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NATURALIZING IDEOLOGY: COLLECTIVE INK PAINTING AND VISUAL CULTURE DURING CHINA'S GREAT LEAP FORWARD

Taojun Yu^{1*}, and Parichart Kluensuwan²

¹Shinawatra University, Thailand. Email: yutaojun@foxmail.com. ORCID : <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-5117-8230>

²Shinawatra University, Thailand. Email: parichart.k@siu.ac.th. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2050-4604>

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Corresponding Author: Taojun Yu
(yutaojun@foxmail.com)

ABSTRACT

This article examines the visual uniformity of collective ink painting produced in China during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1960). Existing scholarship has often explained this phenomenon in terms of political coercion, propaganda, or stylistic convergence. While these approaches clarify the historical context, they do not fully explain how ideological claims came to appear as visually self-evident reality. Drawing on official publications, art criticism, and a corpus of twenty collective ink paintings, the article argues that this uniformity was produced through the interaction of political discourse, institutional organization, and collective artistic practice. Rather than treating these images simply as carriers of ideological content, the study shows how they transformed abundance, collective labor, and political authority into perceptually credible realities. In doing so, it offers a broader reflection on the relationship between visuality, institution, and ideology in modern cultural production.

KEYWORDS: Collective Ink Painting; Great Leap Forward; Visual Culture; Ideology; Art Institutions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Collective ink painting produced in China during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1960) presents a striking historical and aesthetic paradox. In a medium long associated with individual brushwork, cultivated subjectivity, and the expressive values of literati painting, many works produced during these years display a remarkable degree of thematic, compositional, and affective uniformity (Sullivan, 1996; Zou, 2002, 2011; Zheng, 2002). Across different institutions and regions, paintings repeatedly depict scenes of abundance, coordinated labor, monumental construction, and collective harmony, suggesting the emergence of a shared visual language rather than a series of isolated artistic choices.

The central question raised by this phenomenon is not simply why politics intervened in artistic production. That much is already well established in the scholarship on socialist art. More difficult to explain is how historically contingent political propositions came to acquire the appearance of immediate visual truth. In other words, the problem is not only one of coercion, propaganda, or thematic control, but of how ideology became embedded in forms of perception and came to appear as common visual sense.

Existing studies of Mao-era art have offered important accounts of institutional restructuring, political campaigns, and the transformation of traditional painting under socialism (Andrews, 1994; Sullivan, 1996; Zou, 2002, 2011; Zheng, 2018). At the same time, semiotic and visual culture approaches have shown how images can naturalize ideology by organizing meaning, affect, and authority (Barthes, 1972; Mitchell, 1995; Clark, 2010; Galikowski, 1998). Yet these bodies of scholarship do not fully explain how visual regularities were generated and stabilized across different sites of production. What remains under-theorized is the process by which political discourse was translated into recurring rules of representation and reproduced through institutions, collective practice, and evaluative norms.

This article addresses that problem through a study of collective ink painting during the Great Leap Forward. Combining the analysis of official publications and art criticism with a close reading of twenty collective paintings, it argues that visual uniformity should be understood not merely as an effect of external pressure, but as the product of a regulated process of cultural production. Political discourse was converted into visual expectations, institutional procedures, and professional habits that

shaped what could be represented, how it could be represented, and how such representations were recognized as legitimate. From this perspective, visual uniformity becomes evidence of an organized relation between visuality, institution, and ideology.

This study aims to examine how ideological meaning was transformed into visually self-evident forms in collective ink painting during China's Great Leap Forward (1958–1960). Specifically, it seeks to:

1. analyze how political discourse was translated into structured visual rules, shaping subject matter, compositional logic, and affective orientation in collective ink painting;
2. investigate the role of institutions and collective artistic practices in stabilizing and reproducing these visual conventions across different sites of production;
3. demonstrate how such conventions operated in specific works to naturalize ideological meanings, rendering historically contingent political arrangements as perceptually credible realities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *Socialist Art History and the Problem of Visual Uniformity*

Scholarship on Mao-era art has long shown that artistic production in the People's Republic of China cannot be understood apart from political campaigns, institutional restructuring, and changing expectations regarding the social function of art. Early English-language studies by Michael Sullivan, Arnold Chang, and Ellen Johnston Laing established the basic historical problem by tracing the transformation of twentieth-century Chinese art under Communist rule and by identifying the unusually direct entanglement of artistic practice, cultural policy, and ideological judgment in the PRC context (Sullivan, 1996; Chang, 1980; Laing, 1988). Later studies by Julia F. Andrews and Maria Galikowski gave this discussion greater institutional precision by examining the formation of the arts bureaucracy, art publishing, exhibition systems, and art education under socialist administration (Andrews, 1994; Galikowski, 1998). Chinese-language scholarship has further shown how traditional ink painting was reoriented through political mobilization, collective production, and the reorganization of painting academies and artistic labor during the socialist period (Zou, 2002, 2011; Zheng, 2000, 2018).

These studies provide a substantial historical foundation for understanding the Great Leap Forward. They explain how artistic production was

shaped by campaigns, organizational structures, and changing cultural priorities, and they clarify why aesthetic autonomy was subordinated to the needs of socialist construction. Yet they do not fully resolve a more specific question raised by collective ink painting during this period: why did works produced in different institutions and regions display such a high degree of visual regularity? Political pressure helps explain the elevation of certain subjects, but it does not by itself account for the recurrent compositional patterns, affective tones, and representational habits that made these images look strikingly similar across otherwise distinct sites of production. What remains insufficiently explained is the formation of a shared visual logic through which particular ways of seeing became normalized.

This problem is especially significant in the case of ink painting. Unlike media already closely associated with propaganda, ink painting carried longstanding associations with cultivated brushwork, personal expression, and literati subjectivity. As Chang perceptively noted in his study of landscape painting in the PRC, this genre was particularly “problematic” because it lay at the intersection of political demand, inherited aesthetic values, and changing criteria of artistic judgment (Chang, 1980). Its reorganization during the Great Leap Forward therefore involved more than a change in iconography. It required the redefinition of what counted as legitimate technique, valid representation, and meaningful artistic labor. Collective ink painting matters not simply because it served political ends, but because it reveals how a medium historically grounded in individual cultivation was reorganized into a vehicle for standardized ideological persuasion (Sullivan, 1996; Chang, 1980; Zou, 2002, 2011; Zheng, 2018).

2.2. Semiotics, Visual Culture, and Ideological Naturalization

Semiotic and visual culture approaches offer useful tools for understanding how images do more than transmit messages. Roland Barthes’s account of myth remains especially important because it explains how historically contingent meanings can be transformed into forms that appear natural, timeless, and self-evident (Barthes, 1972). From this perspective, ideology does not persuade only by asserting propositions; it persuades by organizing representation in ways that conceal the historical conditions of its own production. Visual culture scholarship has extended this insight by emphasizing that images operate through affect, repetition, visibility, and the social organization of looking, rather than through symbolic content alone

(Mitchell, 1995; Clark, 2010). Comparative studies of political iconography, including Victoria Bonnell’s work on Soviet visual culture, further demonstrate that ideological authority often depends on the standardization of recognizable forms, recurrent visual syntax, and the repetition of politically charged motifs across wider image systems (Bonnell, 1997).

These approaches are indispensable for understanding how ideology becomes persuasive in visual form. They show that images do not simply reflect political reality; they help produce the forms through which that reality is perceived, narrated, and emotionally inhabited. Yet they also leave an important problem unresolved. In much semiotic analysis, myth is identified primarily at the level of interpretation: the critic reads the finished image and shows how it transforms history into nature. Such an approach is illuminating, but it tends to treat naturalization as an effect already contained within the image itself. It pays less attention to the historical conditions through which visual conventions become repeatable, authoritative, and publicly legible in the first place. Similarly, visual culture studies often stress spectatorship, circulation, and symbolic force, but do not always explain how recurrent visual regularities are generated within concrete systems of production (Barthes, 1972; Mitchell, 1995; Bonnell, 1997).

For the present study, this limitation is crucial. The visual force of collective ink painting during the Great Leap Forward did not arise only from iconographic content or rhetorical symbolism. It depended on the repeated conversion of political discourse into recognizable visual conventions, on the institutional coordination that stabilized those conventions, and on the practical routines through which artists learned to reproduce them. If ideology appeared natural in these works, it did so not simply because the images encoded mythic meanings, but because the process of production had already narrowed the range of acceptable representation. This suggests the need to supplement interpretation-centered semiotics with an account of how ideological meaning was organized before the image reached the viewer.

2.3. From Interpretation to Production

This article therefore shifts the analytical emphasis from what images mean to how their meanings were historically produced and stabilized. Rather than approaching collective ink paintings as isolated symbolic texts, it treats their visual uniformity as evidence of a regulated

representational system. The question is not only what these paintings depict, but how political imperatives were translated into compositional habits, thematic hierarchies, and evaluative norms across different institutional settings. Such a shift does not reject semiotic interpretation; rather, it relocates it within the material and organizational conditions of cultural production.

Recent scholarship on socialist culture makes this move especially productive. Chang-tai Huang's work on the making of "red culture" in the early PRC shows how political authority consolidated itself not only through doctrine, but through organized cultural forms, administrative procedures, and routinized mechanisms of control (Huang, 2021). Studies of artistic practice and collective production likewise suggest that ideological efficacy depended on more than policy directives alone. Christine Ho's research on sketching and socialist realism emphasizes the importance of practice, experience, and the formation of new aesthetic communities under Maoist cultural ambitions (Ho, 2020), while her study of *The People Eat for Free* demonstrates how collective production involved intersecting forms of official, artistic, and mass participation rather than a simple model of top-down imposition (Ho, 2016). Chinese scholarship on collective creation and painting academy systems has further shown how state will, institutional form, and collective ethics converged in the organization of artistic labor (Zheng, 2018; Li, 2020). Together, these studies suggest that discourse, institution, and practice must be analyzed as mutually constitutive dimensions of ideological image-making.

From this perspective, visibility is not treated here as a neutral surface onto which ideology is later projected. Political discourse established semantic priorities and normative expectations; institutions translated those priorities into procedures of selection, training, exhibition, and validation; and collective artistic practice transformed them into working habits and recurring representational conventions. The resulting visual coherence was therefore not simply the effect of thematic repetition or stylistic imitation. It was the outcome of a historically organized process in which the conditions of artistic production shaped what could appear as immediately real, persuasive, and legitimate.

The gap, then, lies not simply in interpreting ideological images, but in explaining how ideological meaning became reproducible as visual form. By bringing socialist art history, semiotics, and visual culture into closer relation, this article approaches

collective ink painting during the Great Leap Forward as a case in which political discourse was translated into visual rules and stabilized across a field of organized production. The following section outlines the sources and analytical approach used to trace this process.

3. METHODOLOGY

This article examines how ideological meaning was organized and stabilized in collective ink painting during the Great Leap Forward by combining textual and visual materials produced within the same historical field. Rather than treating paintings as isolated objects of interpretation, the study approaches them as the outcome of a broader process in which political discourse, institutional coordination, and artistic practice interacted to shape what could be represented, how it could be represented, and how such representations were publicly validated. This approach builds on Barthes's theory of myth, while extending semiotic inquiry toward the material and organizational processes through which ideological signification was produced and reproduced (Barthes, 1972).

The textual sources consist primarily of state discourse and professional art criticism published at the height of the Great Leap Forward, especially between 1958 and 1960. These materials include editorials from *People's Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*), theoretical and critical essays published in *Meishu* (the Art), and institutional directives related to artistic production and evaluation. They are used here not simply as contextual background, but as evidence of the ideological priorities and evaluative criteria that structured the artistic field. Through them, the article reconstructs how political imperatives were articulated as normative expectations regarding artistic subject matter, representational legitimacy, and professional responsibility. These primary materials are read alongside existing scholarship on the institutional history of art in the People's Republic of China so that they can be situated within a broader historical framework. (Andrews, 1994; Galikowski, 1998; Zheng, 2000).

The visual corpus comprises twenty collective ink paintings produced during, or closely associated with, the Great Leap Forward. Rather than documenting individual artistic originality, it was assembled to identify recurring visual patterns across different institutional and regional settings. The works were selected according to three criteria: they were produced collectively or under clearly coordinated institutional conditions; they were either

circulated during 1958–1960 or later canonized as representative of Great Leap Forward visual culture; and they addressed themes central to Great Leap Forward image-making, such as collectivized labor, abundance, construction, or national transformation. Ten works are drawn from contemporary official outlets, especially People's Daily and Meishu, while the other ten come from later academic studies and state-sponsored retrospective exhibitions. Together, they make it possible to analyze both the immediate visual output of the period and the paintings later recognized as representative of its artistic logic. The corpus is also institutionally varied, including works associated with regional ink-painting academies, major art colleges, and temporary propaganda-oriented creative groups formed around large-scale construction projects. This breadth matters because the article is concerned less with singular masterpieces than with trans-institutional regularities in representation.

The analysis proceeds in three related steps. First, it identifies recurring denotative features in the paintings, including subject matter, compositional structure, figure arrangement, and rhetorical emphasis. Second, it examines how these visual elements were attached to stable ideological meanings through repeated representational conventions and affective coding. Third, it considers how such conventions came to appear natural and self-evident, so that historically contingent political priorities were transformed into visually credible reality. These steps correspond to the distinction between denotation, ideological connotation, and mythic naturalization, but they are used here less as rigid stages of decoding than as a way of tracing how visual meaning moved from observable form to ideological common sense.

At the same time, the article does not limit itself to the reading of individual images. It also adopts a structural perspective in order to reconstruct the larger rule system that governed collective production. From this structural perspective, attention is given to three interrelated dimensions: the hierarchical selection of themes, the standardization of rhetorical schemes of representation, and the evaluative procedures through which works were judged, exhibited, and legitimized. What emerges from this perspective is not a written manual of image-making, but an implicit visual grammar embedded in discourse, institutions, and collective artistic practice (Bonnell, 1997).

Methodologically, the study combines semiotic analysis with institutional and art-historical inquiry

in order to explain how ideological meaning became repeatable and authoritative.

With these sources and procedures in place, the analysis now turns to the historical process by which political discourse was translated into visual rules and stabilized through collective production.

4. RESULTS

4.1. *From Political Discourse to Visual Rules*

Before examining specific visual features, it is necessary to clarify the underlying mechanisms through which ideological meaning was translated into visual form. The apparent coherence of collective ink painting during the Great Leap Forward was not the result of stylistic coincidence, but of a structured process in which political discourse was progressively reformulated as visual convention. This process operated at multiple levels, involving the articulation of thematic priorities, the organization of compositional principles, and the alignment of affective orientation. Taken together, these elements constituted a system of visual rules that shaped both the production and perception of images. The following sections analyze this process in detail, moving from the formation of thematic and discursive frameworks, to their formal consolidation, and finally to their perceptual and affective effects within specific works.

4.1.1. *Speed, Productivity, and Aesthetic Legitimacy*

Political discourse during the Great Leap Forward did not function merely as a source of themes for artistic representation. It operated more fundamentally as a framework for defining what counted as legitimate subject matter, valid artistic labor, and persuasive visual form. Rather than beginning from individual observation and then attaching political meaning to images afterward, collective ink painting was shaped from the outset by a set of discursive priorities that established the conditions of representation in advance. In this sense, political slogans were not simply illustrated; they were translated into visual expectations that organized how artists worked and how viewers were expected to recognize meaning.

One of the clearest examples of this process was the aestheticization of speed. During the Great Leap Forward, the slogan "More, Faster, Better, and More Economical" was not confined to industry or agricultural production. It entered artistic discourse as a normative demand, reorienting ideas of quality and artistic value. Slow, meticulous procedures associated with traditional literati practice could now

be criticized as politically inadequate, while rapid production, large formats, and campaign-style collective creation were recast as signs of historical urgency and social relevance. Under these conditions, speed no longer referred only to production tempo; it became a criterion of artistic legitimacy. Artistic form was thus drawn into the temporal logic of political mobilization, and visual scale, density, and immediacy were increasingly aligned with ideological value (Wan, 2012; Xie, 2023).

A similar transformation occurred through the discourse of being both “Red and Expert.” In this context, technical competence was no longer treated as an autonomous artistic standard. It had to be subordinated to political correctness, which functioned as the prior condition of meaningful representation. Brushwork, composition, and painterly skill were valued not as expressions of personal cultivation, but as instruments for transmitting politically sanctioned meaning. Fu Baoshi’s remark that when politics takes command, “brushwork changes accordingly” captures this reorientation with particular clarity (Fu, 1959). What changed here was not only artistic content, but the ontological status of technique itself: formal choices became legitimate insofar as they served ideological intelligibility (Chang, 1980; Andrews, 1994).

Through these discursive shifts, political imperatives were converted into a structured hierarchy of visual priorities. Certain themes—people’s communes, industrial construction, hydraulic engineering, mass labor, national transformation—were elevated to privileged visibility, while ambiguity, inwardness, and private experience were marginalized or excluded. This did not simply produce repetition at the level of subject matter. It also imposed a stable affective orientation. Images were expected to project confidence, abundance, coordination, and optimism, thereby reducing uncertainty and narrowing the range of permissible emotional tones.

4.1.2. Institutional Mediation and Collective Production

These discursive priorities acquired practical force through institutions. If political language established the horizon of meaning, organizations such as the Chinese Artists’ Association, painting academies, and art colleges translated that horizon into routines of study, production, exhibition, and evaluation (Andrews, 1994; Galikowski, 1998; Zheng, 2000, 2018; Huang, 2021). In this process, institutions did not simply supervise artistic work from the outside. They materialized discourse as everyday

procedure. Through organized study sessions, editorial control, exhibition mechanisms, and critical judgment, they reduced interpretive plurality and stabilized the rules through which images were conceived and publicly validated. The result was not only coordination, but a narrowing of the field of representational possibility itself.

The Chinese Artists’ Association played a particularly important role in this regard. It functioned as a national hub linking official discourse to artistic practice through political study, mobilization campaigns, publications, and exhibition control. Study sessions on policy directives worked to align artists’ interpretive horizons, while mobilization meetings translated political commitment into measurable artistic productivity. At the same time, by controlling key platforms such as Meishu and exhibition selection, the Association helped define what counted as thematically correct and publicly meaningful art. In this way, discourse was not left open to individual interpretation; it was continually recalibrated and institutionally reinforced (Jiang, 1958; Yang, 1958; Nie, 1958).

Painting academies and collective creative groups were the sites where these rules became operational in the strongest sense. By reorganizing painters as salaried cultural workers and embedding artistic labor in administrative structures, such institutions exchanged a degree of artistic autonomy for coordinated production. Collective creation, especially under the “three-in-one” model linking Party leadership, artists, and the masses, became a practical mechanism for dissolving individual agency into institutional purpose (Zheng, 2018; Li, 2020). Artists were sent to construction sites, communes, and industrial projects not simply to observe life, but to fulfill specific representational tasks under already defined ideological expectations. In this setting, conformity was not an accidental outcome; it was built into the organizational logic of production itself (Zheng, 2018; Fu, 1959).

The internal operation of collective creation further shows how political discourse became visual rule. In practice, artists were often allowed to contribute ideas only within tightly bounded procedures of “collective conception,” after which final decisions converged on sanctioned solutions. The production history of People’s Commune Canteen is especially revealing: As Chen (2013) shows, early versions of the work were judged insufficient because they failed to communicate abundance clearly enough, and compositional revision followed official direction, including the addition of a menu board specifying generous

rations. What matters here is not only the resulting iconography, but the mechanism itself. Political objectives entered the image through concrete adjustments in composition and detail, thereby narrowing the distinction between ideological directive and visual form (Ho, 2016).

4.1.3. Practice, Repetition, and the Normalization of Form

Practice also stabilized these rules by repetition. The pressure for speed synchronized artistic labor with campaign rhythms, while repeated participation in collective drafting, revision, display, and criticism transformed externally imposed criteria into embodied habits. Under such conditions, what began as directive gradually became routine, and routine in turn became common sense (Li, 2020; Ho, 2020). This process was reinforced in art education, where the training of “art workers” rather than autonomous artists reorganized pedagogy around service to political goals (Andrews, 1994). Sending students to factories and farms was framed not simply as fieldwork, but as ideological transformation, making “politics commanding art” a lived and internalized norm (Qi, 1958).

Exhibitions and criticism completed this process by stabilizing interpretation after production. These were not neutral spaces for display or aesthetic exchange. They functioned as disciplinary environments in which selected works were elevated as models, accompanying discourse narrowed the range of legitimate readings, and criticism subordinated aesthetic judgment to political correctness. National exhibitions transformed regional experiments into exemplary forms, while journals such as *Meishu* and critical commentary reinforced authoritative interpretations (Qin, 1959; Chen, 1959; Jizhe, 1959; *Meishu* Editorial Board, 1960; Wan, 2012; Liu, 2022). Evaluation therefore did more than assess completed works; it also oriented future production by continuously signaling which kinds of images would be recognized, praised, and reproduced.

Taken together, these processes produced more than thematic consistency. They generated a historically specific visual grammar. This grammar did not exist as a formal manual, yet it operated with considerable force through the interaction of discursive priorities, institutional coordination, practical repetition, and evaluative authority. It regulated which subjects were visible, how they could be represented, and how their meaning would be fixed in advance of open interpretation. From this perspective, visual uniformity during the Great Leap

Forward should not be treated as a superficial matter of style, but as the trace of a rule-governed system of organized production.

In this sense, the movement from political discourse to visual rules marks the first major step in the naturalization of ideology. Once themes, affects, compositional expectations, and evaluative criteria were aligned, images no longer needed to argue explicitly for the reality they depicted. They could present collectivization, abundance, coordinated labor, and political authority as immediately visible conditions of the world. What appears in the paintings as visual clarity was therefore inseparable from the prior organization of discourse, institutions, and practice that made such clarity possible.

4.2. Three Scenes of Visual Naturalization

The preceding section reconstructed the formation of visual rules during the Great Leap Forward by tracing the interaction of political discourse, institutional organization, and collective practice. Those rules become most legible when examined in specific works. The paintings discussed below do not function simply as illustrations of political themes. Rather, they show how collective subjectivity, institutional life, and political authority were rendered perceptually credible through recurring formal strategies. In each case, ideological meaning operates not only through subject matter, but through the organization of figures, space, and affect in ways that make historically contingent arrangements appear natural and self-evident. The following three works are examined in detail because they condense three recurrent functions visible across the broader corpus: the construction of collective subjectivity, the normalization of institutional life, and the monumentalization of political authority.

4.2.1. Collective Subjectivity in Launching an Offensive Against the Sea

A first effect of this visual system can be seen in the construction of collective subjectivity. The 1960 work *Launching an Offensive Against the Sea* (Figure 1), produced by teachers and students of the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts after field study at the Zhanjiang sea-blocking project, presents labor not as a series of separate actions but as a unified social force. Rather than documenting one isolated section of the construction site, the painting condenses scattered fragments of work into a single intensified scene, making a vast hydraulic project appear visually coherent and historically purposeful (Xu, 2023; Xie, 2023).



Figure 1. Launching an Offensive Against the Sea (four-panel set), 1960. By teachers and students of Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts (collective creation). Ink and color on paper, each panel 151 x 374 cm. Collection of the Art Museum of Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts.

This effect depends above all on composition. The emerging dike runs diagonally across the image from the lower right to the upper left, creating the strongest visual line in the painting and directing the viewer's gaze through the entire scene. Combined with rising tides and rushing seawater, this diagonal generates a sense of pressure, movement, and urgency, transforming construction into a visible struggle against nature. The painting thus converts the political rhetoric of mobilization into a perceptual experience of coordinated advance (Xie, 2023).

The treatment of the figures reinforces this effect. One close reading estimates roughly 570 laboring bodies, together with ships, carts, tractors, and other tools distributed across the site. Yet the image does not appear chaotic. Workers are arranged in rows, clusters, and parallel units of action, producing a strong sense of order within intense activity. Individual physiognomy is minimized, but bodily variation remains vivid: some figures carry stone, some push wheelbarrows, some unload materials, and others steer transport boats toward the breach. Clothing details—straw hats, headscarves, rolled trousers, and bare torsos—register social and physical difference without turning the workers into individualized protagonists. What emerges is not a crowd of separate heroes, but a collective body whose agency appears to arise from coordinated exertion itself (Xu, 2023). The result is a visual field in which persons cease to function as psychological individuals and instead appear as components of a unified productive body.

This strategy was not unique to one painting. A comparable logic appears in *World-Creating Wonder*, a collective painting on the Yellow River closure project, where a diagonal embankment, dense laboring crowds, and concentrated engineering action similarly transform mass labor into heroic collective force. Together, these works show how hydraulic construction painting during the Great Leap Forward rendered collective subjectivity as visually self-evident form rather than as abstract ideological claim (Xie, 2023; Liu, 2022).

4.2.2. *Institutional Life in People's Commune Canteen*

If collective subjectivity is one major effect of this visual grammar, the naturalization of institutional life is another. This is especially clear in the 1958 collective painting *People's Commune Canteen* (Figure 2), produced by the Jiangsu Chinese Painting Academy. The work does not present the commune canteen as a single administrative facility. Rather, it visualizes an entire institutional environment in which dining, welfare, education, storage, transport, and political celebration appear seamlessly integrated into everyday life. What is rendered visible is not simply a meal, but a complete social order.



Figure 2. *People's Commune Canteen*, 1958. By Jiangsu Chinese Painting Academy (collective creation). Ink and color on paper, 146 x 96 cm. Collection of Jiangsu Chinese Painting Academy.

What is naturalized here is not only abundance, but organization itself. The painting collapses the distinction between political arrangement and social reality, presenting the commune canteen as an objective condition of everyday life rather than a contingent and contested historical construction. In this sense, People's Commune Canteen exemplifies one of the central mechanisms of visual naturalization during the Great Leap Forward: the conversion of institutional policy into experiential reality.

This effect depends on the accumulation and coordination of concrete details. Outside the canteen wall, three orderly queues move toward the entrance, with men and women grouped separately and cadres identifiable among them. Nearby, two tricycles marked "Home of Happiness" and "Nursery" carry wooden buckets, indicating that the commune extends care beyond the dining hall itself: food is delivered to the elderly and to children rather than requiring them to enter the canteen. On the wall, propaganda images of giant rice, oversized corn, and enormous pumpkins visually echo the discourse of agricultural abundance. Inside the compound, a large notice board announces: "Today, in addition to three dishes and one soup, each person receives an extra half jin of pork." Around it, eleven crowded dining tables are filled with dishes, while men, women, and children sit in separate but harmonious groups; children wearing red scarves further suggest that the commune encompasses education as well as subsistence. In the background, granaries, a grain-processing plant, donkey carts, trucks loaded with sacks, red flags, and political slogans extend the scene beyond consumption to storage, distribution, and state authority. The image is spatially dense, yet not chaotic: its layered depth and filled composition produce a sense of plenitude without disorder (Wan, 2012; Chen, 2013; Ho, 2016).

The menu board is especially revealing. According to later testimony, it was emphasized after official review in order to make visible not only that people could eat their fill, but that they could "eat well." (Chen, 2013) It therefore functions as more than a realistic prop. It is a small but decisive device of verification, turning ideological promise into something seemingly readable, countable, and already achieved. Institutional life is thus naturalized through detail: the commune appears not as policy under construction, but as a settled condition of abundance, care, and social harmony. A related logic can be seen in the collective long scroll *Spring in the Capital*, where urban, industrial, and infrastructural details are likewise subordinated to a unified

thematic program. In both works, visual detail does not open space for contingency; it is organized to make socialist order appear coherent, comprehensive, and self-evident.

4.2.3. *Political Authority in This Land So Rich in Beauty*

A third and more encompassing effect of this visual system can be seen in the monumentalization of political authority. This process reaches a particularly concentrated form in *This Land So Rich in Beauty* (Figure 3), the monumental landscape by Fu Baoshi and Guan Shanyue installed in the Great Hall of the People. Unlike the previous two works, this painting does not center on labor or institutional daily life. Instead, it reorganizes the very image of the nation as a politically ordered totality. Its visual force lies not only in scale, but in the way disparate spatial, temporal, and symbolic elements are compressed into a single panoramic field.



Figure 3. *This Land So Rich in Beauty*, 1959. By Fu Baoshi and Guan Shanyue. Ink and color on paper, 650 x 900 cm. Collection of the Great Hall of the People, Beijing.

The painting's landscape is deliberately synthetic. Rather than depicting one actual site, it assembles emblematic features of the Chinese nation into a single view: snowy mountains, river systems, monumental peaks, and southern waters coexist within one coordinated image (Chen, 2013). This compositional compression gives visual form to a totalized nation-space, making territorial vastness appear not fragmented or heterogeneous, but unified and immediately graspable. The effect is reinforced by the decision to omit human figures. Their absence does not empty the scene; rather, it removes

anecdotal distraction and allows the land itself to stand forth as the collective body of the nation. What might otherwise have appeared as geography is thus transformed into political landscape.

The red sun is central to this transformation. According to the painting's production history, the question of whether to include the sun was explicitly debated, and it was ultimately affirmed—and later enlarged at Zhou Enlai's instruction—as indispensable to the image. The sun therefore functions not as a neutral natural element, but as the visual center that orders the entire composition. It casts political illumination across the landscape, establishing a hierarchy in which mountains, rivers, snow, and water are gathered into a single radiant field. The inscription based on Mao Zedong's calligraphy and combined from multiple handwritten versions, further intensifies this effect (Shao, 2009). Text, seal, and image do not remain separate. They merge symbolic authorship, state authority, and national scenery into one monumental visual program.

Installed in the Great Hall of the People, the work exceeded pictorial representation and became part of the architecture of state ritual itself. In this sense, political authority is not merely symbolized within the image; it becomes the condition through which the nation is seen as whole, radiant, and historically fulfilled. Here ideology no longer appears as a message placed upon the world, but as the principle that orders the world into a legible national vision.

4.2.4. From Image Analysis to Visual Naturalization

Taken together, these works show that the persuasive force of collective ink painting during the Great Leap Forward cannot be reduced to subject matter alone. Across different contexts, they rely on recurring formal strategies through which political meanings were made perceptually credible.

Visual naturalization describes a shift from argument to perception: the paintings do not merely communicate ideological content, but organize the conditions under which that content is apprehended as reality. The recurrence of such effects confirms the broader argument of this article: visual uniformity during the Great Leap Forward was the trace of a regulated system that transformed ideology into visual common sense.

These visual analyses make clear that ideological efficacy in collective ink painting did not depend on symbolic content alone. What requires further discussion, therefore, is how these recurrent formal effects reshape our understanding of propaganda,

visuality, and the relation between institutional regulation and perception.

4.3. Discussion

4.3.1. Beyond Propaganda: Producing Visual Self-Evidence

The analysis presented in this article suggests that collective ink painting during the Great Leap Forward cannot be adequately understood through the familiar language of propaganda alone. To describe these works simply as instruments of ideological persuasion is not incorrect, but it is insufficient. Such a description tends to presume a relatively straightforward relation between message and image, as if political authority first formulated a proposition and painting then served as its visual vehicle. What the evidence examined here makes clear, however, is that the persuasive force of these works depended on something more fundamental: the production of visual self-evidence. Ideology did not operate only by inserting content into images. It worked by shaping the conditions under which certain representations came to appear immediately credible, emotionally coherent, and perceptually real.

This distinction matters because it shifts analytical attention away from overt symbolic messaging and toward the historical organization of visual plausibility. The works discussed in the previous section did not derive their force simply from what they depicted. Their effectiveness lay in how they transformed contingent political arrangements into apparently natural states of the world. In each case, ideological meaning is persuasive not because it is loudly declared, but because it is built into the visual structure of what appears real.

Seen from this perspective, visual uniformity should not be dismissed as a secondary stylistic consequence of political control. It is better understood as a historical indicator of how representation was regulated before it reached the viewer. The recurring themes, affective tones, compositional structures, and evaluative norms found across the corpus show that the paintings were not simply repeating political content; they were reproducing a shared regime of legibility. That regime narrowed the field of the visible by defining in advance what could count as abundance, collectivization, productive vitality, or legitimate authority. The image therefore became effective not only by symbolizing ideology, but by making ideological order seem already inscribed in social reality.

This also helps explain why the language of coercion, while historically necessary, is analytically

incomplete. Coercion can account for pressure, censorship, and organizational hierarchy, but it cannot by itself explain the striking regularity with which politically valued forms became aesthetically convincing. What must be explained is not simply compliance, but convergence: how artistic production across different institutions repeatedly generated images that shared comparable ways of organizing action, affect, and visibility. The evidence assembled here suggests that this convergence emerged through the interaction of discursive priorities, institutional mediation, repetitive practice, and evaluative reinforcement (Huang, 2021; Zheng, 2018; Li, 2020). In other words, ideological efficacy resided not only in command, but in the successful production of forms that could be seen as common sense.

4.3.2. *Visuality, Institution, and Ideology*

The broader implication of this study lies in how it repositions the relation between visuality, institution, and ideology. Much scholarship on ideological imagery has focused either on symbolic interpretation or on political context. The present case suggests that these two approaches need to be connected more closely through an analysis of production. Visuality is not treated here as a neutral surface upon which ideological meaning is later imposed. Nor are institutions understood merely as external frameworks constraining artistic freedom. Rather, discourse, institutions, and artistic practice are shown to operate together in the historical formation of representational possibility. What became visible in collective ink painting was inseparable from the institutional procedures that organized the making, evaluation, and circulation of images (Andrews, 1994; Galikowski, 1998; Zheng, 2018).

This point also clarifies how the article engages Barthes's account of myth (Barthes, 1972). Barthes's account of myth remains indispensable for understanding how history can appear as nature, but the case examined here indicates that naturalization cannot be understood only at the level of interpretation. Mythic effect is not simply discovered in the completed image; it is prepared in advance through the organization of production itself. Political discourse sets semantic priorities, institutions translate them into rules and procedures, and repetitive collective practice turns those rules into habitual visual form. By the time the image reaches the viewer, much of its ideological work has already been done. What appears as immediacy or realism is therefore historically mediated from the

outset.

In this sense, the contribution of the article is not to replace semiotic interpretation with institutional history, but to bring them into closer relation. Semiotics helps explain how ideological meaning operates within images; institutional and art-historical analysis helps explain how those images became repeatable, authoritative, and publicly legible in the first place. The concept of visual naturalization proposed here therefore refers not only to a symbolic effect, but to a historical process in which representational conventions are stabilized through discourse, organization, and practice. Such an approach makes it possible to understand why visual coherence during the Great Leap Forward was so persistent: it did not arise from mere stylistic imitation, but from a system in which ideological priorities were continually translated into artistic norms.

The case of collective ink painting also has implications beyond the specific history of Mao-era art. Without claiming a universal model, it suggests a broader methodological point: ideological images become especially powerful when production systems regulate not only what may be represented, but how reality itself will be made perceptually available. The persuasive force of such images lies in their ability to transform contingent arrangements into apparently self-evident worlds. What this article shows, through the example of collective ink painting during the Great Leap Forward, is that visuality becomes most effective politically when it no longer appears as mediation at all.

5. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the visual uniformity of collective ink painting during China's Great Leap Forward cannot be explained adequately by political coercion, propaganda, or stylistic convergence alone. While these factors formed the historical conditions of artistic production, they do not fully account for the remarkable regularity with which paintings produced across different institutional settings came to share similar subjects, compositional strategies, affective orientations, and representational habits. What this study has sought to show is that such uniformity was the result of a more specific historical process in which political discourse, institutional organization, and collective artistic practice converged to produce a stable visual order.

By examining official publications, critical writing, institutional procedures, and a corpus of collective paintings, the article has traced how political imperatives were translated into visual

rules. These rules did not simply govern what artists were expected to depict. They also shaped how social reality could be made visible, how legitimacy was assigned to particular forms of representation, and how those forms came to appear persuasive, coherent, and natural. In this sense, the argument has been less concerned with ideology as explicit content than with ideology as a condition of visual plausibility. The historical significance of collective ink painting lies not only in its role within socialist culture, but in the way it reveals how representation can be organized so that political propositions appear as self-evident reality.

The close readings of *Launching an Offensive Against the Sea*, *People's Commune Canteen*, and *This Land So Rich in Beauty* have shown how this process operated in concrete visual terms. Across these works, the collective body, institutional life, and political authority were not simply illustrated; they were rendered perceptually credible through recurring formal strategies. Such effects help explain why visual repetition during the Great Leap Forward should not be treated as a superficial aesthetic trait. It was the visible trace of a regulated system of production through which ideology acquired form, legibility, and affective force.

The article has also proposed a broader methodological point. To understand ideological

images, it is not enough to interpret their symbolic content after the fact. It is equally necessary to examine the historical processes through which certain visual forms become repeatable, authoritative, and publicly intelligible. In this respect, the case of collective ink painting suggests that semiotic analysis and art-historical institutional analysis are most productive when brought together. Ideological naturalization occurs not only in the meanings that images carry, but in the regulated conditions under which those meanings become visible and credible in the first place.

Without claiming universality, this study therefore offers a way of thinking about how visuality, institution, and ideology can be studied in relation to one another. The Great Leap Forward provides an especially concentrated historical example of this interaction, but the underlying problem is broader: images become politically powerful when they do not merely transmit messages, but organize the visible world in ways that make historical arrangements appear natural. By tracing this process in the case of collective ink painting, the article hopes to contribute not only to the study of Mao-era art, but also to wider discussions of modern visual culture and the historical production of ideological reality.

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