

From Innocent Memory to Fading Reality

BY

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ABSTRACT

This MDES research, exhibition, and written thesis investigates the loss, preservation, and visual reconstruction of memories from my childhood in Shanghai and within the context of rapid urban development. Through the lens of personal experience, art-based research and artistic practice, this research examines how familiar urban scenes evoke emotional, personal, and intergenerational memories. The research is grounded in my own family history. Using art-based research methods, I combine autobiographical writing, oral history, family remembrances, and archival materials with textual and spatial analysis to situate personal and intergenerational memory within broader processes of urban change in Shanghai. Artistic practice forms a core component of the methodology for this research: Through visual storytelling across graphic design, Chinese scroll painting, watercolor illustration, and hand-drawn animation, this research explores how composition and color of a painting can resonate with the audience. The artwork translates remembered experiences and turns them into immersive encounters that invite empathy, resonance, and critical reflection.

Keywords: Urbanization and Memory Loss, Family History and Identity, Abstract and Figurative Art, Practice-based Research, Scroll design, Hand-drawn animation, Interdisciplinary-media Storytelling

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DEDICATION

For my fading memory.

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PROLOGUE:

EVERYTHING ABOUT MY GREAT-GRANDMOTHER(太奶奶)

I spent most of my childhood with my grandparents(爷爷奶奶), especially my great-grandmother(太奶奶) in their old neighborhood in Shanghai. On a pleasant afternoon when I was ten years old, I remember that the sun was warm, and the breeze was gentle, and everything felt calm and peaceful. My great-grandmother held my hand, we sat on the chair on the balcony, and she told me her story —

She was born in the mountains in China in the 1920s, at a time when the economy was backward, and the thinking was feudal and conservative. From a young age, children were asked to do farm work for their family to earn money. At that time, there was no law of compulsory education(九年义务制教育)¹. Many children from poor families could not afford to go to school, leading to the illiteracy rate being extremely high in China, including my great-grandmother. Moreover, the patriarchal mentality was very strong, and because of this, as a girl, she never had the opportunity to go to school.

While the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, my great-grandmother's husband was sacrificed in the one of the major wars,

¹ The *Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China* was adopted at the Fourth Session of the Sixth National People's Congress on 12 April 1986 and came into effect on 1 July 1986.

leaving her a single mother with only one child who is my grandfather now. To have a better life, she brought her child alone to Shanghai where I was born and grew up. Shanghai was the number one city in China at that time, and she was convinced that there must be more job opportunities in the big city. She didn't have much money, and she couldn't read or write. It's hard to imagine how difficult the situation must have been for her at that time.

Fortunately, she is an ambitious woman, and China was at the beginning of its economic boom in 1950s. All industries were exuding vitality. My great-grandmother had the opportunity to work in a textile mill. Her child, my grandfather, studied well and was accepted into a prestigious university, Nanjing University. For my great-grandmother—a single mother—she could only support herself and her child on her meager salary by working day and night.

Her health was gradually declining in her twilight years. Yet she once told me that my birth made her feel her life had already become full. For her, after all those years of hardship and perseverance, watching me grow up gave her a sense that she had had enough.

This MDES research connects me to her story. My great-grandmother came to Shanghai, where I was born. This is where I am from. She lived for 101 years and passed away just four years ago in 2022, but her story deserves to be remembered. I have drawn a series of watercolor paintings

to commemorate her, so that she will not fade away in my memory. I recorded them chronologically from the first-person perspective to make the audience feel more involved. In my arts-based research, I invite the audience to view my great-grandmother's story. I want viewers to experience her strength through remembering her story visually as well as in this written format.



figure 1 My great-grandmother as a child. Watercolor painting by the author, 2024.

“In 1930, I was 8. My mother said I was no longer a child and should start helping the family earn money. Moreover, being a girl, there was no need for me to go to school. What should I do?”

This is the image of my great-grandmother in her difficult childhood. She didn't have the chance to go to school. With a tiny body carrying heavy firewood, she walked on the rough mountain paths.



figure 2 My great-grandmother in youth. Watercolor painting by the author, 2024.

“In 1950, I was 28. My husband had sacrificed his life in war, leaving behind me and our only child. I took my son to Shanghai to look for work opportunities. I had almost run out of money, and my son still needed to be fed. What should I do?”

This is the image of my great-grandmother in her youth. She took the green iron train to Shanghai Railway Station². The sign“上海站” indicates the location is in Shanghai, where she went to look for job opportunities. Carrying a heavy load of luggage, holding her son in her arms, as a single mother, she suffered a lot.

² The old Shanghai Railway Station generally refers to the former Shanghai North Railway Station.



figure 3 My great-grandmother in middle age. Watercolor painting by the author, 2024.

“In 1970, I was 48. My son was well-behaved. I wanted to spend more time with him, but I had to work overtime. As a single mother, I could only rely on my meager salary to support his education. What should I do?”

This is the image of my great-grandmother in her middle age. She worked in a textile mill. She had to support herself and her child. She looked tired but she kept working hard.



figure 4 My great-grandmother in old age. Watercolor painting by the author, 2024.

“In 2000, I was 78. My hair had turned white, and my health was beginning to fail. My life was nearing its end. What should I do?”

This is the image of my great-grandmother in her old age. She was ill and had an operation. Sitting on the bed in the hospital, she looked hopeless and found her life was nearing the end.

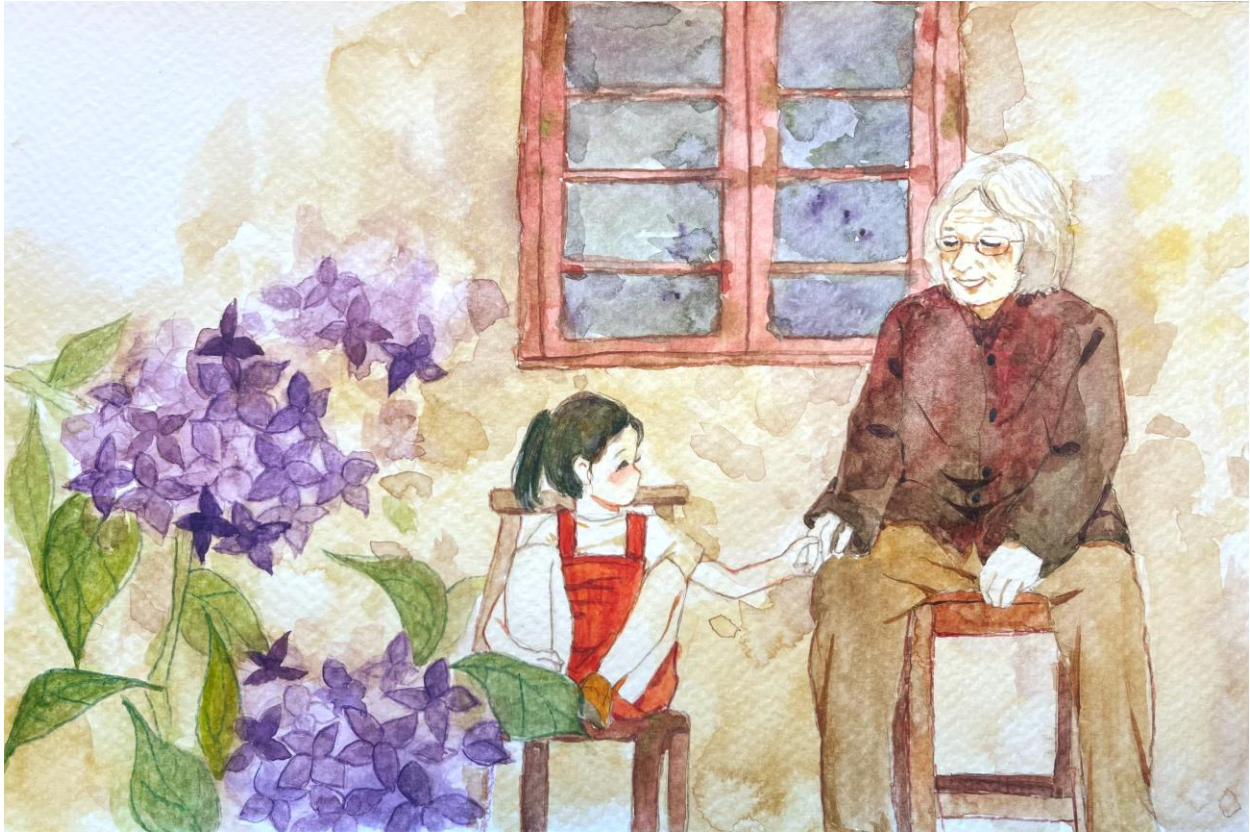


figure 5 My great-grandmother in twilight age. Watercolor painting by the author, 2024.

“In 2010, I was 88. Holding the hand of my great-granddaughter, the sun was shining, the breeze was gentle, and life was peaceful. That is enough.”

On the right is the image of my great-grandmother in her twilight age. The background is the balcony of her old house. She loved to plant flowers on it. On the left is the image of myself in my childhood. We sat on the wooden chairs, holding each other’s hands. In the first four paintings, the face expression of my great-grandmother is unhappy, because she can’t go to school, she had no money, she had to work and she was ill. While in the last painting, her face expression turned happy. My birth allowed my great-grandmother to glimpse her own childhood once again. Yet nearly eighty years apart in age, we belonged to such different times. My arrival also gave her a sense of fulfilment, as if her life had finally come full circle.

The site of memory, emotional geography, place attachment, as well as the methodology of watercolor painting and storytelling is the beginning of my research. By recording the story of my great-grandmother through painting, I depict a strong and resilient woman who faced hardship, loss, and adversity with remarkable courage. What she experienced at each stage of her life also reflected the social context of China at that time. Remembering her is not only a way of honoring her life, but also the starting point of this thesis. Through her story, I began to understand memory not simply as a recollection of the past, but as a way of keeping a life, a voice, and a history present. It is from this act of remembering that the theme of this thesis emerges.

INTRODUCTION

Research Background: Urban Development and the Importance of Remembering

The story of my great-grandmother forms the emotional beginning. Before her death, one of my last and clearest memories of her was tied to the old house where I spent most of my childhood. In that house — a worn room filled with old furniture, dim yet warm-colored gleaming light, and the damp and moldy smell of the corridor — everything was shabby but cozy. After my great-grandmother passed away, that room was renovated and rented out to strangers, while my family and I moved into a new apartment. The place of that old house still physically exists, yet the life once held within it has disappeared. What remains is no longer a place I can return to, and the house is a memory that I feel responsible to remember.

This personal experience reflects a broader condition of urban change in my hometown of Shanghai. In rapidly urbanizing context in big cities like Shanghai, the transformation of places entails not only the reconfiguration of such spaces, but also leads to the displacement of communities. This rapid urbanization of cities has also led to the loss of childhood memories, and the reshaping of cultural identity. For many people of my family's generation and my own, old houses like my great-grandmother's were not simply outdated buildings, but containers of everyday life, family intimacy, and shared social memory. However, in the process of rapid urban development, such houses are gradually being demolished or radically transformed due to policy reasons (which will be analyzed in detail in following chapters). As development progresses of industrialization and urbanization, old things will inevitably be replaced by new ones.

My research begins from this tension between urban transformation and remembrance. Starting in my own family history and memories of being born and growing up in Shanghai, I have

witnessed the city's accelerated development and the continuous replacement of familiar surroundings. As Richard Ford stated in his article "At Home, For Now": "The concept of home—the direction finder we're all supposedly equipped with, that leads us onward (or back) to the place we belong, where we'll be...what? Happy? At peace? At rest? Permanent? I'm not really sure."³ Home is not simply a physical place to which one can return, but a fragile structure of memory that becomes increasingly difficult to hold onto as the city changes. As someone born in the 2000s, I grew up during a period in which changes seemed constant and unavoidable. Every few years, when I returned to a street, a neighborhood, or a building from my childhood, it had altered so drastically that I began to lose confidence in my own recollection of it. This experience led me to ask not simply what has changed in the city, but what happens to memory when the physical world that once held it is erased or replaced.

³ Richard Ford, "At Home, For Now"

Research Objectives

The main objective of this research is to investigate how rapid urban development contributes to the disappearance of personal and intergenerational memories. The research aims to highlight the importance of remembering fragile stories, everyday experiences, and emotional ties to the past. Through art-based research, I will examine how spatial scenes, specific landscapes and things in everyday life evoke emotional responses and personal memories, thereby illuminating the cultural values inscribed in urban places, and showcasing the complex entanglements of urban places and memories.

Through my artwork, I aim to evoke resonance in the audience—to allow them, upon seeing the scenes I draw, to recall their own experiences that once unfolded in similar places. As what is described in *The World of Perception* by Merleau-Ponty, “The world of perception, or in other words the world which is revealed to us by our senses and in everyday life, seems at first sight to be the one we know best of all.” Memories I explore are rooted in the world of everyday perception. In this sense, the artworks I create are not merely depictions of my past; they serve as emotional bridges between personal and shared histories which viewers of my generation may also experience. By transforming memories into visual narratives, I hope to illuminate the loss and transformation that accompany urbanization. My purpose is to help the audience recognize that behind every modern skyline lies a layer of forgotten stories and emotions. In this way, my work becomes a dialogue between what has vanished and what still lingers in memory — a reminder that remembrance itself can be a poetic act of preservation.

Research Questions

1. How do everyday scenes, family stories, and sensory fragments trigger personal and intergenerational memory?
2. How do urbanization, industrialization, and historical change gradually erode, transform, or displace individual and collective memories of everyday life?
3. How can artistic practice serve as an act of remembering?
4. How can artistic practice preserve fragile memories that might otherwise fade or be forgotten in the process of social and urban transformation?
5. In what ways does the past continue to be felt in the present?

Significance of the Research

The significance of this research lies in bridging autobiographical experience with broader reflections on social change. By situating personal and intergenerational narratives within the dynamics of urban transformation, the thesis demonstrates how individual memories are both shaped by and contributory to the cultural meanings of places. Furthermore, through artistic practice, the research not only documents but also reimagines places as repositories of memory and emotion.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

My artistic practice serves as a medium for exploring the intricate relationships between memory and place. Through paintings and animations, I reconstruct scenes from my childhood in Shanghai, capturing the emotional landscapes tied to the places I hold dear. These works are not merely depictions of physical locations, but emotional repositories where memories linger and unfold.

It is through these artistic explorations that I engage deeply with the concepts of “site of memory”, “emotional geography”, and “place attachment”. These concepts guide the analysis of my memories, as I investigate how certain places, through their sensory experiences and emotional significance, hold and transmit memories across generations. Through my work, I aim to demonstrate how places—whether still standing or transformed by urbanization—carry the imprints of past lives and feelings, becoming living archives of history and identity.

Sites of Memory

Places always hold meanings, because people use them to remember important events, histories, traumas, celebrations, identities, or shared experiences. As in Pierre Nora's description, "A lieu de mémoire(French for "site of memory") is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community (in this case, the French community)"⁴

Things change as time passes by, but the physical places——where a community stores and expresses its collective memory——are still there, as well as is the site of memory.

In my practice, “sites of memory” are visualized through my painting of places and events in them, reflecting how places themselves can be a “site of memory”. Places unfold shared ideas,

⁴ Pierre Nora, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire* (1989), xvii.

myths, or cultural symbols as well as collective memories. Through the painting of the places where I was born and grew up, including events such as life with my family, school and society, the deepest memory in one's heart will be evoked. No matter how things change — being transacted, reformed or even abolished — memories are still there, indicating that people once were there as well as those once happened there.

Emotional Geography

“Emotional geography” is an interdisciplinary field within human and cultural geography that explores how memories, emotions, and everyday sensory experiences become attached to lived environments. It argues that urban places are never neutral — they are felt, remembered, feared, desired, mourned, or loved. As Bondi Z and Smith M have the same research in Geography's ‘Emotional Turn’ : “An emotional geography, then, attempts to understand emotion — experientially and conceptually — in terms of its socio-spatial mediation and articulation rather than as entirely interiorized subjective mental states.”⁵ Emotional geographies draw attention to the symbolic importance of places, many of which owe their significance to the emotional associations they carry — awe, dread, worry, loss or love — which in turn shapes how bodies relate to geographical and physical places.

In my artistic practice and thesis exhibition, with a series of watercolor paintings on rice paper, emotional geography is expressed through the way I visually reconstruct the sensory qualities of places from my memory. The scroll picture book and hand-drawn animation do not simply document physical locations; they attempt to capture the emotional atmosphere that surrounded those landscapes at specific moments in my life. Combination of obscure and clear brushstrokes, delicate texture of rice paper, compositions, color palettes, and shifts in perspective function as emotional cues, translating the felt experience of place into visual form. In this way, my artworks

⁵ Liz Bondi, Joyce Davidson, Mick Smith, “Introduction: Geography's ‘Emotional Turn’”

serve as affective maps—representations of how urban places are remembered not only for what they were physically, but for how they made me feel.

Place Attachment

Including attachment to home, neighborhoods and landscapes, place attachment refers to the emotional, cognitive, cultural, and sometimes spiritual bonds that individuals or communities form with specific places. It is the felt sense that a place matters, that it anchors part of one's identity, memory, or sense of belonging. Although scholars have not yet developed a comprehensive developmental model or a detailed account of the neurological processes underlying place attachment, there is broad agreement that individuals form attachments to places at some point in their lives, most commonly to their childhood homes. Just as research questions Morgan develops, "Attempts to theorize how place attachment develops — especially through childhood experiences of interacting with environment (exploration, play, sensory engagement), which over time become internalized as lasting emotional bonds."⁶ When people have positive experiences with a place during childhood, these experiences create an unconscious inner model that leads to a long-term emotional connection to that place, known as "place attachment."

My artwork also visualizes scenes in childhood memories with old urban places. My artistic practice draws directly on these attachments, focusing on positive childhood memories and the places where those memories happened. The places depicted in my artworks are not simply illustrated urban places; they are emotional anchors from my personal history as well as they serve to the awakening of inner emotions of viewers. The process of painting them becomes an act of revisiting, reinhabiting, and preserving the attachments I formed with these urban places.

⁶ Paul Morgan, "Towards a developmental theory of place attachment"

Autobiographical and Narrative Research

Autobiographical inquiry positions personal experience not as anecdotal or secondary, but as a meaningful source of knowledge about family history and fading memory. I have not only written down my great-grandmother's story as family history, I also documented my personal experience from the age of a toddler to a school-aged person and a teenager. Lacking concrete evidence such as photos or diaries, I can only write down fragments of memories, which seem fabricated, unrealistic, and subject to my own feelings. Through reconstructing memories of family history, childhood places and emotional responses to the changing of Shanghai, I use myself as an entry point into broader questions of urban transformation.

Narrative research further allows these personal memories to be contextualized within collective histories. I will also interview others who are engaged in my growing experience, such as parents, relatives, friends and middle school classmates, asking for their memories as references.

Information and images from the Internet are also a very important part. My stories are not isolated fragments; they intersect with the lived experiences of earlier generations in my family, with the evolution of my neighborhood, and with the socio-economic shifts occurring in Shanghai from the early 2000s onward.

Art-based Research and Interdisciplinary-Media Design

Art-based research provides the primary creative methodology for this thesis, positioning artistic practice as both a mode of inquiry and a form of knowledge production. In this approach, making art is not simply illustrative; it becomes a way of thinking—an embodied, sensory, and emotional exploration of memory and place. Through painting, drawing, sequencing, and animation, I engage directly with the textures, atmospheres, and sensory qualities of the landscapes I attempt to recall. The process of mark-making becomes a tool for accessing layers of memory that cannot

be fully articulated through writing alone: the warmth of my great-grandmother's room, the dimness of an alley at dusk, the rhythm of daily life in school corridors, or the disorientation of witnessing familiar places disappear.

Interdisciplinary-media design expands the scope of this research by integrating multiple visual and temporal forms—specifically, the scroll painting and hand-drawn animation. Each medium contributes distinct ways of thinking about time, memory, and spatial transformation.

The scroll format draws on traditional Chinese visual storytelling, where time unfolds horizontally and landscapes are experienced through gradual revelation. As the viewer unrolls the scroll, scenes emerge sequentially, mirroring the structure of memory as something that unfolds gradually and cannot be perceived all at once. This format emphasizes continuity across generations, the layering of history on the same piece of physical place, and the way spatial environments accumulate meaning over time.

The hand-drawn animation introduces motion, rhythm, and temporality. Animation allows me to depict transformation—buildings rising and disappearing, seasons shifting, people moving through spaces—in ways that echo the dynamic nature of urban change. Each frame is drawn by hand, reinforcing the tactile, intimate quality of memory work and resisting the smooth, rigid temporality of digital or mechanical representation.

Integrating multiple media enables a richer exploration of emotional geography and place attachment. Whereas the scroll picture book emphasizes continuity and tangible presence, animation highlights impermanence and transition. Together, they embody the central theme of this thesis: urban places as both enduring and continually reconfigured, and memory as something that moves between stability and loss.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature Review 1: Wong Kar-Wai: Memory, Urban Atmosphere, and Visual Language

Wong Kar-Wai (王家卫) is an internationally acclaimed filmmaker whose work is deeply concerned with time, memory, longing, and the emotional afterlife of urban change. Although he is most often associated with Hong Kong cinema, some of his most personal works are closely connected to Shanghainese culture. For examples, *In Days of Being Wild* (阿飞正传)⁷ and *In the Mood for Love* (花样年华)⁸, actress Rebecca Pan (潘迪华) plays a woman dressed in cheongsam (旗袍) and spoke pure Shanghainese, embodying the elegance of Shanghai women of that era. Wong allows the city of Hongkong and Shanghai to be experienced not simply as a physical setting but as a structure of memory. Born in Shanghai, Wong moved to Hong Kong with his parents at the age of five, and Shanghai continued to shape Wong's life and artistic identity. For my research, Wong is important not only as a filmmaker of urban landscape, but as an artist who transforms the changing city into an emotionally charged space of remembrance.

Blossoms Shanghai (繁花)⁹ as a more direct return to Shanghai:

In the TV series *Blossoms Shanghai*, Wong turns to 1990s Shanghai. In this film and television work, Wong presents the city through its language, commerce, food, fashion, and visual spectacle. Showing the unique maximalism¹⁰ prosperity, this TV series evoke an urban atmosphere markedly different from that of the city today. It captures the closeness of urban life alongside the grandeur of landmarks such as the Peace Hotel (和平饭店) and the rising Oriental Pearl TV Tower (东方明珠电视塔), both of which reflect different dimensions of the city's

⁷ Film directed by Wong Kar-Wai, 1990

⁸ Film directed by Wong Kar-Wai, 2000

⁹ *Blossoms Shanghai*, TV series directed by Wong Kar-Wai, 2023.

¹⁰ An aesthetic approach opposed to minimalism, characterized by the principle of "more is more", can be traced back to the Baroque and Rococo art periods in France and Italy during the 17th and 18th centuries.

identity. Particularly memorable is the recreated Huanghe Road(黄河路), a dazzling and chaotic corridor of neon, restaurants, and nightlife. In the series, this street becomes more than a location: it is a social stage where one's place in the city is revealed through recognition, access, and display.



figure 6 Still from *Blossoms Shanghai*

Impressionistic color as emotional memory:

Wong Kar-Wai's use of impressionist¹¹ style color provides an important reference for my research because it shows how color can function not simply as decoration, but also as a visual language of memory. In *Blossoms Shanghai*, for example, the visual splendor of 1990s Shanghai is conveyed not through documentary realism alone, but through a heightened chromatic atmosphere of neon, reflective surfaces, and theatrical light. Such color treatment does not

¹¹ A 19th-century French art movement characterized by visible brushstrokes, vibrant colors, and capturing fleeting moments of light and modern life.

simply reconstruct the city, it reimagines and remembers the city filtered through desire, nostalgia, and emotional intensity.

Distorted movement and suspended time:

In Wong Kar-Wai's films, step-printing and stuttering motion are often used to visualize the haziness and fleeting of memory. The frame rate of a typical movie is 24 FPS¹², but in some of Wong's films, the frame rate is reduced to 12FPS or even less. The image no longer moves in a fully continuous way. The scenes appear delayed, fragmented, and suspended, as if the past can only be recalled in incomplete flashes. This approach has influenced the animation design in my own artwork, where I intentionally use an extremely slow frame rate. Rather than pursuing smooth movement, I allow the animation to unfold in a restrained and broken rhythm, so that it mirrors the way memory survives: not as a clear record, but as something fading, uncertain, and intermittently returning.

¹² 24 Frames Per Second: The industry standard for movies and TV, offering a natural, classic look with slight motion blur.

Literature Review 2: Ao Guoxing's *The Ode of Happiness*: Abandoned City Space



figure 7 *The Ode of Happiness*, photography works by Ao Guoxing, 2011

Ao Guoxing's photographic series *The Ode of Happiness* offers an important visual reference for my research, as it transforms an amusement park—once associated with crowds, laughter, noise, and collective pleasure—into an empty, silent, and absurd space. Ao is a photography artist, currently working as an associate professor and graduate students' advisor at Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts. He is also one of my undergraduate instructors. *The Ode of Happiness* captured an

abandoned amusement park in Shanghai. His series of works also inspire me to visit the old-fashioned amusement parks in Shanghai for a field trip and case study.

Urban Change and the Disappearance of Public Pleasure Spaces:

Ao's *The Ode of Happiness* can be understood within the broader context of urban change and the gradual disappearance of older public spaces. As cities continue to develop and modernize, old infrastructures must inevitably fall into disuse, be abandoned, or be replaced by newer forms of construction and consumption. In this sense, the abandoned amusement park in Ao's photographs becomes not only an isolated site of ruin, but it also is a reminder of how urban transformation leaves certain spaces and experiences behind. What was once lively, meaningful, and emotionally charged becomes obsolete, and eventually survives only as a material remnant of a past way of life. Teaching us why memory is important, this photography series are highly relevant to my research, which examines how urbanization contributes to physical change, the disappearance of the memories and lived experiences once attached to familiar places.

Emptiness and the Visualization of Absence:

What makes *The Ode of Happiness* especially striking is its visual use of emptiness, inspiring my paintings for the exhibition *Translucent yet Present*, which also does not contain a single human figure. The amusement facilities shown in the photographs are places that should normally be filled with movement, laughter, music, and crowds. In Ao's images they stand completely deserted, producing a powerful sense of absurdity and emotional dissonance. The silence of the park does not erase its past vitality; rather, it intensifies it. The viewer can almost imagine the bustling crowds, the noise, and the laughter that once animated the space. In this way, absence becomes visible and physical. The empty image allows the viewer to sense what is no longer there.

This aspect of Ao's work has been particularly inspiring for my own artistic practice and research. In my art practice of the paintings on rice paper, rather than showing people themselves, I focus on the things they have left behind, so that memory emerges through absence. Ao's work helped me realize that an uninhabited image can still be emotionally full, and that objects within a scene can become powerful storytellers of vanished lives, past experiences, and fading memory.

METHODOLOGY AND PRACTICE: WATERCOLOR ON RICE PAPER AND STORYTELLING

Scroll 1: A Spring Trip 春游日记



figure 8 Scroll 1 A Spring Trip, Watercolor on rice paper, full version, by author, 2026

This scroll painting is based on the memory of a spring trip to an old-style park. During primary school, we always go on a one-day trip in spring or autumn(春游/秋游). Nowadays, we are so busy that we seldom have time to enjoy such a trip, and those old-style parks are gradually demolished. This kind of scene becomes a memory.



figure 9 Detail of scroll 1 A Spring Trip, watercolor on rice paper, by author, 2026

The first scene is at the entrance of the park. Balloons of many kinds are tied to the front basket of a vendor's bicycle, recalling the moment when children would stop to choose one and the vendor would untie it for them. Various patterns of balloons such as lions, tigers, frogs, elephants,

Hello kitty, Kurumi, Murakami's sunflowers (though no copyright) featured the designs that children liked at that time.



figure 10 Detail of scroll 1 A Spring Trip, watercolor on rice paper, by author, 2026

The second scene is further inside the park. We walked through the stone path, relaxed and chatted on wooden benches, sat on stone stools and shared snacks on the stone table, surrounded by lush green trees and well-cut bushes.

The third scene is the amusement area, which contains a Ferris wheel, a carousel, seesaws, rocking rides, and a slide. The motion of the seesaws and rocking rides, together with the illuminated carousel, implies that space is still animated by human presence. The swing in the foreground positions the viewer as if seated within the image.



figure 11 Detail of scroll 1 A Spring Trip, watercolor on rice paper, by author, 2026



figure 12 Detail of scroll 1 A Spring Trip, watercolor on rice paper, by author, 2026
The fourth scene is flying kite on the lawn. Traditional Chinese kites patterned such as geese and goldfish float in the air, while their thin strings swaying in the wind, suggesting children running across the grass.

Scroll 2: The Last Class of the Day 放学后



figure 13 Scroll 2 The Last Class of the Day, Watercolor on rice paper, full version, by author, 2026

This scroll captures the memories of my childhood school days, particularly the moments after school when the classrooms and playground were alive with activity. Many years later, the buildings and classrooms were all redecorated to be more in line with modern styles. Walls and floors were all repainted, and the white tiles become a symbol of memory.



figure 14 Detail of scroll 2 The Last Class of the Day, watercolor on rice paper, by author, 2026

The first scene is depicted from a first-person perspective, where I am sitting in the classroom holding a book, listening to the class. The backboard was written with white chalk, accompanied by the red flag on the wall, symbolizing the class's honor. The desk is scattered with notebook and grid-paper sheet. Doodles can be found in the margins next to the book's text—common sights in an elementary school classroom.



figure 15 Detail of scroll 2 The Last Class of the Day, watercolor on rice paper, by author, 2026
The second scene shifts to the school corridor, where each classroom is marked by a sign representing the class name. The chairs are placed on top of desks, a clear sign that school is out for the day.



figure 16 Detail of scroll 2 The Last Class of the Day, watercolor on rice paper, by author, 2026
The third scene takes place on the basketball court outside the building, a place where students loved to gather and play after school. The iron fence gate is open, implicating someone sliding in or out.



figure 17 Detail of scroll 2 The Last Class of the Day, watercolor on rice paper, by author, 2026

The fourth scene shows the school's open grounds, where various childhood toys are scattered around: metal frogs(铁皮青蛙), the game of directions (东南西北), ropes(翻花绳), and glass marbles(玻璃弹珠). These toys, which were part of my everyday after-school activities, evoke the sense of carefree joy and simple fun that defined my early years.

Scroll 3: Afternoons by the Street Stalls 街边摊前的午后



figure 18 Scroll 3 Afternoon by Street Stalls, Watercolor on rice paper, full version, by author, 2026

This scroll depicts a row of roadside stalls, many of which have now disappeared or been demolished. Among all the roadside stalls I remember, the ones that left the deepest impression on me were those on the street just outside my middle school gate. For this reason, the painting is structured around the story of walking past roadside stalls after school. The entire composition is linked together by the plane trees along the street.



figure 19 Detail of scroll 3 Afternoon by Street Stalls, Watercolor on rice paper, by author, 2026

The first scene shows the school gate. The retractable gate(伸缩门), the iron doors(大铁门), and the stone bollards(石墩子) by the roadside were all familiar features of the school environment at that time.



figure 21 Detail of scroll 3 Afternoon by Street Stalls, Watercolor on rice paper, by author, 2026
The second scene focuses on the roadside stalls. From left to right, they include a grocery stall(小卖部), a stationery stall(文具店), a oden stall(关东煮) with a drinks machine beside it, an accessories stall(精品店), a pancake stall(手抓饼), and a fast-food shop(豪大大鸡排). Each store is crowded with goods, while the food stalls display menus and snacks in abundance. These details suggest a lively atmosphere of busy trade, reflecting how prosperous and full of life the street once felt after school.



figure 20 Detail of scroll 3 Afternoon by Street Stalls, Watercolor on rice paper, by author, 2026
The third scene depicts the road turning toward home. On both sides of the street are plane trees and well-cut bushes, creating a quieter atmosphere after the lively commercial area.

Scroll 4: The Mall Before the New Year 年节将近的地下商场



figure 22 Scroll 4 The Mall Before the New Year, Watercolor on rice paper, full version, by author, 2026

This painting depicts an underground shopping mall, taking Dimei Shopping Street (迪美购物中心) in People's Square, Shanghai, as its background. Throughout the whole image, I have incorporated elements of the Spring Festival, such as streamers, lanterns, and decorative fu (福)-character stickers, to suggest that the New Year is approaching. The painting is not only a recollection of a disappearing underground shopping street, but also a remembrance of the fading festive atmosphere of the Chinese New Year.



figure 23 Detail of Scroll 4 The Mall Before the New Year, Watercolor on rice paper, full version, by author, 2026

The first scene shows a long corridor with a variety of neon signs. Their bright colors and dense arrangement suggest the lively and commercial atmosphere that once defined the space.



figure 24 Detail of Scroll 4 The Mall Before the New Year, Watercolor on rice paper, full version, by author, 2026
The second scene presents an old-fashioned clothing shop selling inexpensive wholesale women's fashion. Filled with garments, this scene evokes the sense of abundance and accessibility that it used to attract young shoppers to these underground retail streets.



figure 25 Detail of Scroll 4 The Mall Before the New Year, Watercolor on rice paper, full version, by author, 2026
The third scene is a photo booth shop. The lit-up screen and lamps, the accessories placed nearby, and the sample photographs displayed on the glass all imply that someone is in the middle of having their pictures taken. Although no figures appear in the image, these details suggest activity and human presence through traces left in the scene.



figure 26 Detail of Scroll 4 The Mall Before the New Year, Watercolor on rice paper, full version, by author, 2026
The fourth scene shows a nail salon, where rows of colorful nail polish are carefully arranged.

Nail tools are scattered on the table, implicating the business of the store.

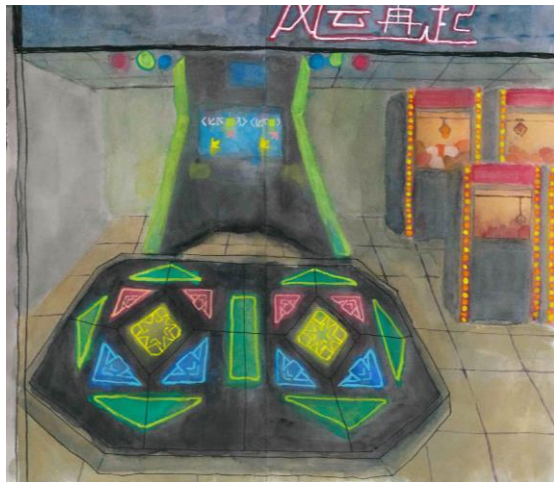


figure 27 Detail of Scroll 4 The Mall Before the New Year, Watercolor on rice paper, full version, by author, 2026
The fifth scene depicts an arcade. The flashing lights and glowing screen of the dance machine, together with the claw of the doll machine reaching for a toy, indicate the excitement and liveliness of the space.

Paintings: Old Neighborhood



figure 29 Stairwell of the Old Apartment, watercolor on rice paper, painted by author, 2025



figure 30 Old Community Fitness Equipment, watercolor on rice paper, painted by author, 2025

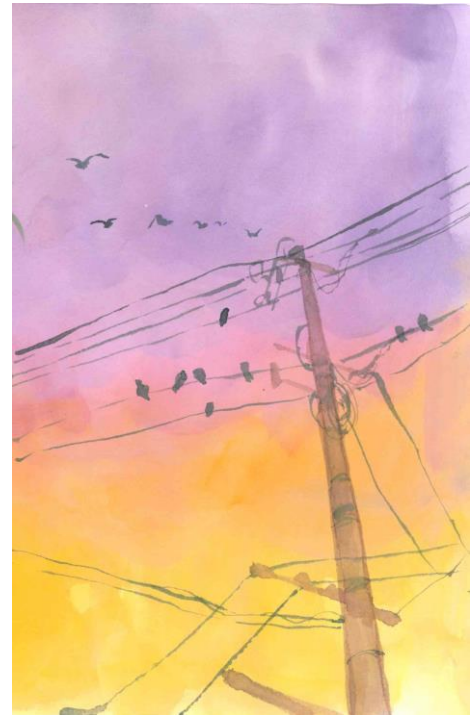


figure 28 Telephone Pole and Sparrows, watercolor on rice paper, painted by author, 2025

These three paintings depict an old-style residential neighborhood in the city, focusing on the ordinary details that once shaped everyday life in such communities. These details include stamped advertisements on the walls of the stairwell, garden-style window frames, and exposed electrical wiring running alongside the buildings. The paintings also include the public fitness equipment downstairs, electrical poles and sparrows resting on them. Together, these details highlight small but familiar elements that carry strong memories of older urban living.

Visual Language and Material Experiment

Spatial-temporal memory:

One of the primary influences on my visual language is the concept of spatial-temporal memory, which refers to how our brains remember both the physical location (spatial) and the time (temporal) when something occurred. My artworks attempt to illustrate this duality by using disjointed brushstrokes, layered textures, and shifting perspectives that visually mimic how memories come and go. As an individual recalls a past event, the clarity of some elements fades while others remain sharply defined. This technique allows me to create an immersive experience where the viewer's perception is as fragmented and shifting as their own memories might be.

Integration of Abstract and Figurative Painting Styles:

The visual style in my artwork combines both abstract and figurative painting techniques to depict the memory which is sometimes vague and sometimes clear. This integration is not only a technical choice but also a reflection of how memories themselves can be blurred, fragmented, and indistinct, much like how time affects our recollection of past places. Through a blend of abstraction and realism, I aim to depict places as they exist in my memory — not in their physical accuracy, but in their emotional resonance. The abstraction allows for a subjective exploration of the feeling of a place, while the figurative elements ground the viewer in recognizable scenes and objects that evoke nostalgia and connection.

Chronological Storytelling and scroll:

The use of scrolls to frame these narratives further enhances this method of storytelling. The scroll format allows the artwork to unfold over time, mirroring how memories often emerge gradually, piece by piece. As the viewers move across the scroll, they are drawn into the flow of memories, akin to re-experiencing a personal recollection. This sequential movement mimics the way our understanding of place changes over time — with some details becoming clearer, while others blur or disappear altogether. Thus, the scrolls serve not only as physical representations of memory but as metaphors for the process of recalling and reinterpreting the past.

Experimentation with Watercolor on Rice paper



figure 31 Painting process, by author

In my experimental process, I choose to use watercolor on rice paper, a traditional medium in Chinese painting, as it carries both personal and cultural significance. Unlike general watercolor paper, rice paper is more delicate and fragile, and absorbs water and pigment very quickly, causing the colors to bleed rapidly and blend into one another. As a result, the paint becomes much harder to control, and the edges of forms often dissolve into the surrounding surface. Rather than resisting this material behavior, I chose to embrace it as part of the work itself. Through this process, I developed a painting method that combines blurred and defined areas.

This interplay between clarity and diffusion reflects the nature of memory in my thesis: memories do not remain fixed or fully intact, but gradually fade, overlap, and fragment over time. In this sense, the uncontrollable flow of pigment on rice paper becomes a visual metaphor for the fluidity and disappearance of recollection. This effect helps convey the feeling of loss or disappearance, a common theme in the exploration of urban transformation and memory.

TRANSLUCENT YET PRESENT:
EXHIBITION DESIGN AND MEMORY EXPERIENCE

Hand-drawn Animation: From Empty Scenes to Abstract Figures

The links to the full animation are provided here:

<https://youtu.be/h0Luj1czFFo>

<https://youtu.be/yNZbkpfOq2Q>



figure 32 Stills from the hand-drawn animation, digital painting, by author
Hand-drawn frame-by-frame animation forms an important part of my artistic practice, as it allows memory to be expressed not only through still images but also through movement. While my watercolor paintings on rice paper preserve scenes as fragile and suspended moments,

animation introduces duration and change, enabling these remembered spaces to become active once again.

One feature of my animations is the introduction of abstract human figures. In my watercolor paintings, I avoid depicting any single figure, allowing objects, spaces, and details to suggest human presence and events through absence. In the animations, however, I add ghost-like figures who appear to move through the scene. These figures are not realistic portraits but rather traces of those who once inhabited these spaces. They represent the people in memory who have grown older, drifted away, or lost contact over time, yet who continue to exist in remembered scenes. Through these moving figures, animation allows absence and presence to coexist: the people are no longer fully there, yet they have not completely vanished.

Influenced by Wong Kar-Wai's use of step-printing and stuttering motion (as I write in Literature Review 1 chapter), another feature of my animation is that the frame rate is as slow as 1FPS. In Wong's films, the image often appears delayed and interrupted, creating a visual sense of memory as something blurred and unstable. Inspired by this technique, I deliberately set the frame rate of my animations at 1FPS, allowing the image to move in a highly reduced and discontinuous way. Rather than producing smooth motion, this extremely slow frame rate creates a sense of visual interruption and suspension. The image seems to hesitate between stillness and movement, which reflects the way memories return: not as complete and continuous narratives, but as broken flashes, pauses, and fragments.

Set up and Exhibition Design

The exhibition *Translucent yet present* combines watercolor paintings on rice paper with hand-drawn frame-by-frame animation to create an immersive experience for the audience to be amid memories. This exhibition is designed to evoke a sense of transparency and fragility. As cities

grow and landscapes change, many of these once-familiar scenes have physically disappeared. Yet, they remain vividly present in the mind—intangible, but never truly lost.

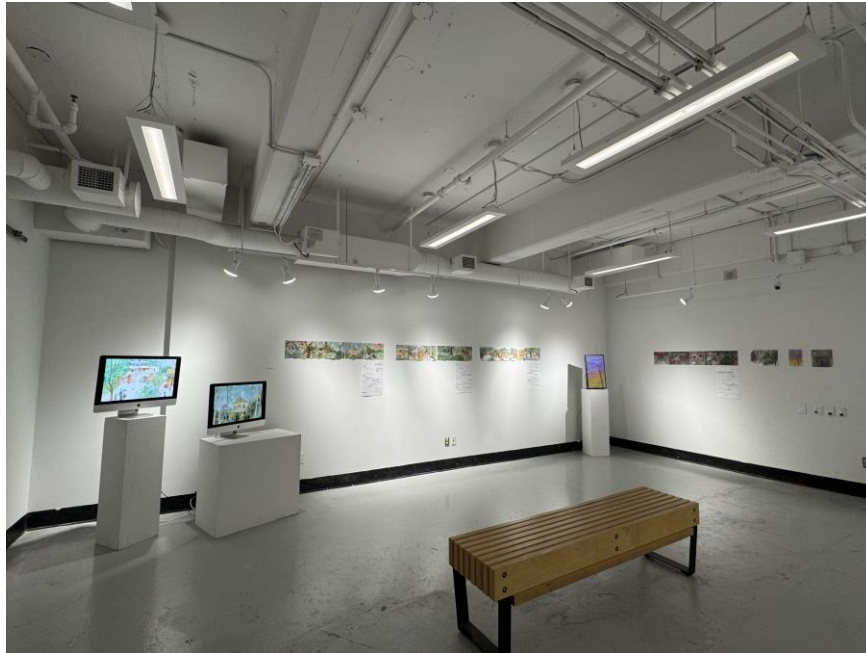


figure 33 Panoramic view of the exhibition *Translucent yet present*

In the title *Translucent yet present*, the word “translucent” carries several layers of meaning. First, it refers to the visual quality of watercolor on rice paper, where pigment spreads lightly across the surface and creates a sense of softness, transparency, and fragility. Second, it relates to the transparent human figures that appear in my hand-drawn animations. These ghost-like forms are not fully solid or defined, but instead suggest traces of people remembered through time. Finally, “translucent” also points to the nature of memory itself. Memories are often not entirely clear or fixed; they fade, blur, and become partially obscured as time passes. In this sense, translucency becomes both a material effect and a metaphor for recollection—something fragile, fading, and difficult to fully grasp, yet still present in the mind.



figure 34 Installation view

Motion Poster link: <https://youtu.be/xJCxIX9ghl8>

Using the same hand-drawn animation method as in my moving-image pieces, I created an animated poster for the exhibition. I selected the image of the electric pole and animated the movement of sparrows flying around it. This approach allowed the promotional material to remain closely connected to the themes of the exhibition, while also carrying the same sense of memory, fragility, and quiet movement found in the artworks themselves.



figure 35 Narrative layout design

Beside each scroll I placed a short poem-story that I had written in response to the painting.

These texts functioned as narrative companions to the visual works, helping viewers who may not be familiar with memories of old Shanghai to understand the scenes and emotions represented in the images.

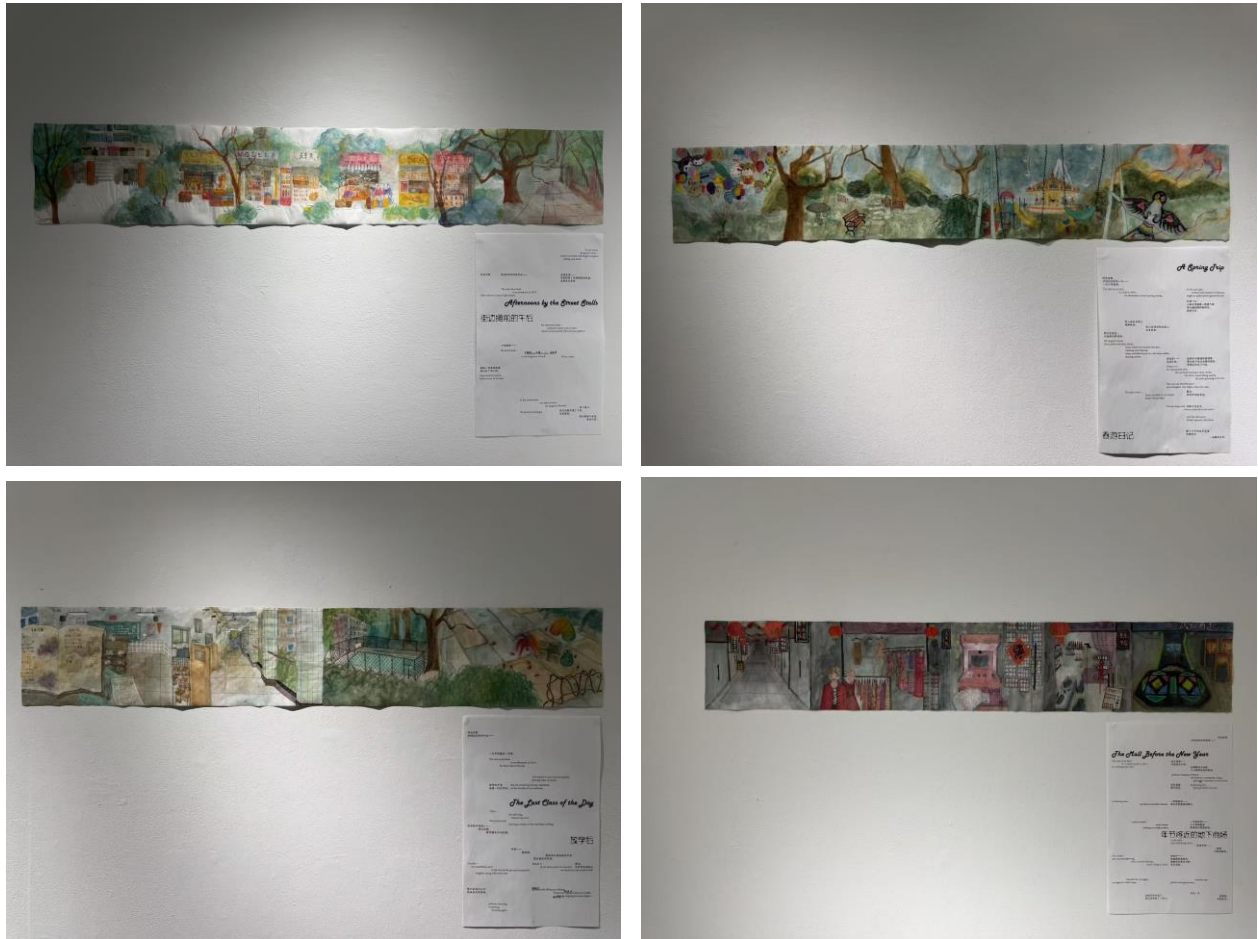


figure 43 Installation view

The combination of motion posters, painted scrolls, and poetic texts allowed the exhibition space to function not only as a display of artworks, but as a more immersive and readable environment of remembrance.

FINAL REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE PLANS

Scrolls or Long Paintings?

Looking back on this project, one of my reflections is about the format of the works themselves. I have described them as scrolls, because they are informed by the logic of scroll storytelling: they unfold gradually, and they invite the viewer to move through the story piece by piece. Scroll is a traditional Chinese painting format. Watercolor is a western painting style. So I started to ask myself whether they are scrolls in a traditional sense, or they are better understood as contemporary long paintings shaped by the idea of the scroll.

Looking ahead, I aim to focus more on the creation of Chinese traditional art techniques, particularly in the true traditional sense of scroll painting. I plan to delve deeper into the study of traditional Chinese painting techniques, especially ink and wash painting, and explore how these ancient forms can be applied in contemporary creations. I hope to merge the traditional scroll format with modern concepts of memory, emotion, and space, creating works that are not only rich in historical significance but also emotionally resonant, contributing to the preservation and promotion of the unique charm and cultural essence of Chinese traditional art.

More immersive exhibition experience with projector

Another reflection is about the exhibition format, which aims to provide immersive experience for the viewers. Looking back, I think the video work could have been presented more effectively through projection rather than only through a screen-based display. Projection would create a more immersive spatial experience. More importantly, if viewers stood in front of the projected image, their shadows would appear on the surface. It would echo the shadow-like figures in my hand-drawn animation. The audience would no longer be outside the work as observers; they themselves become part of the artwork.

Expanding the Archive of Memory

For future development, I see this project as still expandable. I would like to continue researching my family history, through more conversations with my family members. I also want to do more field trips in Shanghai, revisiting old neighborhoods and urban spaces to deepen the connection between personal memory and changing urban environments. I would like to continue making more illustrations and expand the visual archive of this project. Retain more things that are worth remembering.

Conclusion

My research has explored the loss of memory and the importance of remembering in the context of rapid urban development. Shifting the focus away from place as purely physical territory, my research has examined memory as something fragile, fleeting and emotionally embedded in everyday scenes. Through personal and intergenerational experience, this research has shown that urban transformation does not simply alter the material environment of the city, but also erodes the familiar scenes, objects, relationships, and atmospheres through which memory is sustained.

The starting point of this thesis lies in the memory of my great-grandmother and the old house in Shanghai where I was born and grew up. After my great-grandmother passed away, the room that once carried her presence was redecorated and rented out, and my family moved elsewhere. The old scenes and people once in the old house will no longer exist, appearing only in memories. This experience became central to my understanding that the disappearance of space is never only architectural: it is also the loss of a lived world. From this personal point of departure, the thesis expanded to examine broader examples of urban change in Shanghai, including old residential communities, roadside shops, underground shopping streets, old-style amusement

spaces, and school environments. These case studies revealed how urban redevelopment, commercial restructuring, and changes in social life gradually detach memory from the spaces that once held it.

The literature and visual references discussed in this thesis further supported this inquiry. Writers, filmmakers, and photographers such as Wong Kar-Wai and Ao Guoxing have demonstrated that memory can be activated not only through direct narrative, but through atmosphere, fragmentation, emptiness, color, and the traces left behind in space. Their work helped clarify how visual art can approach memory not as stable documentation, but as something partial, fading, and emotionally resonant. This has been especially important for my own practice, in which familiar scenes are often depicted without visible figures. Instead, I allow objects and details to suggest absent lives and vanished experiences.

Within my artistic practice, watercolor on rice paper became a significant material language for expressing this understanding of memory. The uncontrollable diffusion of pigment on the paper, rather than being treated as a technical obstacle, was embraced as a metaphor for recollection itself: blurred, unstable, layered, and incomplete. The combination of soft washes and clearer details allowed me to develop a visual strategy of ambiguity and definition, reflecting the way memory contains both vivid fragments and fading obscurity. In this process, material experimentation became inseparable from conceptual inquiry.

Hand-drawn animation extended this investigation further by introducing time, movement, and rhythm into the representation of memory. Inspired in part by Wong Kar-Wai's use of fragmented and stuttering cinematic movement, I employed an extremely slow frame rate of 1 FPS, allowing the image to hesitate between stillness and motion. Through falling leaves, turning rides, and ghost-like abstract figures, the animations suggested that remembered spaces are never

fully empty: they remain inhabited by traces of those who once moved through them. In this way, the animation did not simply illustrate the paintings, but brought memory into motion as something returning in fragments.

The exhibition *Translucent yet present* brought these concerns together in spatial form. Through the combination of paintings, hand-drawn animation, poetic texts, and exhibition design, the project sought to create an immersive environment in which viewers could experience memory as both fragile and enduring. The title itself encapsulated the central argument of the thesis: memory may be translucent, blurred, and partially faded, yet it remains present in the mind, in emotion, and in visual traces. The exhibition therefore functioned not only as an outcome of the research, but also as a further demonstration that art can serve as a method of remembrance.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that in a rapidly changing city, remembering becomes an essential act. Urban development may replace old buildings, reconfigure streets, and erase familiar environments, but art offers a way to resist total disappearance. By attending to fragile details, fading atmospheres, and the subtle remains of everyday life, visual practice can preserve stories that would otherwise be lost. To remember, in this context, is not simply to look back with nostalgia, but to insist that what has disappeared still matters.

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APPENDIX 1

Case Study 1: Renovation of Old Neighborhoods



figure 44 The photos I took in the existing old communities, 2025



figure 46 Photo I take in new residence I am living now, 2025



figure 45 Painting related to case study of old neighborhood, watercolor on rice paper, by author

I have visited the old neighborhoods that still exist, which were the first-generation residences¹³ in Shanghai. These were the collectivist housing units that sprang up in China in the 1950s, and throughout the 1950s, more than two hundred new workers' villages were built in Shanghai, providing housing for 600,000 workers' families, including my great-grandmother's home. I spent most of my toddlerhood time with my great-grandmother in that kind of neighborhood.

(This story scene will be included in my artworks) I can still remember the small but cozy room and crowded but full of joy and neighbor's laughter. These old neighborhoods, though humble, were filled with communal activities and strong social bonds. The narrow alleys, the shared courtyards, and the sounds of daily life were deeply embedded in my memory.

Our family moved to new residences in 2010s, when new-generation residences¹⁴ were now popular. The emergence of the new-generation residences and their core characteristics lie in that they are the outcome of the housing system reform and represent the development of China's society and economy. The building uses new materials and paints, the rooms are larger and spacious, and the architectural design is more modern in new residences, providing more comfortable and convenient life for the new generations. The rapid pace of urbanization in Shanghai has led to significant changes in the physical landscape, with the demolition of old neighborhoods to make way for modern residential complexes and commercial buildings. These changes are not just about the physical reshaping of space but also about the erosion of cultural identity and memory attached to these places.

¹³ A product of the planned economy before the 1990s in China. Such housing was allocated by the state, but such were limited in size and constrained by underdeveloped construction technology.

¹⁴ Residences built in 2010s, marking a stage of improved residential quality and a growing emphasis on community-oriented and ecological design.

Case Study 2: The Loss of Newsstand and Roadside Markets



figure 48 The old-time newsstands, the picture is from the internet.

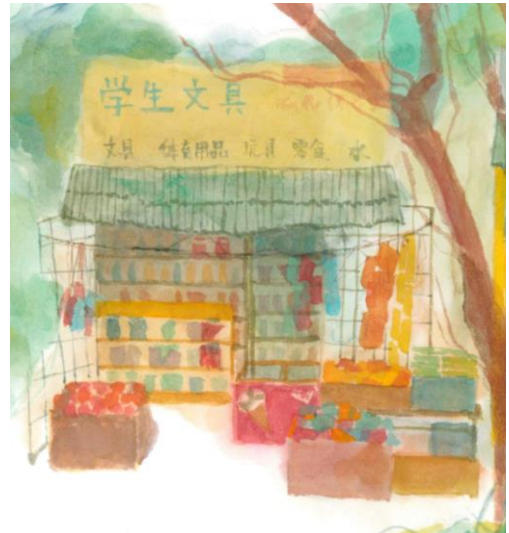


figure 47 Painting related to case study of roadside markets, watercolor on rice paper, by author



figure 49 Roadside markets in old times. The picture is from the Internet.

Another significant change I observed during my field research is the disappearance of newsstands and roadside markets, which were once essential elements of urban life in Shanghai. These small, often family-owned kiosks and street vendors served as informal hubs of community interaction, where people gathered to buy magazines, snacks, and daily necessities. I remember passing by these newsstands on my way home from school, picking up my favorite magazines and novels. I also remember the fragrance of food and the laughter of children sharing

food in those roadside markets. Though poorly equipped, the products in those newsstands and roadside markets are so cheap that we junior high school students, with little pocket money, could also afford them. These places were not just commercial spaces—they were social spaces that fostered informal exchanges and contributed to the local character of the area.

However, over the years, many of these newsstands and roadside markets have closed due to policy reasons¹⁵. The rise of digital media and the shift towards online reading have diminished the demand for physical newspapers and magazines. At the same time, urban policies aimed at improving city cleanliness and traffic flow have led to the dismantling of many street vendors. Roadside markets selling snacks, junk food and low-quality goods have been replaced by more regulated, sanitized commercial spaces. Many years later, when I returned to places once filled with the laughter and joy of children, there were now only students hurriedly making their way back home after school. These changes reflect broader trends in urban management, where the informal and organic spaces of the city are being replaced by more structured, regulated environments that prioritize efficiency over community engagement. As urbanization increases, there is a tendency to replace the old, often chaotic, ways of life with more modern, commercialized solutions.

¹⁵ See *Notice on Issuing the Guiding Opinions on Further Regulating Street-vending Activities (Trial)* (Hu Lü Rong Gui [2023] No. 4), issued by the Shanghai Municipal Administration of Greening and City Appearance on 5 July 2023 and effective from 5 August 2023.

Case Study 3: The Old Amusement Park vs. Shanghai Disney Land



figure 52 Early propaganda poster for Jinjiang Amusement Park (from the Internet)



figure 51 photo I take when I drive past in 2025



figure 50 Painting related to case study of old amusement park, watercolor on rice paper, by author

Inspired by Ao guoxing’s photography artworks, I also researched the old amusement parks that I frequently visited during spring and autumn outings in my childhood. I can still recall the recreational facilities—slides, miniature trains, roller coasters, carousels, and more—where we had joy and fun together. At noon, we would picnic on the lawns, sharing food and laughter with one another. These spaces once functioned not merely as sites of recreation, but as everyday

places where collective activities gradually accumulated into embodied memories. Over time, many of these traditional amusement parks gradually became outdated and were eventually closed, as younger generations increasingly gravitated toward the large-scale theme parks such as Shanghai Disney Land¹⁶ and LEGO Land¹⁷, which offer more immersive attractions, games, performances, and experiences.

Jinjiang Amusement Park, first built and opened to the public in 1984, holds the collective memories of several generations—not only my own, but also those of my parents. As the first large-scale amusement park in Shanghai, it was a place I visited countless times as a child. Even now, I can vividly remember parents lining up with their children for the roller coaster rides. Yet with the continuous transformation of the city and the emergence of new theme park projects, the facilities of Jinjiang Amusement Park—after nearly forty years of operation—could no longer meet contemporary market demands.

When I drove past the place of Jinjiang Amusement Park in 2025, most of its facilities had already been dismantled or removed. The place once held not only recreational facilities but also my childhood without sorrow and anxiety no longer existed. However, the absence of its physical structures did not sever my connection to the place. Instead, the encounter activated memories embedded in the physical place itself. Urbanization and industrialization inevitably bring changes to social culture, and new forms of recreation will continue to replace the old. However, the emotional connections formed through these former spaces do not disappear. Even as new developments emerge, passing through these old sites still has the power to awaken personal and collective memories, reminding us that although places may change, the affective bonds tied to the old urban places endure.

¹⁶ Opened on 16 June 2016 in Shanghai

¹⁷ Open on 5 July 2025 in Shanghai

Case Study 4: The Silent Decline of Shanghai's Underground Shopping Mall

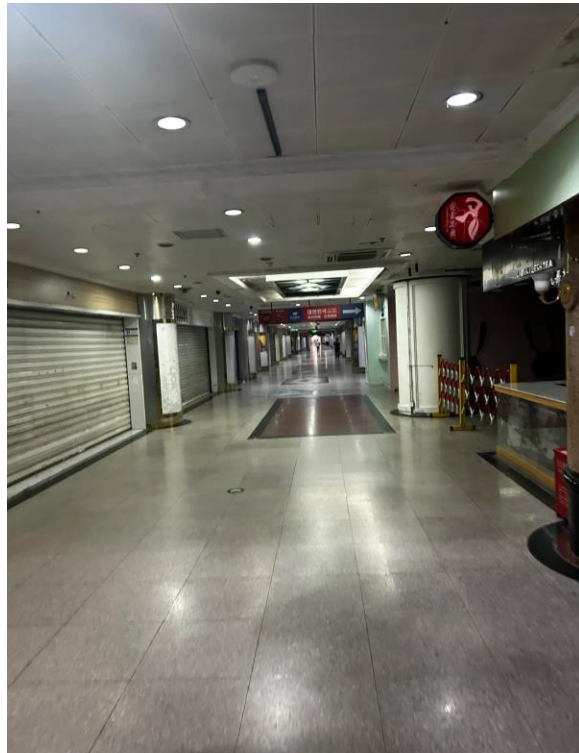


figure 53 The present condition of an underground shopping street in Shanghai People's Square(人民广场),photographed by the author, 2025.



figure 54 Painting related to case study of old underground shopping street, watercolor on rice paper, by author

The changing condition of the underground shopping streets around People's Square(人民广场迪美购物中心) reflects not only the shift of commercial style, but also a broader process of urban restructuring. Once associated with low-cost fashion, accessories, nail salons, photo booths, and informal youth consumption, these underground malls formed part of the everyday memory of Shanghai's urban life in the late 1990s and 2000s. When I revisit the underground shopping streets around People's Square in 2025, half of those stores were closed, leaving the tightly closed shop doors and the rolling shutter doors that will never be opened again. Some of the shops have been transformed into spaces catering to young people's ACGN-oriented consumption. In recent years, parts of this underground commercial network have been affected by contract expiry, business-format upgrading, and the strategic repositioning of retail space¹⁸. At the same time, the rise in e-commerce and the emergence of newer above-ground commercial complexes have weakened the appeal of older underground retail environments. In this sense, the underground shopping street is no longer simply a declining retail space; it has become a site where the memory of an earlier form of urban consumption is fractured, relocated, and partially erased.

¹⁸ Hong Kong Plaza Underground Shopping Street(香港名店街) suspended operations in 2023 due to the expiration of its lease and subsequent business-format upgrading. However, the main body of Dimei Shopping Centre(迪美购物中心) did not close as a whole; instead, it was still reported to be in continued operation during 2024–2025 and was further transforming into a gathering place for ACGN-oriented consumption.

APPENDIX 2: POEMS

The year turns back
to a day in 2010—
an elementary school spring outing.
At the park gate,
vendors held clusters of balloons,
bright as spilled paint
against the sky.
We stepped inside.
Stone paths stretched ahead.
Some rested on wooden benches,
chatting and relaxing.
Some unfolded lunches on stone tables,
sharing snacks.

Deeper in—
the amusement park.
The carousel turning in slow circles,
the Ferris wheel lifting its quiet
promise,
the slide gleaming in the sun.
This was our favorite place—
where laughter rose higher than the
rides.
the open lawn.
Kites trembled in our hands
before taking flight.
Thread unspooled,
voices scattered in the wind—
and the afternoon
floated upward with them.

时光回转

回到 2010 年的一天——

一次小学春游。

公园门口，

小贩手里握着一簇簇气球，

像打翻的颜料般鲜亮，

映着天空。

我们走进去。

石板路向前延伸。

有人坐在木椅上

闲聊休息；

有人在清凉的石桌上

摊开午餐，

分享零食。

再往里——

是游乐场。

旋转木马慢慢转着圆圈，

摩天轮升起它安静的期待，

滑梯在阳光下闪亮。

这是我们最喜欢的地方——

笑声比游乐设施

升得更高。

最后，

来到开阔的草地。

风筝在我们手中颤动

然后飞起。

线轴慢慢放开，

声音散进风里——

而整个下午

也随它们

一同飘向天空。

The year turns back
to an afternoon in 2012—
the final class of the day.
The teacher's voice moved steadily
through lines of poetry.
But my mind had already wandered.
In the doodles of my textbook.
Then—
the bell rang,
School was over.
We poured into
the long corridor of the teaching building.

Outside—
the basketball court.
A ball struck the ground repeatedly,
laughter rising with each shot.
Beside it,
on an open patch of concrete,
We made our own small world.
Shuttlecocks lifting and falling.
Hopscotch squares are drawn in chalk.
Strings looping between fingers—
patterns forming,
vanishing,
forming again.

时光回转
回到 2012 年的午后——
一天中的最后一节课。
老师的声音
读着一行行诗句。
可我的心思
早已飘远。
在课本的涂鸦中。
忽然——
铃声响起，
放学了。
我们涌进
教学楼长长的走廊。

外面——
篮球场。
篮球一下一下
击打着地面，
每一次投篮
都扬起笑声。
旁边，
一块空旷的水泥地上，
我们有自己的小世界。
毽子起落。
粉笔画出的跳房子格子。
指间翻转的线绳。

The year turns back
to an afternoon in 2010—
After school in junior high school.
On the street,
the grocery store—
shelves crowded with bright wrappers,
selling junk food.
the stationery shop—
notebooks, pens, pencil cases…
whose covers painted with various
patterns.

the food kiosk—
pancakes, hamburgers, oden,
in the fragrance of food.
What a feast.
One hundred meters,
half an hour of wonder.
At the intersection
our steps slowed,
our laughter thinned.
We parted unwillingly.

时光回转

回到 2014 年的放学后——

街道上，

杂货店里——

货架挤满了色彩鲜亮的包装，

卖着各式零食；

文具店里——

本子、钢笔、笔袋……

封面绘着不同的图案；

小吃摊前——

煎饼、汉堡、关东煮，

食物的香气在空气里弥散。

短短一百米的街道，

却盛满半小时的惊喜。

到了路口，

我们的脚步慢了下来，

互相道别。

我们依依不舍地

各自回家。

The year turns back
to a winter break in 2015—
An underground mall.
Lanterns hanging overhead,
red ribbons crossing the ceiling,
golden Fu(福) characters on the doors,
implicating that Spring Festival was near.
A clothing store—
mirrors on every wall,
we tried on beautiful dresses.
A photo booth—
the curtain closed,
small frames
holding our bright smiles.

A nail salon—
rows of shining colors.
The arcade—
claw machines glowing,
dance arrows flashing,
music rising in waves.
Beneath the city lights,
we lingered a little longer.
One weekend,
half a day of glitter.
And the year
quietly moving forward.

时光回转

回到 2015 年的寒假——

地下商场——

灯笼悬在头顶，

红绸横过天花板，

门上贴着金色的福字，

悄声提醒

春节将近。

一家服装店——

四面都是镜子，

我们试穿漂亮的裙子。

一间拍照亭——

帘子拉上，

小小的相框里

装着我们明亮的笑。

一家美甲店——

一排排闪亮的颜色。

游戏厅——

抓娃娃机亮着光，

跳舞机的箭头闪烁，

音乐一阵阵涌起。

在城市的灯光下，

我们多停留了一会儿。

一个周末，

半天的闪亮时光。

而这一年

悄悄地

向前走去。