

THE SYMBOLIC MEANING OF THE FEMALE BODY IN NIGHTMARE-THE CHONGQING BOMBING

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Abstract. As a communication medium, visual artworks present images and convey the information and meaning the artist wants to convey to the public through specific symbols. From 1931 to 1945, Japan launched a 14-year war of aggression against China, which profoundly affected China's political, economic and cultural development. As the temporary capital during the war, Chongqing suffered fierce bombings by the Japanese army many times during this period, becoming an important witness to the war disaster. Faced with this historical trauma, many artists responded by attempting to record the suffering and evoke resonance, with painting being particularly prominent among them. The study aims to describe and interpret the visual presentation and symbolic meaning of the female body in Zhao Qing's painting *Nightmare-The Chongqing Bombing* in the context of the Anti-Japanese War. This study adopts the qualitative art research methodology, which is characterised by an interpretive method guided by the symbolic message model of the artwork and a constructed conceptual framework as a support for analysis and interpretation. This study adopts the research method of observation, interview and documents. The study combines Peirce's semiotic trichotomy, Barthes's second-order semiological system, and body theory to analyse the symbolic meaning of the female body in visual art. The analysis results show that the female body in the work *Nightmare-The Chongqing Bombing* symbolises physical and psychological suffering and vulnerability, helplessness, maternal love, destruction and vitality. These findings transcend traditional depictions of females as superficially passive or decorative figures. Instead, they examine the female body as a richly layered symbolic site that absorbs and reflects historical trauma, ideological intent, and collective emotional resonance.

Keywords: *symbol, body, Anti-Japanese war, painting*

Introduction

From 1931 to 1945, Japan launched a 14-year war of aggression against China. The temporary capital was moved to Chongqing during the war, quickly becoming the core of China's politics, military and economy. It, therefore, became the main target of the Japanese bombing. In order to weaken China's anti-Japanese war capabilities and public morale, Japan launched continuous and large-scale air raids on Chongqing from 1938 to 1942, intending to destroy its military facilities, industrial systems and transportation hubs. In the face of aggression, society launched a widespread patriotic rescue movement, and all walks of life responded positively to this historical event. Among them, painting played an important role as an important visual medium. The art of the Anti-Japanese War is a special and important chapter in Chinese art history. Art is a channel for emotional expression, and the war's disasters and sufferings inspired artists to have strong empathy. Paintings during the Anti-Japanese War became a powerful tool to serve the revolutionary cause and laid a solid foundation for creating similar themes after the war. It is worth noting that from a visual perspective, the existing Chinese paintings on the theme of the Anti-Japanese War generally use male images as the main subject of expression, and males are often highlighted as heroic subjects. At

the same time, females are often in a marginal position, appearing only as background characters under specific needs or even completely absent in some works. The female body is affected by some traditional gender concepts, the information value in the picture is low, and female characters' agency and symbolic function are limited. This study takes Chongqing artist Zhao Qing's large-scale oil painting *Nightmare-The Chongqing Bombing* as a case study, focusing on the visual representation of the female body in the work. The objective of this study is to describe and interpret the visual symbolic structure and symbolic meaning of the female bodies in the work. The core research question is: What is the symbolic meaning of the female body in *Nightmare-The Chongqing Bombing*?

Materials and Methods

This study adopts an art research method derived from qualitative research. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is a method of exploring and understanding the meaning of individuals or groups to social or human issues. It focuses on descriptive research and uses humans as instruments (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In other words, qualitative research consists of a series of interpretive and physical practices that make the world perceptible. Researchers can understand or explain phenomena based on the meanings people give to phenomena. Rohidi (2011) stated that the implementation of art research can be traced back to one or more types of qualitative research. However, analyzing artworks cannot rely solely on personal subjective feelings or emotional reactions. It requires researchers to have a high degree of insight and appreciation, as well as a set of clearly structured and systematic research methods to support the effectiveness and persuasiveness of the research. Therefore, art research takes artworks as research objects and uses qualitative methods to capture cultural and artistic practices. This study uses observational methods to collect data on the symbolic meaning of the female body in *Nightmare-The Chongqing Bombing*, supplemented by semi-structured field interview and document analysis. The source of literature data is a published and public database. The researcher integrated data from different sources (original data and secondary literature) to achieve mutual complementation and cross-validation of research results, thereby enhancing the reliability and validity of the research. Before collecting interview data, the researcher obtained approval letters from the UiTM Ethics Committee (approval number: PG/MR/475) and relevant agencies (approval number: HEA/PPS.2/7/5). In addition, the interviewee was informed of the purpose of the study and provided informed consent and signatures. During the interview process, the researcher strictly followed the relevant regulations of academic ethics. Finally, all the collected data were organized into descriptive texts in written form for research analysis and report writing.

Definition of terms

In order to answer the research questions clearly, the researcher defined the core concepts in detail, including "sign" and "female body." It laid a solid theoretical foundation for the study and constructed a systematic conceptual framework to guide the artwork analysis. Peirce's semiotic theory divides signs into three types: icon, index, and symbol (Atkin, 2022). When we can directly identify the object or action a sign refers to through its appearance or behavior, it can be considered an icon. Here, icon refers to the similarity or direct imitation relationship between the sign and its referent.

For example, traffic lights or hand gestures are considered icons because they are directly related to specific things. The index focuses on the causal or physical connection between a sign and an object. In visual art, the index can be used to interpret specific emotions, plots, and environments. Icon and 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 human body is composed of physical structures, including bones, muscles, and organs. These complex systems interact to maintain human life. However, the body is not only a biological entity. According to Maftuhin (2017), the body is a natural phenomenon composed of physical structure, functions and characteristics influenced by social, cultural and psychological factors. In literature and art, the body is often used as a carrier to express emotions, thoughts or social issues. In particular, the female body is endowed with multiple cultural and social meanings. In a sense, the body is not only the private domain of the individual but also an important part of social norms and public discourse.

Conceptual framework

Based on the previous 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 Nightmare-The Chongqing Bombing, 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 researchers deeply understand the situation of females in the context of the times. Then, the bodies are placed in different contexts, including social, cultural, psychological, historical and philosophical, and finally, multiple connotation meaning are obtained.

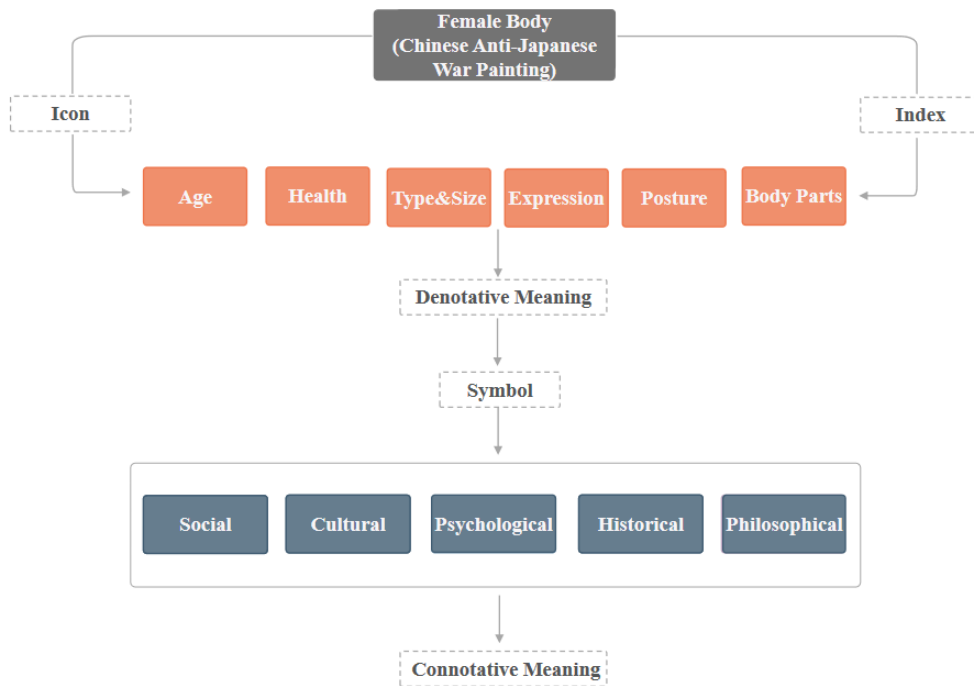


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the symbolic meaning in visual artwork.

In addition, the researcher combined Barthes's second-order semiological system when conducting data analysis (Figure 2). As one of the founders of modern linguistics and semiotics, Saussure's core view is that language is a symbolic system composed of signs, and each sign is composed of a signifier and a signified (Susen, 2018). The signifier is the form taken by the sign, such as written text or sound; the signified is a particular concept or idea represented by the sign. In Saussure linguistics, the sign is unmotivated, and the relationship between the signifier and the signified can be arbitrary (Danesi, 2022). In other words, a specific signifier is associated with a specific signified, but there is no inherent reason for the two. For example, the connection between the word "tree" and the real tree is tacit. Barthes (1972) developed a second-order symbol system based on Saussure semiotics, which analyzes the ideological symbols hidden in daily life through two levels of meaning. The second-level symbol 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, forming a "myth." The meaning of myth is never arbitrary; it is always partially motivated (Barthes, 1977).

Signifier		Signified	Connotation (Myth)
Signifier	Signified		Denotation (Langue)

Figure 2. The Second-Order Semiological System in Barthes' Elements.

Results and Discussion

For artist Zhao Qing, *Nightmare-The Chongqing Bombing* (Figure 3) is a work of turning point significance. He regards it as one of the most important creations in his life. This work was created when Zhao Qing was in his early 20s. At that time, he received praise and affirmation from the academy, on the one hand, and was deeply confused and self-questioning about the nature of art, on the other hand. He began to think that art should be a self-defined practice and must find a standard of measurement and expression that suits oneself. It was in this spiritual struggle and the urgency of self-salvation that this large oil painting was completed. At first, it did not come from the natural flow of inspiration but an action that actively forced him to face life's difficulties. This work marks a break between the artist and his past creative experience. He described it as a farewell to the classroom, the academy, and even the existing artistic path. So, he began to think deeply and sort out his spirit about the "last painting". After a long period of confusion and losing direction, he turned his attention to his region and memory and rethought how art responds to individual and collective experiences. As a local artist in Chongqing, he began to search for the historical memory of this city. Ultimately, he chose the grand narrative of the Chongqing bombing as the subject of his work, not only because of its historical significance but also because this period of history is closely related to his family memory. The war experience that his grandmother had told him many times left a deep visual imprint in his mind and became the source of inspiration for his work. The state of life being torn apart by war suddenly appeared before his eyes, just as the title of this work, "Nightmare", itself has pointed to the long-term psychological trauma caused by the war.



Figure 3. Zhao Qing, Nightmare-The Chongqing Bombing, 1998.

The picture is mainly black, white and grey, creating a heavy and depressing war atmosphere. In the smoke in the distance, the outline of the city is looming, buildings are broken, flames are rising, and the whole city is shrouded in thick smoke, presenting a scene of ruins. Several bombing planes hovered over the city, showing the state of destruction of Chongqing under the bombing, further strengthening the urgency and

terror of the war. The artist interrupted the painting during the creative process and denied the original conception. He decided to seek differences in visual language. In order to avoid being mistaken for a photo or a still, he actively abandoned the colour. He turned to a more simplified and symbolic grey and black tone processing to respond to the historical context carried by the work. This work uses a non-linear narrative, which reminds people of Picasso's multi-perspective presentation of *Guernica*. At that time, Zhao Qing was deeply influenced by philosophers such as Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. In particular, Sartre's interpretation of "the contingency of life" and Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* made him realize that life is accidental. These humanities readings made him accumulate a kind of compassion for life, and the vulnerability and pain of life touched his nerves. This kind of thinking was transformed into visual expression in the process of artistic creation, thus constructing the work's spiritual core and expression form. The work is filled with twisted limbs and hideous faces, showing a strong sense of dynamics. The crowd on the left side of the picture is trapped in a purgatory of pain and disaster, being torn apart by bombing and burning. The artist uses countless arms stretched upward and convulsing to express the characters' struggle and desire for survival in extreme suffering. In contrast, the rising smoke on the right side of the picture symbolizes the carbonization and dissipation of life after destruction. The artist uses a group of suspended feet to express the sense of weightlessness. Those horizontally floating bodies are like light ashes rising with the air, with a visual suggestion of "ascension".

The artist intentionally replaced the rigour of anatomy with symbolic language. For example, the spastic hands were deliberately treated as inaccurate structures, emphasizing emotional expression and spiritual tension. This contrast of sinking and rising images gives the work a sense of religion, presenting a symbolic background of the coexistence of life destruction and biochemistry. There are several baby images in the picture, which serve as visual rhythm points to inject emotional layers into the work, including the baby sucking milk, the baby held in the mother's arms, the baby squinting and mumbling, and the baby in white clothes in the centre. Each baby has a semantic extension. The artist explained that "the sucking breast and the held baby show a relationship of attachment; the baby on the top is a dead soul still speaking of life; the baby in the center is the focal point in terms of intensity and vector." This arrangement echoes the literary works he came into contact with at the same time. The gentle and fragile state of life aroused his deep resonance and became one of the most moving existences in the work. These baby images are distributed in an orderly manner in space, connecting other characters, such as screaming people, lovers hugging each other and dying, and people tearing their clothes. These plot-based "points" together constitute a tragic narrative network. However, in comparison, the most symbolic tension is still the baby images, which present life's vulnerability and soft but unavoidable existence in the simplest way. In terms of overall treatment, the artist deliberately weakened the depiction of building debris and ruins and strengthened the depiction of babies, frightened faces, twisted gestures and suspended feet.

The artist has gone through a long period of experimentation in material processing. He tried to use plastic film, old clothes, linen, lead powder, gypsum plastic paste and many other materials to express the "sense of brokenness", but none could achieve the ideal sharp texture. In the end, he accidentally discovered that the baby's used diapers had a unique fibre-tearing feeling after being torn, so he disassembled them into pieces and pasted them on the canvas with thin latex, forming a texture with a strong sense of

damage and visual impact in some parts. This approach not only strengthened the tactile feeling of the "death residue" of the work but also became an important breakthrough in the material language of his artistic creation. There are two groups of images of mothers holding babies in the picture. The mother in *Figure 4* (middle) is under the ruins. Her eyes are closed, and her face is dying, full of pain, showing the passing of life. Her shoulders have been deformed by the impact of the burned wooden frame, and the strength of her arms has long been weakened. The muscles in her right arm are loose, and the lines are weak, revealing a state of fatigue and limp. Her tilted cheek is pressed against the child's body as if she is saying her last goodbye. Her fingers are still trying to grasp as if making a final struggle at the end of her life. Her body has become a witness to the destructiveness of war, showing how war deprives mothers of their last ability to protect their children. The female body symbolizes suffering and powerlessness.



Figure 4. Zhao Qing, *Nightmare-The Chongqing Bombing* (details) (left side and middle); the corpse at the Eighteenth Ladder of Jiaochangkou (right side).

Females are endowed with fertility due to their physiological structure, and their bodies have been regarded as the "source of life" since ancient times. This biological characteristic has long been considered a core component of female identity. In many ancient cultures, the female body was not only regarded as a sacred existence but was also closely linked to the reproductive power of nature. For example, the Paleolithic Venus of Willendorf uses a plump female figure to symbolize fertility and harvest, reflecting the worship of motherhood and fertility (Markale, 1999). In addition, some cultures also compare the female body to the earth, symbolizing the power to give birth to all things. From a physiological mechanism perspective, the female body holding the baby in the picture is the carrier and guardian of life. In sharp contrast to the limp right arm is the taut muscles of the mother's left arm. Although the war has destroyed her body and is on the verge of death, she still strives to maintain a posture of protecting her child, trying to block the harm from the outside world with her broken body. The baby in her arms becomes her last hope and symbolizes life's unextinguished fire. This contrast not only creates visual tension but also strongly impacts the emotional level. Even on the edge of destruction, she still shows extraordinary tenacity and human brilliance. This detail gives the picture a deep tragic power and reveals women's sacrifice and persistence in extreme environments. The female body symbolizes maternal love. In the context of war, maternal love is not only presented as a social role or cultural symbol. However, it is also deeply rooted in individual female psychological and emotional mechanisms. From a psychological perspective, maternal love is a deep attachment behaviour that reflects the instinctive emotional connection between mother and child (Ainsworth, 1969).

Attachment theory holds that when individuals face uncertain environments and threats, their internal attachment system will be activated, prompting them to seek a

secure base (Bowlby, 1988). This is the primary caregiver (mother) for babies, and this activation mechanism manifests as a strong protective response for mothers. Mothers protect their children not simply out of social responsibility or cultural mission but also as a result of the automatic response of the human emotional system. In extreme cases, mothers will show behaviours that transcend rationality and sacrifice themselves, and the fundamental motivation is the child's urgent need for safety and survival. The image of the mother in the work uses facial expressions and body movements to strengthen this psychological drive. *Figure 5* (middle) depicts a mother who has already died. Her face is shrouded in faint, elusive shadows; eyes tightly closed, brows furrowed, and slightly parted lips seem to speak of the agony endured before death. Her body is wrapped in a complex fold of cloth, blending into the chaotic environment around her, sinking into despair and darkness. The baby in her arms curls up to suck milk, but the mother can no longer respond. Life is forever frozen at this moment, and her hand gently holding the baby reveals the last trace of protection and attachment. The mother's feeding behaviour represents the instinct and hope for the continuation of life. As the artist said, "A mother holding her baby strengthens her love. A baby sucking mother breast also strengthens maternal love."



Figure 5. Zhao Qing, *Nightmare-The Chongqing Bombing* (details) (left side and middle); the mother injured by the bomb still insists on breastfeeding her child (right side).

Hormones are vital in female childbearing and child-rearing. Take oxytocin, for example, a substance often called the "bonding hormone" or "maternal hormone," which is secreted in large quantities during childbirth and breastfeeding. It helps strengthen the attachment between mother and baby and increases the mother's sensitivity to the baby's needs, enhancing her protective response. In addition to its physiological effects, oxytocin significantly affects the mother's psychological state, causing her to show deeper emotional involvement and a stronger desire to protect her baby (Feldman, 2012). In addition to the image of the mother, the painting also depicts two other female images. The female in *Figure 6* (middle) is pressed between the crowd and the ruins, with her limbs twisted unnaturally. One of her hands is bent close to her chest, and her head is raised, revealing signs of struggle. Her image directly reflects the damage that was caused to the female body. Here, the female body is not only the recipient of violence but also a symbol of physical pain and vulnerability. The survival instinct of human beings is one of the most fundamental and deep-rooted driving forces. When an individual faces the threat of death, they usually stimulate survival, escape or resistance behaviors, which are defense mechanisms derived from physiological instincts. However, in an extreme war environment, the survival instinct is gradually weakened and eventually completely collapsed. The struggling female body functions are on the verge of being limited, and she cannot escape the collapsed ruins. Her body not only

presents the image of a victim but also carries the multiple injuries caused by war to females.



Figure 6. Zhao Qing, *Nightmare-The Chongqing Bombing* (details) (left side and middle); On the night of June 5, 1941, the bodies of the victims were cleared out from the Shibati (big tunnel) cave (right side).

As the physiological instincts gradually weaken, the individual's psychological defenses also collapse and begin to enter a state of collapse at the motivation level. The concept of "learned helplessness" in psychology points out that when an individual experiences continuous pain, failure and loss of control, he or she will gradually lose the motivation to survive and eventually fall into passivity and despair (Skinner, 1995). The female in the picture tried to escape and seek shelter. However, the intense bombing and the oppression of the ruins put her in a difficult situation, and she gradually lost her ability to act and psychological resistance. As Freud proposed, humans are dominated by two basic driving forces: one is the survival instinct (Eros), which is related to life, love and continuation; the other is the death instinct (Thanatos), which is related to aggression and destructive tendencies (Kli, 2018). The former instinctively pursues life, happiness and continuation; for the latter, in extreme pain or despair, the individual may give up struggling and tend to accept death. From this perspective, the female in the work is in a critical state of sliding from an instinctive struggle for survival to psychological abandonment. Her psychological defenses gradually collapsed under the continuous oppression of the war, and she finally fell into despair. The female body also symbolizes mental suffering and the helplessness of being oppressed. The female in *Figure 7* (middle) seems to have been thrown or fallen from a height under the impact of the explosion, lying on her back on a pile of corpses. The drooping head and scattered hair together convey the loss of life and a strong sense of weightlessness. This posture not only shows the moment of individual death but also symbolizes the destruction brought by war.



Figure 7. Zhao Qing, *Nightmare-The Chongqing Bombing* (details) (left side and middle); the corpse at the Eighteenth Ladder of Jiaochangkou (right side).

The females in *Figure 7* (middle) and *Figure 6* (middle) share a common feature: they are mostly naked. The flames almost burn their clothes, and only a few pieces of





torn cloth are scattered around their bodies, presenting a tragic scene of human bodies being engulfed by flames after the bombing. This exposure not only strengthens the visual sense of destruction and helplessness but also makes their twisted bodies covered with traces of war become the most intuitive witness to the inhumanity of war. In the 1990s, with the rapid development of the market economy and urbanization, China's consumer culture emerged, which promoted the secularization of popular aesthetics, and cultural production showed a tendency to be motivated by emotional "pleasure". Against this background, the female body was rapidly commercialized and sexualized in popular culture (Lin, 2013). In many oil paintings, the female image was overly beautified and became the visual endorsement of "Oriental female beauty"; the appearance of a large number of naked female images often serves the male gaze and satisfies the consumer expectations of visual pleasure. Compared with pursuing aesthetic pleasure and aesthetic body expression at that time, Zhao Qing's female body in Nightmare-The Chongqing Bombing is highly rebellious. He refused to reproduce the female body aesthetically but gave it a sense of real pain and historical weight. The female skin in the painting still retains its temperature, a manifestation of human beauty and a symbol of vitality. This warm texture contrasts sharply with the broken clothes and the wounds left by the fire, making the cruelty of war and the tenacity of life coexist on the canvas, forming a strong visual and emotional tension. As Zhao Qing said:

"It is a kind of female... feminine, such as sexiness. In the broken contrast, human skin is warm and smooth. Look, this arm and waist can feel the sexiness of life. However, this sexiness is not the main expression but a side reflection of the preciousness of life and her life state. It is not to objectify her, but a warm feeling."

In Zhao Qing's image language, females are no longer the embodiment of beauty in the traditional sense but witnesses of war, bearers of pain, and even visual carriers of historical scars. He created a female body with evident muscularity, which breaks away from the visual expectations of weakness or aestheticization. Females are not only victims but also have an implicit sense of power-this power is not heroic but a "struggling existence." The female bodies are a natural manifestation of life in Zhao Qing's works. They are no longer just aesthetic symbols catering to the desire to view. Even in the face of death, life still has its warmth and texture. Zhao Qing's brushstrokes are not deprived of the natural beauty of the female body. On the contrary, the destruction of war violence highlights the vulnerability and preciousness of life. The female body's texture, curves and twisted postures are not decorative visual elements but visual witnesses of vitality and historical trauma. The study found that the female bodies in Nightmare-The Chongqing Bombing present multiple symbolic meanings, covering physical and psychological suffering, vulnerability, helplessness, maternal love, destruction and vitality (*Table 1*). They appear in the picture as victims who have suffered in the war, showing physical trauma, psychological collapse and failure to survive in extreme environments, reflecting the passivity and despair of females under violent oppression. Even if the mother image is dying or even dead, they still instinctively protect and feed the baby, reflecting a maternal love that transcends physiology and approaches sacrifice. The struggling, twisted and falling body postures reveal the fragility and helplessness of life and also highlight the devastating harm that war brings to innocent females. It is worth noting that the artist's portrayal of the

muscular body of females gives them vitality, transcending the image of victims and presenting an existence with human warmth and non-materialized characteristics.

Table 1. Summary of the symbolic meaning of the female body in the Artwork *Nightmare-The Chongqing Bombing*.

Female body	Icon/index	Denotative meaning	Content	Connotative meaning
	Dying female Mother protecting her baby	The passage of life Life guardian	Social: Role Psychological: Emotional driver	Suffering; Powerlessness Maternal love
	Female with eyes closed Baby sucking mother's milk	Lost life Continuation of life	Social: Role Psychological: Instinct	Suffering Maternal love
	Struggling half-naked female	The carrier of violence	Social: Role Psychological: Instinct	Pain; Vulnerability Suffering; Helplessness
	Falling half- naked female	Lost life	Social: Role History: Body Beauty	Destruction Vitality

Conclusion

Through analyzing Zhao Qing's painting *Nightmare - The Chongqing Bombing* in the context of the Chinese Anti-Japanese War, this study reveals multiple female roles and symbolic meanings in the historical process and cultural construction. Focusing on the reinterpretation of female images will not only help strengthen the public's understanding of female identity, experience and contribution but also help promote the society's re-examination of female values. Theoretically, this study takes the female body as the core field of symbolic construction. It comprehensively applies Peirce's semiotic theory, Barthes's second-order semiological system and body theory to construct a comprehensive conceptual framework for analyzing the symbolic meaning of the female body. This study provides a new theoretical and methodological perspective for understanding the visual expression of female bodies in war art. It

provides an empirical basis for expanding the cross-dialogue between visual culture, semiotics and gender studies.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that no conflict of interest is associated with any parties involved in this research.

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