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Symbolic Meaning of the Female Body in Anti-Japanese War Painting: *Catastrophe of the Temporary Capital*

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Abstract

From 1938 to 1944, the Japanese invaders carried out indiscriminate bombings on Chongqing, which had a profound impact on society. Artists responded to this historical disaster. This study aims to interpret the signs and symbolic meaning of the female body in the oil painting *Catastrophe of the Temporary Capital* by constructing a conceptual framework. This study uses a qualitative art research approach, which is characterized by an interpretive approach guided by the symbolic information model of the artwork. The results show that the female body in the work symbolizes suffering, tenacity, bravery, resistance, maternal love, responsibility, and vulnerability.

Keywords: Symbolic meaning; female body; *Catastrophe of the Temporary Capital*; Anti-Japanese War painting

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1.0 Introduction

From 1931 to 1945, Japan waged a 14-year war of aggression against China. It wildly blew China's politics, economy, and culture. Patriotic rescue activities against aggression were carried out nationwide. All sectors of society responded to this historical event, especially the painting, which made significant contributions. Art is a medium for emotional expression, and the disasters and sufferings brought by the war inspired artists' strong empathy (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008). The art of the Anti-Japanese War is a special part of Chinese art history. After the war, China always showed a positive attitude towards this topic. Anti-Japanese War paintings became a powerful tool to assist the revolutionary cause during the war, and laid the foundation for the creation of such themes later.

From a visual perspective, most existing anti-Japanese war paintings in China use males as the main subject of expression, and they are in a dominant position in the picture. Females are usually secondary subjects or only appear in a corner or background, and sometimes there is no female body. The female body is still influenced by some traditional concepts, which gives it a low information value in the picture. Zhang Fangzhen's painting *Catastrophe of the Temporary Capital* is based on his childhood memories. The objective of this study is to describe the symbolic meaning and structure of the female body in the work. The research question is: What is the symbolic meaning of the female body in the Anti-Japanese War painting *Catastrophe of the Temporary Capital*?

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 The Symbolic Use of the Female Body in Chinese Painting of the Anti-Japanese War

One of the main themes in anti-Japanese war paintings is the depiction of females as victims, a representation designed to arouse moral outrage and collective resistance. Edwards (2013) discussed the manifestation of violence against females, especially sexual violence, in anti-Japanese propaganda cartoons during the war. The depiction of a female being mutilated was used to emphasize the cruelty of the enemy and the need to strengthen national unity in the face of oppression. Yao & Ma (2015) discussed the representation of female images in propaganda paintings during the Anti-Japanese War, including female victims who were fleeing or displaced. They also revealed the specific role and significance of female images in anti-Japanese propaganda. Zhang (2022) analyzed how anti-Japanese war cartoons shaped and expressed female images, pointing out that in some cartoons, females appeared purely as images of persecution by the enemy, reflecting the cruelty of the war and arousing enthusiasm for resistance. Qiao (2022) studied how some wartime art portrayed females as resilient survivors who endured pain while maintaining moral strength and perseverance. Jianan et al. (2024) conducted an in-depth interpretation of three refugee-themed paintings, revealing the symbolic meanings conveyed by female bodies. It can be found that there is a paucity of articles on this research area in recent years, and there is a clear gap in current knowledge about the symbolic use of female bodies during the Anti-Japanese War.

3.2 Conceptual Framework

In order to answer the research questions clearly, the researcher explained the definitions of relevant concepts, including sign, body, and the Anti-Japanese War. Peirce's semiotic theory divides signs into three types: icon, index, and symbol (Atkin, 2022). An icon refers to the similarity or direct imitation relationship between the sign and its referent. The index focuses on the causal or physical connection between the sign and the object. An icon and an index both point to information or denotation that can be directly observed. The symbol is developed from icons and indexes and is the highest level of signs (Ding, 2016). Its meaning changes in different contexts and usually has multiple abstract constructions.

In a broad sense, the body refers to the physical structure of a person or animal, including muscles, bones, and organs. It can be understood that the human body is a complex entity composed of organs and systems, which need to function together to maintain life. Undoubtedly, this definition is too general and limited, and the body is more than just biological. According to Maftuhin (2017), the body is a natural phenomenon composed of physical structure, function, and characteristics, and is also influenced by social, cultural, and psychological factors.

Based on the above discussion of the concepts of sign and body, the researcher constructed a conceptual framework for interpreting the symbolic meaning of the female body in paintings (Figure 1). The top of the framework is the Anti-Japanese War theme painting, in which the female body is the main research object. First, the icon and index of the female body are analyzed through biological elements to obtain its denotation meaning. Among them, body parts include external appendages of the body, such as decorations, because they are cultural manifestations, which can help researcher deeply understand the situation of females in the context of the times. Then, the body is placed in different social, cultural, psychological, historical, and philosophical contexts, and finally, multiple connotative meanings are obtained.

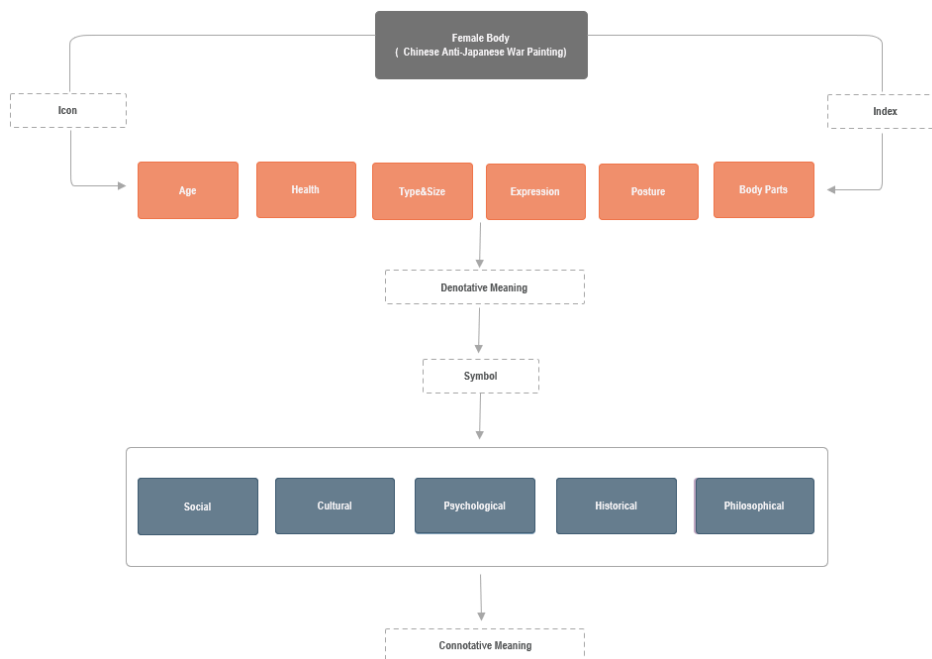


Fig. 1: Conceptual Framework for Symbolic Meaning in Visual Artwork
(Source: The researcher)

In addition, when analyzing artwork, the researcher combined Barthes's second-order semiological system (Fig. 2), which was developed based on Saussurean semiotics, and analyzed the ideological symbols hidden in daily life through two levels of meaning (Barthes, 1972). Saussure believed that language is a symbol system composed of signs, and each sign is composed of a signifier and a signified. The signifier is the form taken by the sign; the signified is a particular concept or idea represented by the sign. In Saussurean linguistics, the sign is unmotivated, and the relationship between the signifier and the signified can be arbitrary (Danesi, 2022). The second-order semiological system exists above the primary system as a structure occupying a higher level. What is a sign on the first level becomes a pure signifier on the second level. This sign is further endowed with new cultural and social meanings. The meaning of myth is never arbitrary; it is always partially motivated (Barthes, 1977).



Fig. 2 The Second-Order Semiological System in Barthes' Elements
(Source: *Elements of Semiology*)

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Art Research in Qualitative Approach

Since the research object of this study is visual art, it can be classified as art research. Rohidi (2011) believes that the implementation of art research can be traced back to one or more types of qualitative research. Art researchers can select specific aspects from qualitative research as a special method based on the problems to be explained. Ismail et al. (2025) mentioned that art research focuses on the interpretation of symbolic meanings embedded in human or cultural activities and objects, including visual artworks. Therefore, art research takes artworks as research objects and uses qualitative methods to capture cultural and artistic practices. It has both the particularity related to the creation or appreciation of artworks and the basic characteristics of qualitative research.

3.2 Research Design

Creswell (2003) defines a case study as "the researcher's in-depth exploration of a project, an event, an activity, a process, or one or more individuals." Anti-Japanese War painting is a collective cultural phenomenon that emerged in a specific historical period. Its unique historical and cultural background provides rich contextual resources for the case study. According to Algozzine & Hancock (2017), one of the core characteristics of a case study is to systematically analyze and discuss specific cases within a limited time frame. This study aims to understand the artistic representation of female bodies in the context of war and explain the symbolic meanings implied by analyzing representative cases. This study adopts observation and document methods and combines Barthes's second-order semiological theory as a tool for data analysis.

3.3 Research Method

This study selected document and observation methods in qualitative research. Bowen (2009) mentioned that document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents, including printed and electronic materials. The method aims to extract meaning from the literature, enhance understanding, and develop empirical knowledge. This study selected text and image documents related to the research topic and extracted data that conformed to the research direction for analysis. Secondly, according to Kumar (2010), observation is a purposeful, systematic, and selective way of observing and listening to the interactions or phenomena occurring. Observation is used to visually represent the female body in artworks. Without external interference, the researcher focuses on the theme and image conveyed by the work itself, thereby deeply understanding the meaning behind the work (McNiff, 1998).






4.0 Findings

Catastrophe of the Temporary Capital (Fig. 3) portrays the aftermath of a bombing in wartime Chongqing, capturing the devastation and human suffering in vivid detail. The artist focuses on desperate refugees by the river—many of them elderly, sick, or disabled—frantically seeking escape despite limited boats. In the background, bombed buildings and uncollected bodies underscore the chaos, while smoke from extinguished fires still lingers. A burning stilt house further heightens the atmosphere of panic and destruction, rendering a powerful visual narrative of collective trauma. Through the analysis of the symbolic meaning of the female body in *Catastrophe of the Temporary Capital*, the specific findings are presented in Table 1.



Fig. 3: Zhang Fangzhen, *Catastrophe of the Temporary Capital*, 2005, Oil painting, 135cm×200cm
 (Source: Chen, R. & Chen, J. (Eds.). (2017). *Zhang Fangzhen Oil Painting Art* (p.26). Sichuan Fine Arts Publishing House.)

Table 1: Summary of the Symbolic Meaning of the Female Body in the Artwork *Catastrophe of the Temporary Capital*.

Female Body	Icon/Index	Denotative Meaning	Context	Connotative Meaning
	A female refugee carrying bamboo baskets	Burden	Social -Role	Suffering Tenacity
	Standing in the river, right fire on face	In danger	Psychological - Needs	Bravery Resistance
	Mothers carrying or hugging their baby	Asylum	Social -Role Cultural -Value	Maternal love Responsibility
	Wife who lost her husband	Widow	Social -Role Cultural -Concept Psychological -Love and belonging needs	Pain Dependence Emotional constancy
	Elderly females being carried or supported	Vulnerable groups	Social -Role	Vulnerability Burden

(Source: Made by the researcher)

In Fig. 4(b), a middle-aged female carrying a bamboo basket and two children beside her shows the typical state of a refugee mother in Chongqing during the war. She is dressed in the clothes of a rural woman, with a confused expression, a frown on her face, and her body bent by the heavy bamboo basket, which shows the pressure and burden under the pressure of life. The bamboo basket is not only a daily labor tool for life in the mountainous areas of Chongqing but also a symbol of survival for refugee females during the war. She carries clothes and daily necessities in a bamboo basket, which reflects her efforts to meet the basic living conditions of the family. The female body symbolizes suffering and tenacity.

The female refugee is in the turbulent river, with her face illuminated by the intense light cast by the burning flames, suggesting the danger and chaos of her environment. Unlike the traditional image of a female as weak and dependent, the female wades forward with

a firm attitude and takes the initiative to walk towards the ship that symbolizes hope. Taormina & Gao (2013) pointed out that a person's primary motivation is to seek security and avoid fear and threats. In the context of war, females need a safe and stable living space more than ever before. The behavior of the female is a necessary survival strategy in the war. The female body symbolizes bravery and resistance.



Fig. 4 (a, b) Details of *Catastrophe of the Temporary Capital*.

(Source: Adapted by the researcher)

(c) A typical air-raid shelter dug out of a rocky mountain near Chongqing.

(Source: Zhang, X. W. & Yang, T. S. (Eds). (2016). *The Pictures of Anti-Japanese War in the National Archive of the USA-Volume 21 Homeland in War I* (p. 25). Chemical Industry Press.)

Fig. 5(b, c, d) depicts three rural mothers carrying or hugging their kids. They are dressed in plain blue clothes, revealing the simplicity of the lower class. The young mother in Fig. 5(b) is holding a sleeping baby and a crying child, looking anxiously at the departing ship, revealing her desire and helplessness for the chance to escape. Another elderly mother (Fig. 5c) has a haggard face and despair in her eyes. She can only carry her child on her back due to physical exhaustion, showing her physical limitations and her unwillingness to give up her motherhood. The mother's head down in Fig. 5(d) shows a calm and sad mood. She no longer tries to escape but uses her gentle body posture as the last shelter for her child.

From a biological perspective, hormones are vital in female childbearing and childrearing (Brizendine, 2006). Oxytocin (bonding hormone) also affects the mother's psychological state, making her show stronger emotional investment and protective desire when facing her children (Feldman, 2012). The female body symbolizes maternal love, showing both their vulnerability on the edge of life and their indomitable maternal strength and human brilliance.

On the other hand, maternal love is also profoundly influenced by social and cultural construction. In different social contexts, the value of females and the significance of motherhood are endowed with different cultural norms and moral expectations. In traditional Chinese society, the value of females is often equated with fertility, especially in a social structure dominated by an agricultural economy, where population growth is seen as the foundation of family and social and economic prosperity (Murphy, 2003). This concept has been reinforced in the Confucian cultural system. Females bear the responsibility of childbearing, raising children, and doing housework. This gender role division is not only a cultural paradigm but also deeply rooted in the basic model of family structure and social operation. The female body symbolizes responsibility.



Fig. 5 (a, b, c, d) Details of *Catastrophe of the Temporary Capital*.

(Source: Adapted by the researcher)

Mother and child in the ruins after a Japanese air raid.

(Source: https://www.sohu.com/a/409241488_120725313?_trans_=000013_sjcl_zsmh)

At the far right of the picture, there is a female with disheveled hair and covered in dirt (Fig. 6 b). She kneels on the ruins with her husband, who has died of serious injuries, in front of her. Her forward-leaning posture is full of emotional tension, conveying the great pain of females experiencing the death of their relatives in the war, and also reveals her sudden change from a wife to a widow. The female body symbolizes pain. In traditional Chinese patriarchal society, males have long been regarded as the pillars of the family. Their fall not only means the loss of emotional support but also directly causes the collapse of the family's economic and social resources. This Confucian gender division of labor system, with "male in charge of the outside world and female in charge of the inside world" as the core, makes the family structure highly dependent on the dominant position of the male. Once the family disintegrates, the surviving females are easily marginalized in the social structure. Widows are often oppressed under the clan system; their social status declines

sharply, they are deprived of the right to inherit property and the freedom to remarry, and they become weak in society without protection. In this cultural context, the female body is endowed with the symbolic meaning of dependence.

From a psychological perspective, while others were fleeing in the flames of war, this female was immersed in the sudden great grief and even neglected her safety. She focused on the remains of her relatives in front of her, reflecting her extreme attachment to emotional ties. This behavior reflects the need for love and belonging in Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs theory, which is an emotional need for interpersonal relationships, belonging, and connection. It shows that war not only brings physical destruction but also deprives people of emotional sustenance and spiritual support. Her decision to give up escaping and to accompany her relatives remains shows that the power of family affection exceeds the drive of the survival instinct. This deep attachment makes the female body a symbol of emotional constancy.



Fig. 6 (a, b) Details of *Catastrophe of the Temporary Capital*.

(Source: Adapted by the researcher)

(c) A Chinese female and her dying husband (1940).

(Source: https://www.sohu.com/a/409241488_120725313?_trans_=000013_sjcl_zsmh)

In addition, Fig.7 (b, c) depicts two older women, showing the survival dilemma of the elderly as the most vulnerable group in the war. A white-haired older woman (Fig. 7 b) was carried by his relatives due to his weak body. However, she still stretched her hands forward and tried to grab the boat, symbolizing vulnerability and her tenacious desire for life and will to survive. Another older woman (Fig. 7c) was supported by a middle-aged female and walked with difficulty, highlighting the powerlessness and dependence of people with disabilities in fleeing. These two older women symbolize the war's most marginalized and helpless groups. They face the limitations of physical weakness and represent the vulnerable identities ignored by the social structure during the disaster.

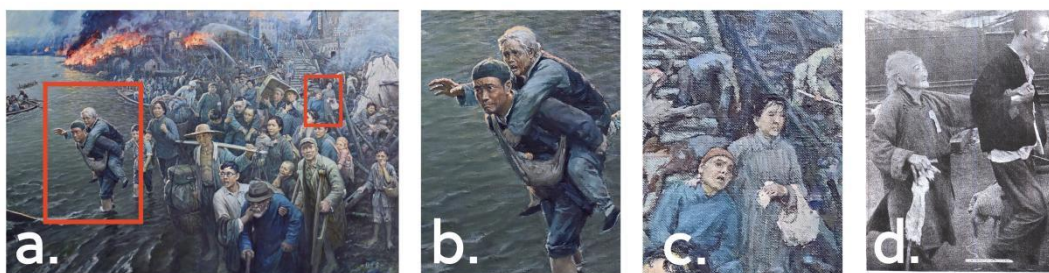


Fig. 7 (a, b, c) Details of *Catastrophe of the Temporary Capital*.

(Source: Adapted by the researcher)

(d) The son supported his blind old mother on the road to escape.

(Source: Yang, K. L. & Cao, H. (1995). *Illustrated History of China's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression* (p. 500). Guangdong Tourism Press.)

5.0 Discussion

Based on previous research, this study further expands the understanding of the symbolic function of the female body. Some existing studies mainly regard the female body as a symbol of national suffering and family breakdown, typically manifested in visual scenes of escape and displacement. This type of research emphasizes the communication effect of female images in stimulating public emotions and national resistance consciousness, focusing on the impact of suffering and violent scenes, but relatively neglecting the expression of female subjectivity and inner experience. This study introduces a new observation perspective and interpretation path, especially at the level of the intersection of psychological trauma, family structure, and social roles, revealing that the female body is not only the carrier of physical suffering but also a visual presentation medium of emotional and mental trauma. The study also constructs a new conceptual framework for analyzing the symbolic meaning of the female body, thereby enhancing the analysis's theoretical depth and explanatory effectiveness.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

Drawing on body theory, Peirce's triadic semiotic theory, and Barthes's second-order semiological system, this study constructs a conceptual framework to interpret the symbolic meaning of the female body in the Chinese Anti-Japanese War painting. The study shows that the females in the work appear as refugees and powerful carriers of society and culture, symbolizing physical and mental suffering and fragility, maternal love, tenacity and resistance. These findings challenge the traditional model of wartime art that generally depicts females as passive victims, and highlight the important role of the female body as a site of historical memory and ideology.

Given that this study only uses a single work as a case, the universality of the research results is limited to a certain extent. To enhance the depth and breadth of the research, interview materials with artists or curators can be introduced in the future to enrich the research perspective with the help of triangulation. It is also possible to add multiple artworks depicting similar themes for comparative analysis, which will help to discover more representative visual laws and symbolic strategies. In addition, this study has opened up new research directions for further exploration: other types of female body symbols can be examined, such as the symbolic construction of images of victims and fighters; comparative studies of Chinese and Western war art can also be carried out, focusing on the visual presentation of trauma and disaster in different cultures, thereby revealing the deeper relationship between gender, history and images.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

By exploring the intersections between gender and artistic expression, this article highlights how the female body informs broader cultural and social themes. In addition, provides new perspectives on the relationship between history, art, and gender for interdisciplinary research.

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