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## **Expression of Spiritual Connotation of Chinese Revolutionary Historical-Themed Oil Paintings in the 1970s**

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### **Abstract**

This study takes the revolutionary historical-themed oil paintings created in the 1970s in the collection of *The Art of the Party* as samples and studies the spiritual connotations contained in the revolutionary historical-themed oil paintings by analysing the content of textual documents and artworks and using relevant theory as the research instrument. The researcher aims to analyse textual data to uncover the historical background, conception process, and methods of expression in revolutionary historical-themed oil paintings. The ultimate goal is to contribute a new theoretical achievement to the study of these paintings.

**Keywords:** Revolutionary history; oil painting; spiritual connotation

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### **1.0 Introduction**

According to the literature survey, the Chinese revolutionary historical theme is a topic worthy of in-depth research, and there is still much research space for researchers to explore. Based on the results of the literature collection, the researcher found that few articles study the spiritual connotations of revolutionary historical-themed oil paintings. Most existing research is conducted from the creation perspective, studying how Chinese artists use creative techniques to express revolutionary historical-themed works. In 2021, which coincides with the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China, China Central Television launched a program called *The Art of the Party* (Qian, 2021) and selected more than one hundred works of art to be exhibited at the National Museum of China (National Museum of China, 2021). Then, in 2023, Zhejiang People's Fine Arts Press published the collection of *The Art of the Party* (Ding, 2023). Many oil paintings are among the classic works of art in the collection, including works by famous masters and outstanding young artists. Based on this, this study uses the oil paintings created in the 1970s in *The Art of the Party* collection as samples (see Table 1). It explains how Chinese artists express the spiritual connotations implied in Chinese revolutionary historical-themed oil paintings by analysing the content of textual documents and artworks. In addition, during the specific analysis process, the researcher will use Rosalind Ragans' theory as a research instrument to analyse the content and obtain answers to the research question.

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Table 1. Samples of Artworks

No.	Title	Author	Time	Size	Collection Institution
1	The Guerrillas Soldiers	Wei Qimei	1977	244cm*444cm	Military Museum of the Chinese People's Revolution
2	Party Branches Built on the Companies	Gaoquan	1977	188cm*198cm	Military Museum of the Chinese People's Revolution

(Source: Made by Author)

## 2.0 Literature Review

In existing research, Zhang Chen (2020) explored the different visual presentation methods and spiritual implications of Jinggangshan's revolutionary historical themes in art creation. He divided the artistic creations on the theme of Jinggangshan into three categories: "The Great Meeting", "Mao Zedong in Jinggangshan", and "Revolutionary Historical Landscape of Jinggangshan" and analysed how artists reshaped the revolutionary history through these themes, showing the Communist Party of China's firm belief in spreading the revolutionary fire under challenging times, and how to inspire people in contemporary times to keep their original aspirations in mind, firm their ideals, and forge ahead courageously. Gao Yan (2021) conducted an in-depth study on the expression of "family and country feelings" in oil paintings of Chinese revolutionary historical themes, analysed the development and evolution of oil paintings of Chinese revolutionary historical themes in different periods since the founding of New China, and analysed in detail how these oil paintings convey deep patriotic feelings and historical responsibility from the four artistic expression techniques of composition, colour and light, tone and brushstroke texture. Wang Weidong (2024) conducted an in-depth discussion on the effective use of oil paintings with revolutionary historical themes in museum display and exhibition and cultural and creative research and development, emphasising that oil paintings of revolutionary historical themes inherited the red revolutionary spirit and reflected the artist's pursuit of a sense of responsibility and mission for the times. Taking the *Literacy Class* in the Yimeng area as an example, the author demonstrated how to reproduce revolutionary historical facts through oil painting and create works rich in humanistic atmosphere and artistic connotations. At the same time, the author also discussed how to incorporate red elements into the design of cultural and creative products to meet the public's ever-increasing aesthetic taste and cultural needs. Finally, the author proposed a multi-dimensional design idea of red characteristics and artistic innovation and demonstrated how to reshape the cultural interpretation of revolutionary spirit in cultural and creative design by combining red cultural elements with modern cultural elements so that the "red revolutionary spirit" can gain new life in cultural and creative design. Li Hongxian et al. (2024) studied the expression of the images of revolutionary heroes in Chinese oil paintings and revealed how Chinese artists use oil paintings to convey the spiritual connotation of revolutionary heroes through the analysis of five representative works. By reviewing the literature, the researcher found a significant knowledge gap in the study of spiritual connotations in oil paintings of Chinese revolutionary historical themes.

## 3.0 Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

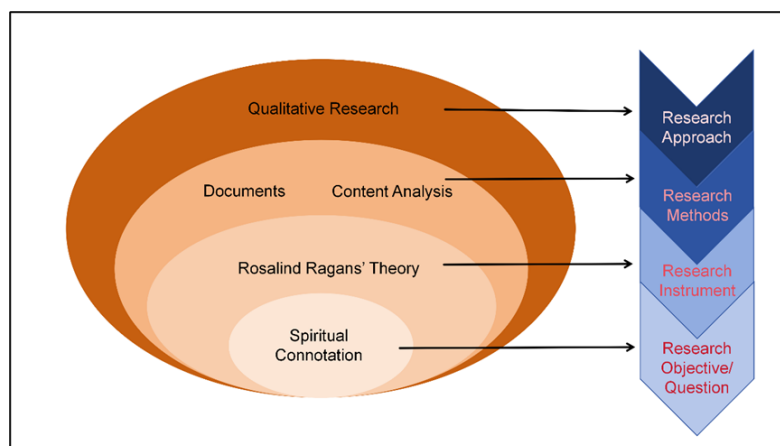


Fig. 1: Structure of the Research Design in Methodology

(Source: Made by Author)

According to Ranjit Kumar (2014), research design is the road map you decide to follow during your research journey to find answers to your research questions. To better conduct the study, the researcher constructs a concise research methodology design, as shown in Fig. 1. This study's research objective and question is to explore the spiritual connotation of Chinese revolutionary historical-themed oil paintings. Since the topic of this study is qualitative, the research approach will choose qualitative research. Qualitative research uses words to seek understanding by describing phenomena in context and interpreting processes or meanings (Silverman, 2016). The specific research method will use documents and content analysis, and Rosalind Ragans' theory will be used as a research instrument

in the analysis process, like Creswell (2018) said that theory is used as a broad explanation for behaviour and attitudes, and using a theoretical lens or perspective in qualitative research can provide an overall orienting lens for the study of questions. This study attempts to use these research methods to obtain answers to the research question and achieve the research objective.

### 3.2 Research Method

This study is qualitative research, so it adopts qualitative research methods. First, the data collection method of this study mainly uses documents. Documents consist of public and private records that qualitative researchers obtain about a site or participants in a study, and these sources provide valuable information in helping researchers understand central phenomena in qualitative studies (Creswell & Guetterman, 2024). The researcher uses documents to collect text and image documents related to the research topic and then reads these documents and sorts out the information applicable to the research topic to provide valuable data for analysis. Second, the data analysis method of this study mainly uses content analysis. The reason for using content analysis is that it is the systematic and methodologically controlled scientific analysis of texts, pictures, films, and other contents of communication (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023) and is very flexible and suitable for analysing the data of this study. While analysing artworks, the researcher will use Rosalind Ragans' theory to analyse the artistic elements and principles used in Chinese revolutionary historical-themed oil paintings and ultimately analyse the spiritual connotations of these paintings.

## 4.0 Findings

This study mainly explores the implied spiritual connotations of revolutionary historical-themed oil paintings by analysing the relevant content of samples of artworks, such as the historical background, creative process and methods of the works.

### 4.1 The Guerrillas Soldiers

At the end of 1938, Japan launched a series of attacks on the central area of Hebei Province and occupied most of the cities. In early 1939, the Eighth Route Army took advantage of the plain terrain to launch guerrilla warfare, wiped out a large number of enemies, and killed Japanese Lieutenant General Abe Nobuhide. Guerrilla warfare, as a unique combat method of the Eighth Route Army, made a solid contribution to the victory of the Anti-Japanese War (Party History Research Office of the CPC Central Committee, 2011). In 1977, Wei Qimei created the oil painting *The Guerrillas Soldiers* based on this historical event. The title of the painting is derived from the lyrics of the *Yellow River Cantata* (Shang, 2011) and the content depicted the scene of the Chinese Eighth Route Army rushing out of the *Qing Sha Zhang* (i.e. sorghum) when conducting guerrilla warfare with the Japanese army in the plains during the Anti-Japanese War (see Fig. 2). In 1976, Wei Qimei was invited by the Military Museum of the Chinese People's Revolution to create *The Guerrillas Soldiers*. After receiving the task, he consulted a large amount of literature and investigated the actual scenes of the guerrillas' battles. Then he went to the Jizhong Plain to experience life, where the sorghum fields on the mountains inspired him. After much thought, Wei Qimei designed the content to be the moment when a group of guerrillas rushed towards the enemy from the sorghum fields (Editorial Board of Historical Painting Dictionary of the Communist Party of China, 2022). To truly represent the image of the guerrillas, Wei Qimei found old farmers who had participated in the guerrilla war and painted portraits of them. After nearly a year of hard work, the creation was finally completed (Shen, 2023).



Fig. 2: The Guerrillas Soldiers  
(Source: Collection of The Art of the Party)

The oil painting *The Guerrillas Soldiers* depicted the moment when the guerrillas rushed out of the sorghum field to represent their heroism. First, the guerrilla leader was the Eighth Route Army in the centre of the picture. He commanded the guerrillas to charge forward, emphasising that he was the core leader of the guerrillas. The position of the Eighth Route Army in the picture formed a triangle, making the composition appear stable (see Fig. 3). Second, the painter designed the movements of the figures. All the figures tend to

rush forward, but the different movements create rhythm. For example, a row of militiamen at the back of the picture was charging forward, and the figures in the formation were like a series of points connected to form an implied curved line. As Rosalind Ragans (2005) said, implied lines are a series of points the viewer's eyes automatically connect. This curved line can change direction (Ragans, 2005), and its function in the painting is to direct the viewer's eyes to the right; the two people in the middle were shooting forward with their guns; there were three militiamen on the right, a soldier pulling the fuse of a mine, a female team member preparing to throw a grenade, and a male militiaman throwing a grenade. Such movement design reflected the guerrillas' heroic spirit and enhanced the picture's visual rhythm. As Rosalind Ragans (2005) said, visual rhythm is the rhythm you receive through your eyes rather than your ears. The painter used rhythm to create visual movement, allowing the viewer's eyes to follow the rhythm of the painting.

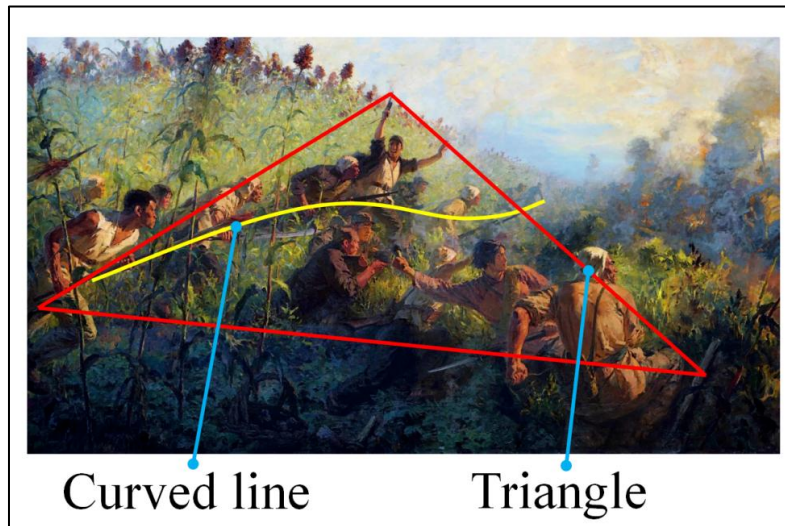


Fig. 3: Elements of Art in The Guerrillas Soldiers  
(Source: Adapted from Shen (2023))

#### 4.2 Party Branches Built on the Companies

In September 1927, after suffering heavy losses in the Autumn Harvest Uprising, Mao Zedong led his troops to Sanwan Village, Yongxin County, Jiangxi Province, and reorganised the troops. Mao Zedong established party branches at the company level and soldiers' committees at all levels above the company level, implementing a democratic system in which officers and soldiers had equal status and treatment. Establishing party branches at the company level was a successful exploration of building the people's army and an important beginning in building a new type of people's army (Party History Research Office of the CPC Central Committee, 2011). In 1977, Gao Quan created the oil painting *Party Branch Built on the Companies* based on this historical event. The content of the oil painting depicted the scene where Mao Zedong held a meeting to reorganise the troops in a grocery store in Sanwan Village, Jiangxi Province, in 1927 (see Fig. 4). In 1977, Gao Quan was invited to create the oil painting *Party Branch Built on the Companies*. In the process of conception, since there was no image reference, he could only express it through imagination. In addition, Gao Quan used the materials accumulated daily in his creation. For example, the coarse cloth and cotton jacket on the figures (Shen, 2023).



Fig. 4: Party Branch Built on the Companies  
(Source: Collection of The Art of the Party)



The oil painting *Party Branch Built on the Companies* represented the leadership of the Communist Party of China, with Mao Zedong as the centre of the army. First, this work is different from other works in dealing with the image of the leader. Most works represented Mao Zedong standing up and taller than the surrounding figures. However, this work represented Mao Zedong sitting down. Mao Zedong sat in the middle of the crowd, forming a triangular-shaped pyramid with the soldiers in white shirts on the left side of the foreground and the soldiers in dark clothes on the right side. Mao Zedong was at the top of the pyramid, indicating that he was the leader of this meeting. The light of the oil lamp shining on the figures' faces indicated that the event took place at night and made Mao Zedong the most prominent figure in the crowd, thus emphasising his leadership position (see Fig. 5). As Rosalind Ragans (2005) said, emphasis is the principle of art that makes one part of a work dominant over the other parts. Second, the painter dealt with the proportion. Proportion is the principle of art concerned with the size relationship of one part to another. Artists and architects have looked for a ratio (a mathematical comparison of sizes) that would produce an ideal form for figures and structures (Ragans, 2005). Gao Quan placed Mao Zedong at the position of the golden mean line, dividing the picture into two parts. This composition was beautiful and emphasised Mao Zedong's leadership status. There was a piece of red paper with the English abbreviation "CCP" of the Communist Party of China written on the table, and a flag of the Communist Party of China was placed on the wall, which represented that the Communist Party of China was the leader of the revolution. In addition, Gao Quan placed round straw hats, square briefcases and rectangular benches in the narrow interior space. These objects of different shapes enriched the space's organisation and set off the figures. As Rosalind Ragans (2005) said, geometric shapes are used for decoration, uniformity, and organisation.

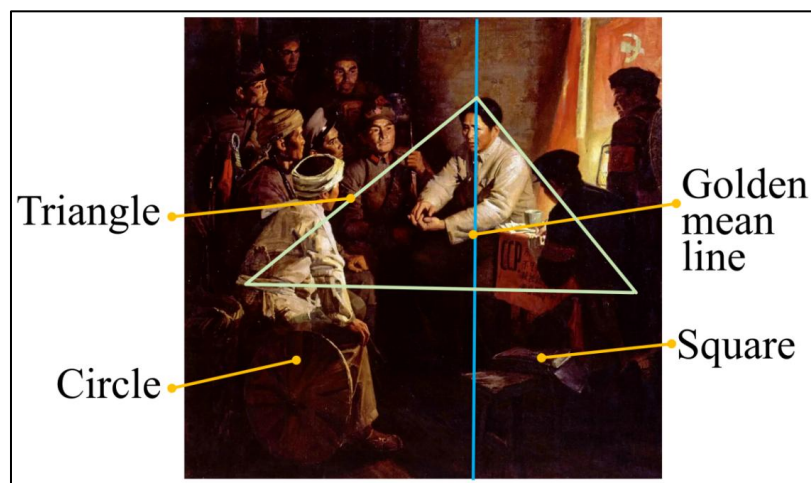


Fig. 5: Elements of Art in Party Branches Built on the Companies  
(Source: Adapted from Shen (2023))

Through data analysis, the researcher found that Chinese revolutionary historical-themed oil paintings mainly selected historical events from the Agrarian Revolutionary War period (1927.8-1937.7) and the Anti-Japanese War period (1931.9-1945.9). In addition, the researcher found the spiritual connotations contained in these works and the artistic elements and principles that express these spiritual connotations, as shown in Table 2.

Works	Category	Spiritual Connotation		Artistic Elements			Artistic Principles		
		Heroism	Lead	Line	Shape	Space	Rhythm	Emphasis	Proportion
1		√	x	√	√	x	√	√	x
2		x	√	√	√	√	x	√	√

(Source: Made by Author)

Through analysis, the researcher found that the spiritual connotations of Chinese revolutionary historical-themed oil paintings in the 1970s mainly included heroism and lead. Chinese artists adopted artistic elements and principles to express these two spiritual connotations. Elements of art are the basic ingredients the artist uses separately or in combination to produce artistic imagery, and their use produces the visual language of art (Ocvirk et al., 2014). The rules that govern how artists organise the elements of art are called the principles of art (Ragans, 2005). According to data analysis, the common point of the artistic elements used by Chinese artists is that they mainly use line and shape to express them, and the most apparent common point of the artistic principles used by Chinese artists is that they tend to use emphasis to express the connotation of the works. When Chinese artists use artistic elements and principles to express the spiritual connotation of Chinese revolutionary historical-themed oil paintings, the focus is not on the quantity used but on choosing appropriate artistic elements and principles to express according to the theme's content. For example, in addition to the use of emphasis in the two work samples, *The Guerrillas Soldiers* also used the artistic principle of rhythm according to the needs

of the theme expression. In contrast, *Party Branch Built on the Companies* used proportion. Therefore, Chinese artists conveyed the spiritual meaning in their works of art to the greatest extent through flexible application.

## 5.0 Discussion

According to the research findings, this study has essential promoting significance for studying historical-themed oil paintings. First, existing studies do not attach much importance to research methods but to narrative analysis, such as the articles mentioned in the literature review section. However, although this study is a short-length article, if the method is misused, it will reduce the credibility of the research results. Therefore, the researcher attaches great importance to the design and application of the research method. Second, Gao Yan (2021) and Wang Weidong (2024) only analysed the creative techniques and characteristics of the works when analysing the samples of works. However, in addition to analysing the historical background, creative process and techniques of the artworks, this study also used Rosalind Ragans' theory as a research instrument to support the scientificity and rationality of the analysis method and the validity and credibility of the data analysis results. Therefore, this study's core significance is providing a methodological reference for studying revolutionary historical-themed oil paintings. In addition, this study also has limitations. Due to limited length, only two works can be analysed, which makes it impossible to carry out a detailed analysis. Nevertheless, this does not affect the research.

## 6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

After analysing this study, the researcher concluded that Chinese artists did not imagine the spiritual connotation of Chinese revolutionary historical-themed oil paintings but were generalised based on actual historical events. Chinese artists will choose appropriate methods in the process of expressing the content of the theme. For example, go to document collection institutions to check historical documents, go to places where historical events occurred to experience life and collect materials, or use art theory as a research instrument. There are many oil paintings of Chinese revolutionary historical themes in the 1970s. Due to length limitations, this study can only select two works as analysis samples. Therefore, if researchers are interested in studying this topic in future, they can choose other works as samples to conduct research. When conducting research, try not to focus only on the creative techniques of the work. Conducting a comprehensive discussion from the creative background and process of the work is recommended. Only when researchers open their horizons can they think about problems comprehensively, deeply and clearly, and their research can be more solid.

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## Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This article's contribution is to provide new research achievements for the study of revolutionary historical-themed paintings and to provide a reference for future researchers on research ideas, thus promoting the development of art disciplines.

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