

A Formalist Analysis of Shen Qing's Artwork in a Cultural Context

Chen leixin¹, *Rushana Sulaiman², Li Hanchen³

¹ Anhui Science and Technology University, Chuzhou, Anhui, China

^{1,2,3} Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

chenleixin0321@163.com¹, rushana@uitm.edu.my², 271622051@qq.com³

*Corresponding author

Received: 20 July 2026; Accepted: 30 August 2026; Published: 1 September 2026

ABSTRACT

*Against the backdrop of the diverse development of contemporary Chinese ink painting, an analysis based on a single formal aspect is no longer sufficient to fully capture the thematic expression and cultural significance of a work. This paper takes the 2016 ink painting *Sunset* by Anhui-based artist Shen Qing as a single case study. Employing a descriptive, qualitative case study methodology, it selects the work based on its cultural narrativity, richness of visual form, and juxtaposition of traditional and modern elements. Data was collected through on-site observation of the artwork, visual documentation and literature review, with the analysis proceeding along the path of 'visual description—formal classification—cultural associations—comprehensive interpretation'. The study found that *Sunset* centres on the themes of elderly villagers and contemporary rural life. Through the combination of the elderly figures, traditional rural dwellings, everyday objects and elements of modern society, the work constructs a visual structure that juxtaposes traditional lifestyles with contemporary rural society. On a formal level, it comprehensively employs visual elements such as line, value and texture, establishing compositional order through organisational principles such as balance and rhythm. The study also clarifies that the relevant cultural interpretations represent the researcher's reasonable interpretation based on visual evidence and do not directly equate to the artist's original creative intent. This research demonstrates that a formal analysis combined with cultural context can provide a more comprehensive approach to the in-depth interpretation of individual contemporary ink-wash works.*

Keywords: art appreciation; socio-cultural; ink wash painting; formalism



ISSN: 2550-214X © 2026. Published for Ideology Journal by UiTM Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-No Commercial-No Derivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

1 INTRODUCTION

Geertz (1976) regards art as a symbolic expression within a cultural system, suggesting that researchers should understand style through the relationship between a work of art and the network of cultural meanings to which it belongs; he argues that art is not an isolated aesthetic object, but rather a part of a specific socio-cultural network of meanings. Williams (1976) points out that culture can refer to the development of the spirit and aesthetics, to the way of life of a particular group, or to practical activities such as art and literature. Chinese ink painting, as one of the most influential art forms in contemporary Chinese art, has consistently held a prominent position. Throughout various stages of its development, Chinese artists have produced a vast body of ink paintings, works that reflect both technical progress and shifts in aesthetic concepts. Yun Yanpei (2024) argues that modern ink painting, whilst upholding the core language of black and white, incorporates Western techniques of realism and composition.

Zhen Zhongyi (2022) also contends that the spirit of freehand brushwork in Chinese ink painting is not merely a matter of technique, but is more closely tied to traditional cultural connotations, concerns regarding social reality, and the expression of humanistic spirit. Shi Shouqian (2018) further points out that painting styles often maintain complex relationships with the changing times, socio-cultural contexts and artistic traditions.

1.1 Research Background

Contemporary Chinese ink painting continues to evolve between traditional artistic language and modern social experience; artists explore the possibilities of traditional ink painting within a contemporary context through the integration of formal language, thematic expression and cultural elements. In this process of development, ink paintings not only focus on formal elements such as brushwork, ink application, composition, colour and space, but also gradually give rise to visual expressions linked to regional culture, the social environment and personal life experiences. As one of the regions in China with a wealth of traditional cultural resources, Anhui's contemporary ink painting exhibits distinct regional cultural characteristics. Whilst inheriting the traditional language of ink painting, artists establish a connection between their works and the contemporary cultural context by depicting local life, rural environments and social changes. Shen Qing's ink painting *Sunset* (2016) depicts a rural elder and his living environment; the composition incorporates traditional rural architecture, everyday objects and elements of modern social life. The figures, spaces and objects in the work not only constitute its visual content but also provide a concrete case study for examining the relationship between formal language and cultural significance in contemporary ink painting.

However, existing research on contemporary ink-wash art tends to focus more on art-historical developments, cultural identity or the artist's body of work as a whole, whilst there remains scope for further exploration regarding how individual works convey cultural significance through specific visual forms. Consequently, this paper selects *Sunset* as a single case study and, through a formalist analytical approach, examines the visual structure of the work and its connection to the cultural context.

1.2 Research Objectives and Questions

This study takes Shen Qing's *Sunset* as its subject matter and aims, through formalist analysis, to explore the relationship between visual form and cultural significance in a single contemporary ink painting. The focus of this research is not to provide an overview of Shen Qing's artistic output as a whole or of contemporary ink art in Anhui, but rather to understand, through the analysis of a specific case, how the work utilises visual elements and formal organisation to express its theme. In line with this research objective, this paper primarily seeks to answer the following three questions:

- (1) How is the main theme of Shen Qing's *Sunset* conveyed through the figures, setting and visual motifs?
- (2) How do the formal elements in the work—such as lines, shapes, colour, value, texture and space—constitute its overall visual structure?
- (3) What connections exist between the visual forms in the work and rural life, regional culture and the social environment?

Through these questions, this paper seeks to establish an analytical pathway from the analysis of visual forms to the interpretation of cultural significance, thereby providing a case study for understanding individual contemporary ink paintings.

1.3 Significance of the Study

In terms of theoretical significance, this study combines formalist art analysis with cultural contextual analysis, seeking to avoid interpreting works of art solely from the perspective of visual form or cultural background. Through a case study of *Sunset*, this paper further explores how visual form contributes to the construction of the theme, and how cultural factors influence the formation of the work's meaning.

In terms of practical significance, this study offers insights into the expression of regional culture in contemporary ink-wash paintings. It should be noted, however, that as this paper employs a single-case study methodology, its conclusions apply primarily to the specific work *Sunset* and cannot be directly generalised to all Anhui ink-wash paintings or to contemporary Chinese ink-wash art as a whole. Future research will need to further validate whether the phenomena observed have broader applicability through comparative analyses of additional case studies and artist interviews.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Chen Binghong (2014) argues that the creation of modern ink-wash figure painting can construct a personalised artistic approach through stylised forms, the figures' postures, spatial arrangement and symbolic allusions. The analysis of artistic form is a key method for understanding works of visual art. Ocvirk et al. (2012) maintain that artistic form is constituted by visual elements such as line, shape, value, texture, colour and space, as well as organisational principles such as balance, harmony, variation, proportion and rhythm. These elements do not exist in isolation but rather form an integrated visual structure under the artist's organisation. Bell (1914) proposed the theory of 'significant form', emphasising that formal relationships within artworks can generate independent aesthetic value, thereby providing a theoretical foundation for formalist analysis.

In the study of Chinese painting, formal analysis focuses not only on the visual elements themselves but also on the relationship between formal language and cultural context. Relevant research indicates that formal elements such as line, colour, texture and space in contemporary Chinese painting serve not only a visual expressive function but also contribute to thematic construction and the expression of cultural meaning (Liu et al., 2025). Consequently, the analysis of ink-wash paintings requires a comprehensive examination that integrates formal structure with cultural context.

In the field of cultural studies, Geertz (1973) posits that culture is a system of meaning constituted by symbols, and that the figures, objects and environments depicted in works of art can serve as vehicles for cultural meaning. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) further point out that cultural values are continuously transmitted through social practices and symbolic systems. Based on this perspective, this paper argues that the figures, rural architecture, everyday objects and elements of modern society depicted in *Sunset* not only constitute the visual content but also provide clues for understanding the work's cultural context.

Consequently, this paper establishes an analytical framework of 'visual form – cultural association – researcher's interpretation': first, it analyses the visual elements and their organisation within the work; second, it discusses the connections between these forms and rural life and the social environment; and finally, it formulates an interpretation of the work's cultural significance.

3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

This study establishes an analytical framework of 'cultural context—visual form—interpretation of meaning' to explain the relationship between artistic form and cultural significance in Shen Qing's ink painting *Sunset*. This framework synthesises formalist art theory with cultural interpretation theory, positing that the visual form of an artwork does not exist in isolation, but is shaped within a specific socio-cultural context and conveys cultural significance through its formal structure. Firstly, formalist

theory provides a visual analytical pathway for this study. Bell's (1914) theory of 'significant form' posits that artistic value arises from the aesthetic structure formed by lines, colours, forms and organisational relationships; Fry (1920) further emphasised the independent roles of visual elements—such as line, colour, composition and space—in artistic expression. Consequently, this study defines 'form' as a visual system jointly constituted by artistic elements (line, shape, colour, value, texture and space) and organisational principles (balance, unity, variation, rhythm and proportion).

Secondly, cultural theory provides a theoretical foundation for interpreting the meaning of form. Geertz (1973) proposed that culture is a 'network of meaning' composed of symbolic significance, and that the figures, objects and environments in works of art can all be interpreted as cultural symbols. Consequently, this study posits that the elderly man, rural architecture, everyday objects and symbols of modern society depicted in *Sunset* are not merely visual objects but also constitute a symbolic system that embodies local culture, social change and value systems. Based on the above theories, this study has developed three levels of analysis:

- (1) Visual form level: Analysis of the artistic elements and formal organisation within the work, including lines, colour, space, texture and compositional relationships.
- (2) Thematic symbol level: Identification of the figures, architecture, artefacts and social symbols within the image, and analysis of their thematic significance.
- (3) Cultural interpretation level: by integrating Anhui rural culture, the Chinese ink-wash tradition and the contemporary social context, this level interprets how visual forms convey cultural values.

This framework avoids interpreting formalism as mere visual description; rather, it builds upon formal analysis to further explore the connection between form and cultural significance.

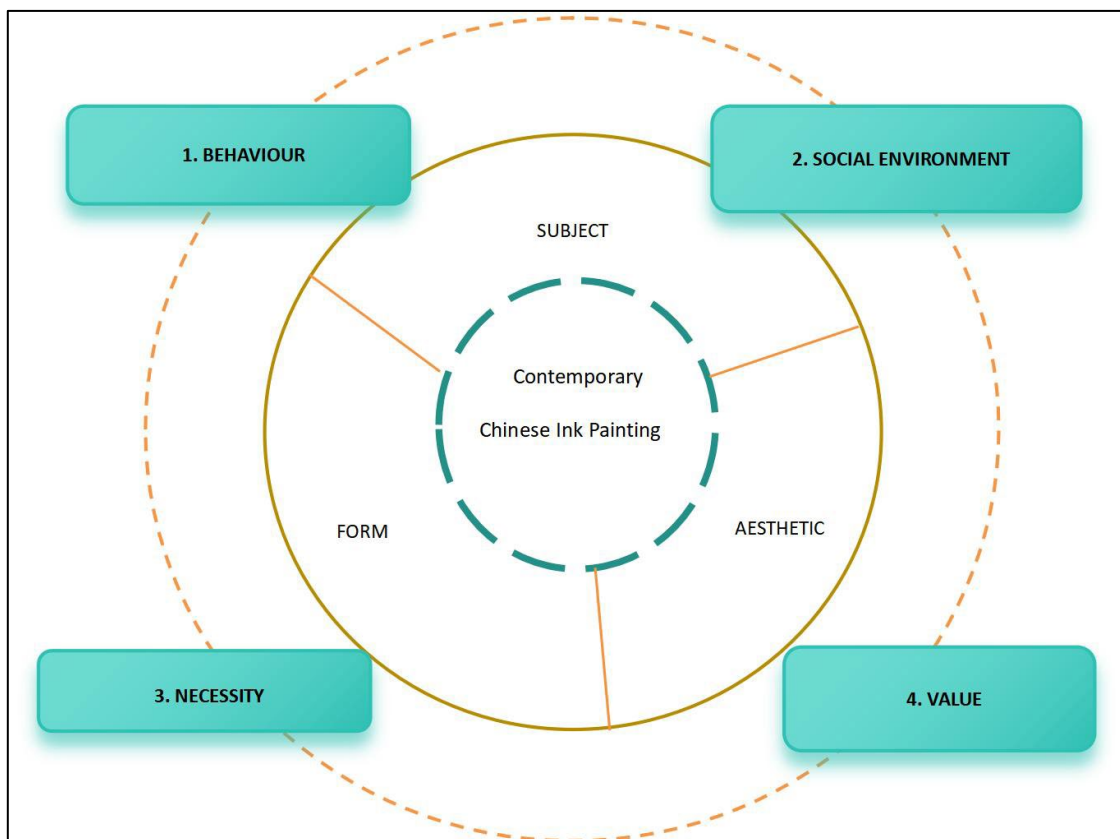


Figure 1 This theoretical framework is adapted from the concept of the formalist cultural system

This interdisciplinary approach combines concepts from formalist art and culture to analyse the visual design in Shen Qing's work *Sunset*. The integration of these concepts forms a conceptual framework, which is constructed in tandem with the analytical process, thereby providing a reference point for the various research questions.

4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a descriptive, qualitative case study methodology, using Shen Qing's ink painting *Sunset* (2016) as its sole case study. The selection of this case was based primarily on three factors: firstly, the work features relatively distinct themes of human figures and rural life; secondly, it incorporates both traditional rural imagery and elements of modern society, offering rich scope for cultural analysis; and thirdly, it lends itself well to an examination of the relationship between formal language and cultural significance through visual formal analysis.

Data collection primarily comprised visual observation of the artwork, photographic documentation and relevant literature. The research process was divided into three stages: firstly, a description of the figures, setting, everyday objects and visual elements within the artwork; secondly, an analysis of the artwork's formal structure in terms of line, shape, colour, value, texture and space; and finally, an interpretation of the visual symbols in the artwork and their potential cultural significance, drawing upon relevant cultural theories.

It should be noted that, as this paper employs a single-case study approach, the research findings are primarily applicable to the specific work *Sunset* and should not be used to draw inferences about Shen Qing's artistic output as a whole or the general characteristics of contemporary ink art in Anhui.

5 RESEARCH FINDINGS

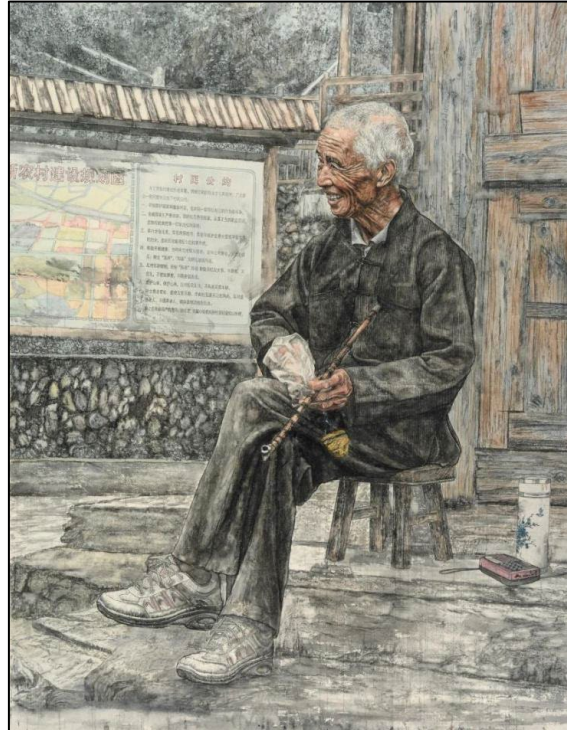


Figure 2 Title: *Sunset*; Artist: Shen Qing; Medium: Chinese ink painting;
Dimensions: 190 cm × 170 cm; Date of creation: 2016

5.1 Description

Sunset depicts a scene in front of a rural dwelling in Anhui: a white-haired elderly man sits on a wooden stool on the stone steps, his body slightly turned to one side, a smile on his face, one leg casually crossed, one hand holding a long bamboo smoking pipe, and the other reaching into a pouch of tobacco to take some out. The elderly man is dressed in a clean, dark-coloured jacket and a grey shirt, with new-style trainers on his feet; to the right of the steps lies a white porcelain thermos flask adorned with floral and bird motifs, alongside a red-and-black push-button mobile phone for the elderly. On the right-hand side of the scene is the door of an old wooden cottage, whilst on the left, a wooden noticeboard with a thatched roof stands against the stone wall. The board is divided into two sections: red text listing the eight provisions of the 'Village Code of Conduct' and a colour 'New Rural Construction Plan' map; in the background, the mountains, forests and vegetation are rendered out of focus. Three tiers of irregular stone steps connect the interior of the house with the public space in front of the door, whilst wooden benches, wooden doors, wooden eaves and wooden steps form a unified set of rustic wooden symbols, with the stone wall and stone steps highlighting the architectural characteristics of rural North Anhui. Old and new elements are juxtaposed: traditional bamboo tobacco pipes and aged wooden and stone structures coexist alongside thermos flasks, mobile phones designed for the elderly and policy noticeboards, creating a striking contrast between eras.

5.2 Theme, Symbol and Image

To avoid conflating visible objects, cultural symbols and the overall meaning within a work, this study treats 'theme', 'symbol', and 'image' as three interrelated yet hierarchically distinct analytical concepts. A theme primarily refers to the overarching subject matter of a work; a symbol primarily refers to specific visual elements within the composition that carry cultural or social connotations; whilst an image refers to an emotional and aesthetic expression formed when visual elements are organised through artistic form.

5.2.1 Theme: Rural Elders and Contemporary Rural Life

The primary theme of *Sunset* can be identified through the relationships between the figures, the living environment and the social objects depicted in the composition. At the centre of the composition sits a white-haired elder on the stone steps in front of his home, surrounded by objects such as a wooden door, stone walls, stone steps, a long bamboo tobacco pipe, a tobacco pouch, a thermos flask, a mobile phone for the elderly and a rural noticeboard. Together, these elements constitute a scene characteristic of rural life in Anhui.

Consequently, this study summarises the theme of *Sunset* as 'rural elders and contemporary rural life'. This theme is not determined solely by the figure of the 'elder', but is jointly formed by the figure, the rural space, everyday objects and symbols of modern society. Judging by the content of the painting, the work simultaneously presents a juxtaposition between traditional rural lifestyles and modern social life; therefore, 'rural life and social change' is also an important dimension for understanding the work's theme.

It should be noted that the above thematic assessment is primarily derived from the work's visual content and relevant cultural materials. As there is currently no direct statement from the artist himself regarding the creative theme of *Sunset*, the theme summarised in this paper constitutes an analysis by the researcher based on the work's visual text and does not directly equate to the artist's subjective creative intent.

5.2.2 Symbols: Figures, Architecture and Everyday Objects

The figures, architecture and everyday objects in *Sunset* are, first and foremost, concrete visual elements within the composition; however, at the level of cultural analysis, they can be further discussed

as symbols with socio-cultural significance. The elderly man is the most prominent visual element in the composition, situated at its centre, with his age conveyed through his white hair, wrinkles, sitting posture and facial expression. The long bamboo tobacco pipe and tobacco pouch bear a distinct association with the traditional rural way of life and can therefore be regarded as visual symbols of this way of life. The wooden door, stone wall, stone steps and wooden eaves, meanwhile, constitute architectural symbols imbued with local rural characteristics.

At the same time, the thermos flask, senior-friendly mobile phone and noticeboard are relatively prominent symbols of modern life and social governance within the composition. In particular, the 'Village Code of Conduct' and the 'New Rural Construction Plan' displayed on the noticeboard establish a connection between private living spaces and public social information. It is thus evident that the juxtaposition of traditional artefacts and modern household items in the work creates a visual contrast between traditional rural life and contemporary social life. This assessment is based primarily on the objects directly observable in the composition and their socio-cultural context, rather than on inferences regarding the artist's personal intentions.

5.2.3 Imagery: Visual Imagery of Rural Elderly Life

Unlike specific symbols, 'imagery' emphasises the overall impression formed when visual objects are organised through artistic form. In *Sunset*, the elderly man is not a figure existing in isolation but rather forms a complete scene of rural life together with the stone steps, wooden door, rural architecture, household objects and the mountains and forests in the distance. The elderly man's natural sitting posture, relaxed expression and the relatively warm colour scheme of the painting create a calm and gentle visual atmosphere throughout the composition. On this basis, the researcher interprets the elderly man in the work as the core visual image of 'rural life in old age' and considers this image to be linked to the everyday life depicted in the work and the rural social environment.

It should be emphasised that terms such as 'serene', 'warm' and 'content' represent the researcher's visual impressions based on the figure's posture, facial expression, colour scheme and composition; these are interpretative research judgements and do not directly prove that the artist held exactly the same subjective intent. Therefore, this paper treats them as the researcher's visual interpretation rather than stating them as the artist's explicit creative purpose.

5.3 Form

5.3.1 Artistic Elements

Fry (1920) further emphasised the importance of visual form. He focused on the independent value of formal elements—such as line, colour, composition and volume—within works of art, thereby establishing formal analysis as one of the key methods of modern art criticism. Wölfflin (1950), meanwhile, analysed shifts in artistic style through categories such as linearity and pictoriality, flatness and depth, and closed and open forms, demonstrating that stylistic differences in art history can be compared through formal structures.

Liu, Fauzi and Rozlan (2025) further illustrate, through their formal analysis of contemporary Chinese gongbi painting, that visual elements such as line, colour, texture, figure poses and background collectively constitute the formal characteristics of a work. Consequently, the formal analysis of *Sunset* in this paper does not involve the isolated observation of a single visual element but rather examines how different elements interact within the composition to form an overall visual order (Liu et al., 2025).

Lines

Lines are the most fundamental visual units in artistic form. *Sunset* features many different types of lines, including long, short, fine, thick, curved and straight lines. The eaves of the noticeboard are

delineated by long, straight lines; the wooden roof tiles are arranged with dense, short lines; the stone walls and facial wrinkles are rendered with thick, curved lines to create a sense of volume; the grain of the wooden door and the folds in the clothing are depicted using delicate curved lines; whilst the body of the garment and the structure of the steps are accentuated with bold, straight lines to distinguish between materials. Lines serve both a formative and a lyrical function: thick, heavy lines convey a sense of roughness and weight, whilst fine lines express softness and delicacy, in line with Liu Haiming's (2020) view: Ink-wash lines serve as a comprehensive vehicle for the artist's physical movements, the texture of objects, and the emotional atmosphere of the composition.

Shape and Structure

Within the composition, the noticeboard, wooden door and the legs of the bench primarily employ rectangular or near-square block-like structures, whilst the stone walls and steps utilise irregularly shaped blocks to convey volume. The contrast between regular and irregular shapes endows the composition with both the stability of architectural structure and the irregular characteristics of a rural setting.

From the perspective of formal analysis, these differences in shape are not merely a representation of objects but rather constitute a key factor in establishing the visual order of the composition. In their formal analysis of contemporary Chinese gongbi painting, Liu et al. (2025) similarly identified the poses of figures, the setting of the background and visual forms as crucial elements for understanding the formal characteristics of a work. Consequently, this paper treats the figures, architecture and everyday objects in *Sunset* as interrelated formal units, rather than entirely isolated objects.

Colour and Value

Lin Yi'an (2006) points out that colour and value not only serve a decorative function but also influence the emotional expression, spatial depth and cultural connotations of a work. In *Sunset*, large areas of the elderly man's clothing are rendered in dense ink, whilst stone steps, door panels and noticeboards are depicted in light ink to create a sense of depth; wooden objects are uniformly rendered in warm tones such as ochre, creating a visual resonance with the title *Sunset*; and sections of the planning map utilise colours such as pale yellow, blue and green to distinguish different types of information.

Xu and Mohamad (2026) note that a connection can be established between traditional Chinese philosophy and pictorial forms through visual organisational principles such as space and the interplay of the real and the abstract. Based on this perspective, the ink tones and localised colours in *Sunset* can be understood from the standpoint of the visual language of traditional ink-wash painting: the composition is dominated by ink tones, with localised colours serving as a complement, thereby maintaining the unity of the image whilst utilising colour variations to emphasise specific visual information. These cultural associations represent interpretations made by researchers based on the formal characteristics of the work; they do not imply that the artist's creative intent can be definitively determined on this basis (Xu & Mohamad, 2026).

Light and Shadow

Arnheim (1974) argued that light and shadow, position, size and direction in visual art all contribute to visual weight and influence the balance of the composition. In terms of light and shadow, the composition employs variations in the depth of ink tones and grey scales to render the layering between the figure, the wall, the door panel and the objects. The contrast in light and shadow between the old man's face, his clothing, the wooden door and the stone wall causes the figure to emerge from the background. Consequently, the arrangement of light in *Sunset* not only shapes the spatial hierarchy but also helps the viewer focus their attention on the old man.

Texture

Oakwell-Kirk et al. (2012) argue that texture can evoke tactile associations in a composition, enhancing the work's sense of realism. In *Sunset*, the roughness of the stone wall, the mottled patina of the wooden door, the dullness of the ground, the wrinkles on the old man's skin and the folds in his clothing are all rendered through the use of ink-wash techniques such as dry-brush strokes, light washes and line work.

From a formal perspective, these variations in texture imbue the architecture, figures and objects with distinct visual qualities, thereby reinforcing the painting's sense of everyday life. The formal analysis of line, texture and colour conducted by Liu et al. (2025) also demonstrates that visual elements must be understood within their interrelationships; the aesthetic characteristics of a work cannot be judged solely based on a single element. Consequently, the textures in *Sunset* not only serve to shape the depicted objects but also contribute to the establishment of the overall visual order.

Space

The Getty Museum (2011) points out that space encompasses the areas between, around and within objects, as well as the relationship between positive and negative space. *Sunset* employs a spatial organisation comprising foreground, middle ground and background: the figures and stone steps in the foreground are rendered with greater clarity; the wooden door and noticeboard in the middle ground possess a relatively complete structural definition; whilst the mountains and forests in the background have their ink tones and contours softened to create a sense of depth.

This spatial organisation creates a continuous visual hierarchy comprising private living spaces, rural architectural spaces and the natural environment. Research by Xu and Mohamad (2026) on traditional Chinese philosophy and the spatial concepts of Chinese literati painting demonstrates that space is not merely a physical container but can also serve as a vital medium through which artistic ideas and aesthetic concepts are transformed into visual forms. Consequently, the spatial structure of *Sunset* can be understood, on a formal level, as the organisation of foreground and background layers, whilst on a cultural level, it serves as a starting point for researchers to further explore the visual dimensions of rural living spaces

5.3.2 Artistic Principles

Huang Chunping (2020) proposes that the intrinsic organisational structure of a work constitutes its design principles, which include harmony, variation, balance, proportion, dominant tendency, movement and simplicity. The form of a pictorial artwork is an artistic form created by combining artistic elements according to certain rules. The following section will analyse the design principles of the work, which constitute another important aspect of its form.

Balance

Balance is the foundation of visual stability within a composition. Arnheim (1974), analysing visual art from the perspective of Gestalt psychology, argued that human visual perception automatically organises images and seeks a visual centre of gravity, direction and relationships of force within the composition. It is thus evident that balance is not merely a matter of left-right symmetry, but rather a visual interplay formed by the interrelation of lines, shapes, colour, value, texture and space. In *Sunset*, the elderly man at the centre of the composition serves as the visual focal point, whilst the noticeboard on the left and the wooden door on the right provide visual counterbalance. The stone steps in the foreground stabilise the lower part of the composition, and the layering of foreground and background creates a spatial contrast in weight. The composition is stable and harmonious, resulting in a state of balance.

Harmony and Unity

Next are the design principles of harmony and unity. Harmony enables the various elements within the composition to form intrinsic connections; unity does not imply that all elements are completely identical but rather refers to the formation of intrinsic connections between lines, shapes, colours, space and texture; harmony, meanwhile, emphasises coordination and mutual adaptation between the various parts (Ocvirk et al., 2012). In *Sunset*, all elements within the composition serve the theme of 'rural life in old age in the new era'. The use of ochre unifies the texture of the wood, whilst ink-wash unifies the overall colour scheme; the figures, architecture and objects—both old and new—coexist naturally without any sense of disconnection, achieving an intrinsic harmony between the figures, the environment and the symbols of the era.

Variation and Diversity

The design principles of variation and diversity prevent the work from becoming monotonous. Zhang Shulin (2019) argues that the unity of variation is a crucial principle of formal beauty in graphic composition; a composition requires both overall unity and local variation. Variation and unity are not opposites, but rather two interdependent aspects of artistic form: without unity, the composition would be chaotic; without variation, it would lack vitality and visual appeal. In *Sunset*, the rigid, square architecture contrasts with the soft human form, creating morphological variation; the slender tobacco pipe and cylindrical thermos create variation in the lines of the objects; the textual policy symbols and ink-wash figure images introduce variation in medium, enriching the composition's details without creating clutter.

Movement

Movement and Rhythm are primarily manifested in the repetition and variation of lines, objects and spatial layers within the composition. Xie Qian (2020) points out that rhythm and cadence can create visual movement through variations in density, solid and void, length and direction. The folds in the elderly man's clothing, the texture of the stone wall, the lines of the wooden door, the structure of the ladder and the orientation of the long tobacco pipe collectively create a visual rhythm. In accordance with this perspective, the viewer's gaze begins at the elderly man's face, follows the tobacco pipe in his hand as it glides towards the thermos flask and mobile phone, then shifts horizontally to the wooden door and the noticeboard, before finally returning to the central figure. This forms a linear narrative rhythm, with a quiet and gentle sense of flow that harmonises with the leisurely and relaxed mood of the scene under the setting sun.

5.4 Cultural Significance

5.4.1 Value

Geertz (1973) proposed that culture can be understood as a network of meanings woven by human beings themselves, through which people interpret their own experiences and social reality via symbolic systems. As a form of cultural expression, art—with its characters, settings and imagery—can serve as a vehicle for cultural meaning.

In *Sunset*, the white-haired elderly man is positioned at the centre of the composition and is the most prominent visual subject. Visually speaking, the work depicts an everyday scene in which an elderly man with white hair sits in front of a rural dwelling, holding a long bamboo tobacco pipe and taking tobacco from a tobacco pouch. Against the backdrop of traditional Chinese culture, the figure of the elderly man can be associated with cultural themes such as age, life experience, family ethics and the concept of respecting the elderly. However, such cultural associations cannot directly prove that the artist's creative intent was specifically 'life wisdom', 'respect for the elderly' or 'the meaning of life'.

Therefore, this paper frames this as a researcher's interpretation based on visual imagery and cultural context.

Xian and Haji Mat Isa (2023) point out that when traditional culture enters contemporary art, it can generate new artistic expressions through the reorganisation of traditional forms, the reconfiguration of patterns, the borrowing of colours, and the embodiment of cultural spirit. This perspective aids in understanding the cultural role of traditional rural artefacts in *Sunset*. Objects such as bamboo tobacco pipes, tobacco pouches, wooden doors, stone walls and wooden stools possess distinct attributes of rural life; they are, first and foremost, concrete visual elements within the work, whilst simultaneously serving as cultural clues for researchers to explore traditional rural lifestyles (Xian & Haji Mat Isa, 2023). In Chinese ink wash painting, an ordinary figure, an everyday object or a rural setting may all embody cultural values concerning life, time, ethics and social relationships (Zong Baihua, 1981).

Juxtaposed with these traditional objects are thermos flasks, mobile phones for the elderly and noticeboards, which constitute another set of visual information. The simultaneous presence of traditional and modern objects allows the composition to reveal the juxtaposition of rural lifestyles amidst the interplay of factors from different eras. Here, it is more appropriate to use expressions such as 'may be regarded as' or 'may be associated with', rather than directly asserting that a particular object 'represents a happy life' or 'expresses the artist's satisfaction with a harmonious society'.

5.4.2 Context

Sunset was created in 2016. The rural wooden door, stone walls, stone steps, noticeboard and visual elements such as the 'Village Code of Conduct' and the 'New Rural Construction Plan' depicted in the painting collectively constitute the work's social context. At the same time, the co-appearance of modern everyday items—such as a thermos flask and a mobile phone—alongside traditional architecture and a bamboo tobacco pipe creates a visual representation of the coexistence of traditional rural life and modern social life.

Research by Xian and Haji Mat Isa (2023) illustrates that traditional culture can find new forms of expression in contemporary art through formal reorganisation and the transformation of cultural elements. From this perspective, the juxtaposition of traditional architecture and everyday objects with modern social information in *Sunset* can be understood as a visual representation of cultural change in rural areas. However, this interpretation is derived primarily from visual evidence within the work itself and does not provide further proof that Shen Qing had explicit intentions of social critique or social reform.

Furthermore, Xu and Mohamad (2026) point out that when traditional Chinese philosophy enters artistic practice, it does not involve the mechanical conversion of philosophical concepts into a fixed image, but rather a dynamic transformation that occurs amidst the specific creative context, the characteristics of the medium, and the spirit of the age. Consequently, the fusion of traditional ink-wash language with elements of modern rural society in *Sunset* can be understood as a formal connection between traditional visual language and contemporary lived experience; it should not be simplistically interpreted as a direct manifestation of any fixed philosophical idea (Xu & Mohamad, 2026).

Regarding Shen Qing's birth in Huaiyuan, Anhui, and her subsequent studies in Beijing, this paper treats these details merely as supplementary information for understanding the work's regional and artistic educational context. Existing evidence is insufficient to prove that her experiences in Anhui or her studies in Beijing directly determined the specific theme or visual choices in *Sunset*; consequently, no inferences regarding the artist's creative motives will be drawn on this basis.

5.4.3 Practice

Behaviour within a culture can be observed through the activities of characters and scenes of daily life depicted in works of art. In the case of *Sunset*, the elderly man sitting in front of his home and taking tobacco from his tobacco pouch is an action that can be directly identified in the image. This action primarily constitutes the work's depiction of everyday rural life. From a cultural perspective, traditional tobacco pipes and pouches can be linked to a specific rural way of life. At the same time, the co-appearance of items such as a thermos flask and a mobile phone alongside the tobacco pouch creates a visual contrast between the traditional way of life and modern everyday objects. Suda (2018) emphasises that the brushstrokes and visual language in a painting possess an independent expressive function; therefore, the interpretation of these behaviours must still be grounded in the work's visual form and concrete imagery, rather than inferring the figure's psychological state solely from his smile.

Consequently, this paper interprets the elderly man's smile as a visual emotional characteristic within the composition, which can be described as evoking a sense of 'calm', 'ease' or 'gentleness'; however, it does not go so far as to identify it as 'satisfaction with his current life' or 'approval of a harmonious society', as such judgements extend beyond the scope of the visual evidence directly provided by the artwork.

5.4.4 Needs

Malinowski (1944) argued that there is a connection between cultural institutions, customs and technological systems, on the one hand, and human needs, on the other. Based on this perspective, the everyday objects depicted in *Sunset* can be further examined from the angles of daily needs and social lifestyles.

The small stool, tobacco pouch, thermos flask and mobile phone featured in the work are all related to daily life. Traditional tobacco pipes and pouches can be linked to traditional lifestyle habits, whilst thermos flasks and mobile phones are associated with modern lifestyle needs. The simultaneous presence of different types of everyday objects within the composition reflects the coexistence of traditional customs and modern amenities in rural daily life.

The 'Village Charter' and 'New Rural Construction Plan' depicted in the work constitute public social information; their inclusion establishes a connection between individual living spaces and the village's public life. From a researcher's perspective, these visual elements can be interpreted as the work's focus on the rural living environment and social change.

However, this paper does not interpret the elements directly as the artist's explicit expression of a 'happy life', a 'harmonious society' or specific social values; rather, it argues that these meanings can be explained to a certain extent through the work's visual structure and cultural context. Should an interview with the artist, creative notes or a statement regarding *Sunset* become available in the future, it would be possible to further verify the extent to which these cultural interpretations align with the artist's creative intentions.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Taking Shen Qing's *Sunset* as a single case study, this paper explores the relationship between visual form and cultural significance in a contemporary ink painting through formal analysis and analysis of the cultural context.

The study finds that *Sunset*, through the depiction of an elderly figure, a rural setting, and the juxtaposition of traditional and modern elements of daily life, constructs a visual representation of rural life. On a formal level, the work constructs its overall composition through visual elements such as line, colour, texture and space, as well as organisational principles including balance, unity and variation. On

a cultural level, the architecture, domestic objects and social cues depicted in the work serve as visual clues for understanding the experience of rural life and societal change.

It should be emphasised that the conclusions of this study apply solely to the case of *Sunset*. Whilst a single artwork may reveal certain visual and cultural phenomena worthy of further investigation, it cannot prove that these phenomena are universally present in contemporary Chinese ink painting or Anhui ink art. Future research will need to draw on comparative analyses of additional case studies and materials such as artist interviews to further explore whether these phenomena hold broader interpretative significance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study could not have been successfully completed without the valuable guidance and generous support provided by my supervisor, Rushana Sulaiman, and my senior colleague, Li Hanchen. We would like to express our sincere gratitude to Professor Shen Qing for providing relevant research materials and crucial support for this study. During the conduct of the research and the drafting of this thesis, the author utilised artificial intelligence tools such as ChatGPT to assist with literature retrieval and organisation, text refinement, and content standardisation. It should be specifically noted that the authors have maintained complete and independent control over the entire research framework, core academic arguments and logical reasoning process throughout. All content generated by the AI tools has undergone rigorous manual review, proofreading and repeated revision by the authors. The authors assume full and final responsibility for all research conclusions and the final published version of this paper.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors have made significant contributions to the preparation of this paper.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no potential conflicts of interest involving any individuals, organisations or researchers in this study.

REFERENCES

- Arnheim, R. (1974). *Art and visual perception: A psychology of the creative eye*. University of California Press.
- Bell, C. (1914). *Art*. Chatto & Windus.
- Chen, B.H. (2014). A Study on the Construction of Self-Directed Creative Methods in Modern Ink-and-Wash Figure Painting. *Journal of Calligraphy and Painting Arts*, 17, 83–118.
- Fei, X.T. (1998). *Rural China*. Peking University Press.
- Fry, R. (1920). *Vision and Design*. Chatto & Windus.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. Basic Books.
- Geertz, C. (1976). Art as a cultural system. *MLN*, 91(6), 1473–1499.
- Getty Museum. (2011). *Elements of Art*. J. Paul Getty Museum.
- Huang, C. P. (2020). *Fundamentals of Form Design*. Chemical Industry Press
- Kroeber, A. L., & Kluckhohn, C. (1952). *Culture: A critical review of concepts and definitions*. Peabody Museum Press.
- Lin, Y.A. (2006). A Preliminary Exploration of the Expressive Content and Form in Chinese Painting. *Journal of Fine Arts*, 159–172.
- Liu, H.M. (2020). The Material Beauty of Line in Modernist Painting and Its Bodily Turn. *Journal of Southwest University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 46(4), 149–158.

- Liu, R., Fauzi, T. A., & Rozlan, R. M. (2025). Feminism in contemporary Gongbi painting: Formal analysis perspective. *Ideology Journal*, 10(2), 346–355.
- Malinowski, B. (1944). *A Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Ocvirk, O. G., Stinson, R. E., Wigg, P. R., Bone, R. O., & Cayton, D. L. (2012). *Art Fundamentals: Theory and Practice* (12th ed.). McGraw-Hill Higher Education.
- Shi, S.Q. (2018). *Style and Social Change: Ten Essays on Chinese Painting*. Peking University Press.
- Suda, M. (2018). Brushstrokes as art's unique signature East and West. *Ideology Journal*, 3(3), 90–95.
- Williams, R. (1976). *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*. Croom Helm.
- Wölfflin, H. (1950). *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art* (trans. M. D. Hottinger). Dover Publications. Original work published 1915.
- Xian, L., & Haji Mat Isa, M. J. (2023). The integration of contemporary art and ethnic culture: Taking the creation of ethnic fiber art as an example. *Ideology Journal*, 8(2), 131–141.
- Xie, Q. (2020). 'The Application and Reflections on Free Layout in Book Design'. *Journal of Anhui University of Technology (Social Sciences Edition)*, 37(5), 43–45.
- Xu, Q., & Mohamad, N. (2026). Translating philosophy into art: Taoism, Zen, and phenomenology from classical thought to contemporary practice. *Ideology Journal*, 11(1), 81–95.
- Yanpei Y. A Analysis of the Visual Artistic Language of the Black-and-White System in Chinese Ink Painting [J]. *Beauty and the Times (Journal of Fine Arts)*, 2024(02): 18–20.
- Zhang, S.L. (2019). *Composition: Graphic Composition* (3rd ed.). Higher Education Press.
- Zhen, Z.y. (11 December 2022). Entering through 'Rendering', Emerging through 'Intent'— Re-examining the Spirit of Freehand Painting in Chinese Painting. *Guangming Daily*, 09.
- Zong, B.H. (1981). *A Stroll through Aesthetics*. Shanghai People's Publishing House.