of figure construction, peasant-themed paintings in the three editions of the National Art Exhibition clearly move beyond the once-dominant image of the “old farmer,” replacing it with more layered and complex character portrayals. While traditional representations—such as the weathered, deeply lined elderly peasants seen in works like *Ripe Rice* (Figure 5) from the 12th Exhibition—still exist, later works from the 14th Exhibition, such as *Spring Noon - Blossoms* (Figure 6), depicts a new generation of young farmers using smartphones and operating drones. This shift reflects artists’ renewed understanding of the concept of the “peasant” in the new era and is closely aligned with the social transformation of rural China under the rural revitalization strategy. By portraying generational shifts, rural-urban mobility, and the reconstruction of identity, these works endow the peasant group with richer emotional depth and broader social meaning.

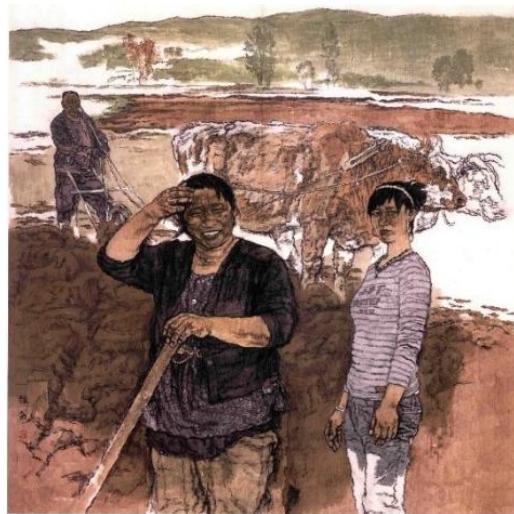


Figure 7: Zhao Qi, Farming People, Chinese Painting, 191cm×191cm, 2014
Source: <https://www.caanet.org.cn/>



Figure 8: Wang Mingqiang, Wharf Scene, Oil Painting, 180cm×160cm, 2014
Source: <https://www.caanet.org.cn/>

Thirdly, from the perspective of artistic language and expressive techniques, peasant-themed works have evolved from a foundation in realist tradition toward a coexistence of expressiveness, narrativity, and formal exploration. In the 12th National Art Exhibition, many works adopted a relatively realistic approach—for example, *Farming People* (Figure 7) used precise modeling and color to convey the warmth and stability of the land. By the 13th and 14th editions, however, numerous works demonstrated breakthroughs in brushwork and visual experimentation, which employed multi-perspective composition, collage techniques, and abstract color blocks, or which integrated traditional mural elements with contemporary design sensibilities. This stylistic diversification not only enhanced visual expressiveness but also facilitated a shift from declarative to expressive artistic language in peasant-themed painting, reflecting the inclusiveness and creative vitality of art within the National Art Exhibition (Figure 8).



Figure 9: Shen Xiaoming, Golden Land, Chinese Painting, 240cm × 240cm, 2024
 Source: <https://www.caanet.org.cn/>

Finally, in terms of visual symbolism and cultural semantics, peasant-themed figure paintings have constructed a stable and multilayered system of visual symbols. Imagery such as land, hoes, ox carts, red cloth, wheat sheaves, village houses, wells, and rising smoke frequently appears across various works, carrying not only concrete references to lived rural experiences but also deep cultural metaphorical meanings. These symbols reinforce the sense of locality and folk customs within the composition while conveying the artists' recognition of rural values, the dignity of labor, and emotional attachment to home. In the work *Golden Land* (Figure 9), the depiction of everyday rural scenes subtly conveys a warm sense of cultural memory and an underlying mechanism of identity affirmation.

Table 1: Main Changes and Characteristics of Peasant-Themed Figure Paintings

No.	Aspects	Changes and Characteristics
1.	Thematic Structure and Narrative Type	Grand political narratives to individual life narratives. With more diverse storytelling dimensions.
2.	Figure Construction	More varied and realistic. Reflecting the complexity of contemporary rural society.
3.	Artistic Language and Expressive Techniques	Purely realistic approaches to a fusion of expressive styles. Enhancing both aesthetic tension and conceptual depth.
4.	Visual Symbolism and Cultural Semantics	Stable and culturally rich. Reflecting a rediscovery and reconstruction of rural cultural roots and spiritual landscapes.

In summary, through the analysis of peasant-themed figure paintings in the 12th to 14th National Art Exhibitions, the research findings presented in (Table 1) can be drawn. These developments not only highlight the sustained vitality and profound evolution of peasant-themed figure painting within the National Art Exhibition platform, but also indicate that this genre is gradually becoming one of the core carriers of contemporary Chinese realist painting. By maintaining a focused engagement with rural subjects and continuously updating their

visual representations, artists are responding to real-world “Three Rural Issues” (agriculture, rural areas, and farmers) and the reshaping of cultural identity, thus contributing rural depth and contemporary spirit to the visual resources of Chinese figure painting.

CONCLUSION

This study, through a systematic analysis and interpretation of peasant-themed figure paintings from the 12th to the 14th National Art Exhibitions of China, reveals the evolutionary trajectory and artistic value of this genre in contemporary Chinese art. From creative orientation, artistic language, and visual expression to cultural symbolism, peasant-themed figure painting not only demonstrates a sustained artistic vitality but also reflects the profound transformations in China’s society, culture, and value systems in the context of the new era (Jiang, R. X., 2007). Firstly, peasant-themed figure painting has undergone a shift from “grand narrative” to “individual narrative.” Secondly, with the innovation of expressive techniques and artistic language, peasant-themed figure paintings have continually broken free from the constraints of traditional realism in their visual presentation. Thirdly, the system of symbols and metaphors in peasant-themed figure paintings has become increasingly rich and complex. Finally, the continued presence of peasant-themed figure painting in the National Art Exhibition is not only an artistic response to the image of the peasant, but also a profound reflection on social transformation and the reshaping of cultural identity.

Overall, the development of peasant-themed figure painting in the 12th to 14th National Art Exhibitions fully embodies the innovative spirit of contemporary Chinese art and the profound depth of its realist tradition. Through multidimensional exploration and artistic reinterpretation of peasant themes, these works have not only become an integral part of contemporary Chinese fine art but also provide valuable visual material for understanding rural society and culture in the new era. In the future, with the continued advancement of China’s rural revitalization strategy, peasant-themed figure painting will likely continue to evolve and innovate, serving as a vital medium for expressing rural life, local spirit, and social values in contemporary Chinese art (Hung, C. C., 2018). Through the in-depth analysis presented in this study, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the unique position and artistic value of peasant-themed figure painting within the contemporary Chinese art system, further promoting academic research and innovative artistic practices in this field.

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