

# Revolutionary Historical Event Themes in the Nationalisation of Chinese Oil Paintings, 1950-1960

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## ABSTRACT

Most current research on creating and nationalising Chinese oil paintings focuses on natural, social, and figure themes. Researchers have yet to pay attention to the revolutionary historical event themes. Thus, the researcher strives to take the oil paintings depicting revolutionary historical events created from 1950 to 1960 in the painting album *The Art of the Party* as examples to conduct research. This research aims to discuss how Chinese artists interpret revolutionary historical events and analyse their creative characteristics through historical storytelling, content observation, and textual analysis. Ultimately, the researcher tries to generalise the methods and regularities for Chinese artists to express revolutionary historical event themes. The researcher attempts to find the theme's source, the methods or techniques to convey the theme and the spiritual connotation represented by the theme through data analysis. After that, the researcher strives to contribute new knowledge to studying the nationalised themes of Chinese oil painting.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The formation of the nationalised theme of Chinese oil paintings is a topic that still has a significant research gap, underscoring the importance of continued and in-depth study by researchers. According to the researchers' investigation, the current research on the nationalisation of oil painting mainly discusses nature, society, figures, landscape, and still-life themes (Zhou, 2002; Hu, 2018), and no research focuses on China's revolutionary historical event themes. In 2023, a painting album titled *The Art of the Party* was published by Zhejiang People's Fine Arts Press (Ding, 2023). Many oil paintings in the painting album, which include works by famous artists and outstanding young artists (Shen, 2023). Thus, this research can potentially fill this gap and contribute new knowledge. This research will use the oil paintings from 1950

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to 1960 in *The Art of the Party* painting album as examples to conduct it. There were many oil paintings from this period, and this research will select five artworks from them (see Table 1). Five examples of artworks were selected for this research. The main reasons for choosing these artworks are that they all depict revolutionary historical events, and the artists who created these works have accepted professional education in both Chinese and Western art. They are classics passed down through the filtering of history. The researcher will narrate the theme's historical background, observe the artwork's content, and analyse the theme's source, the creative process, and the methods or characteristics of expressing the theme in combination with secondary text documents.

**Table 1. Examples of Artworks**

| No. | Artworks' Title                                          | Creator       | Year | Size        | Collected Unit           |
|-----|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------|------|-------------|--------------------------|
| 1   | Unlocking Shackles                                       | Hu Yichuan    | 1950 | 174cm*244cm | National Museum of China |
| 2   | May Fourth Movement                                      | Zhou Lingzhao | 1951 | 155cm*236cm | National Museum of China |
| 3   | Jinggangshan Mountains Meeting                           | Wang Shikuo   | 1957 | 142cm*210cm | Central Archives         |
| 4   | Yan'an Torch                                             | Cai Liang     | 1959 | 164cm*382cm | National Museum of China |
| 5   | A Million Troops March to the South of the Yangtze River | Dong Xiwen    | 1960 | 200cm*466cm | National Museum of China |

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing research on the themes of nationalisation in oil paintings mainly focus on thematic classification and formal strategies. Xu Yanan (2020) discussed Tibetan themes in nationalised oil painting, arguing that integrating traditional Chinese painting thinking methods and modelling principles into oil painting is a successful way of nationalising oil painting. Similarly, Zhou Rongqing (2002) concentrated on the local themes in Chinese oil painting and categorised them into nature, society, and customs, analysing representative works by well-known artists for each category. From a political perspective, Hung Chang-Tai (2007) discussed the "Revolutionary History Painting" project of the 1950s and 1960s, in which five major themes were officially defined, and revolutionary narratives were standardised through typification.

Other scholars have addressed nationalisation through conventional subject categories. Hu Chaogen (2018) analysed figures, landscapes, and still-life themes using selected artworks, while Li Hongxian et al. (2024) focused on revolutionary historical figure themes and their visual and spiritual representation. After reviewing previous research, the researcher found that there has been no research on the application of revolutionary historical event themes in the nationalisation of Chinese oil paintings. There is a significant knowledge gap in the research on the nationalisation of Chinese oil paintings, and it has considerable research value.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

According to John Creswell (2018), qualitative methods utilise text and image data, follow distinct steps in data analysis, and employ various designs. This research involves artworks and secondary documents so that it will use qualitative research methods. According to David Silverman (2016), qualitative research uses words to explore and understand phenomena by providing contextual descriptions and interpreting processes or meanings. The researcher will analyse the

examples of artworks and textual documents to understand how Chinese artists used revolutionary historical events to conduct practical exploration.

This paper's research methods are divided into two types: data collection and data analysis. The data collection will use documents and observation. Documents are created through social processes, providing researchers with important data and insights contained within them (Matthews & Ross, 2010). The types of documents are rich, easy to obtain, objective and accurate, which can provide rich and valuable information for the research questions of this paper. As Bob and Liz (2010) said, observation is the act of watching the real world's social phenomena and recording events as they occur. The researcher will obtain information pertinent to the research topic by examining a selection of artworks.

This research is qualitative, so the data analysis methods will use content and narrative analysis. Content analysis typically involves studying inscriptions found in published reports, newspapers, advertisements, books, web pages, journals, and other types of documentation (Leavy, 2020). The data analysed in this research is pictures and texts. Content analysis can analyse a lot of text information and is flexible to operate. Therefore, it is very suitable for this research. Narrative analysis is a method that encompasses various approaches, offering researchers valuable tools to comprehend the diversity and complexity present in stories (Flick, 2013). The researcher first narrates the collected information, then transcribes the text and picture information, and ultimately analyses all the information and looks for answers.

## 4. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

### 4.1 Unlocking Shackles

In 1949, the Kuomintang reactionaries killed over 300 revolutionaries in jail before Chongqing City was liberated (Shen, 2023). These revolutionaries dedicated their lives to the revolution, but the Kuomintang cruelly massacred them before China achieved liberation. In 1950, artist Hu Yichuan created the oil painting titled *Unlocking Shackles* (see Fig.1) based on this history in memory of these revolutionary warriors who sacrificed for the Chinese revolution, representing the scene of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) rescuing revolutionaries in jail.



Fig. 1. Unlocking Shackles

Source: Hu, 1950

According to Hu Yichuan's self-report, he chose to create this theme because of his personal experience (Li, 2017). In July 1933, Hu Yichuan faced arrest by the Kuomintang government because of his dedicated revolutionary efforts, resulting in a three-year imprisonment. He united the inmates to launch a food strike in jail, resulting in putting him in shackles for 40 days (Lai, 2014). His personal experience provides crucial inspiration for his artistic creation, and the creative materials are collected from prisons or wars. Hu Yichuan did not give up on himself in jail. He learned the revolutionary ideals of the Communist Party of China (CPC) from Deng Zhongxia, carefully observed the inmates' images, and accumulated many creative materials. After Hu Yichuan was released from jail, he continued to engage in revolutionary work through art. He has been active on the front lines of the war, collecting pictures from the battlefield as material, which laid the foundation for future artistic creation.

When specifically conceiving and creating, to distinguish between the many figures, Hu Yichuan used different expressions of face during the process. The picture was split into two sections with an iron gate (see Fig.2-①). On the right side, the PLA opens the shackles of two revolutionary fighters (see Fig.2-②). The revolutionaries near the middle happily shake hands with the PLA. The revolutionaries near the right corner look down expressionlessly at the PLA opening the shackles. On the left, the PLA is helping other revolutionaries out of prison (see Fig. 2-③). The revolutionary warriors in front have clear eyes as if they have seen the light. The revolutionary soldiers behind raised their hands and cheered to celebrate liberation (see Fig. 2-④). Regarding space processing, Hu Yichuan opened the jail door from the outside to the inside, making the picture space wider. Regarding light source processing, Hu Yichuan used oil lamps (see Fig. 2-⑤) to express light, shadow, and colour changes. A large area of warm yellow is used around the light source to illuminate the entire jail, symbolising that the PLA rescues the people from darkness and leads them toward light and freedom.

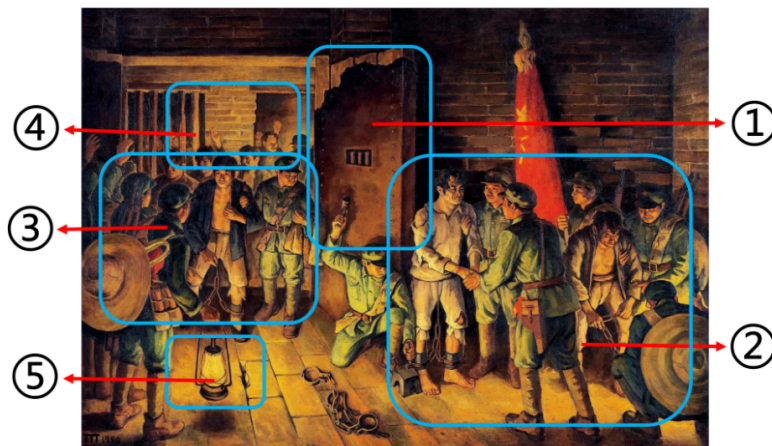


Fig. 2. The Components of Unlocking Shackles

Source: Adapted from Hu, 1950

#### 4.2 May Fourth Movement

In January 1919, the 27 victorious countries held the Paris Peace Conference in Versailles, France, after the end of World War I. At the conference, Chinese representatives claimed that Japan must return to China all rights and interests originally held by Germany in Shandong Province, abolish the unequal treaties between China and Japan, withdraw foreign troops, and return leased territories along with tariff autonomy (Zhang & Zhu, 2009). However, the conference denied the request made by the Chinese representatives, indicating that China's diplomacy at the Paris Peace Conference was unsuccessful. Not long after, the failed news was disseminated to Beijing, China. On May 4, 1919, the May Fourth Movement broke out in Beijing. College students demonstrated in Tiananmen Square, calling for Chinese representatives



to refuse to sign at the Paris Peace Conference (Shen, 2023). In 1951, The oil painting titled *May Fourth Movement* was created by artist Zhou Lingzhao, which was inspired by the history of the May Fourth Movement. (see Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. May Fourth Movement

Source: Zhou, 1951

In March 1951, to prepare for the “Exhibition to Commemorate the 30th Anniversary of the Communist Party of China (CPC)”, the National Museum of China organised art creations with revolutionary historical themes. The Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the CPC and the Ministry of Culture of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) have formulated methods for collecting artworks and entrusted the heads of various units to collect works. After receiving the notification, the heads of each unit assigned creative themes to the art creators. Among them, the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) appointed Zhou Lingzhao to create a work based on the history of the May Fourth Movement (Li, 2021). After Zhou Lingzhao received the creative task, he believed he could only start creating if he understood the situation. Thus, Zhou Lingzhao first investigated the May Fourth Movement’s historical background. Afterwards, he went to Beijing Zhaojialou Hutong and the Red Building at Peking University for a field investigation. He also asked an old and famous scholar for advice. The scholar suggested that Zhou Lingzhao paint the scene of the Tiananmen Parade because it represented the May Fourth Movement’s spirit. Zhou Lingzhao thought that the May Fourth Movement occurred in Tiananmen Square and finally decided to choose Tiananmen as the location to express the theme (Gu, 2016).

The composition of this painting adopts a horizontally divided layout. The first half is the crowd parading (see Fig. 4-①), and the second half is Tiananmen Square and the sky as the background (see Fig. 4-②). The crowd in the first half can be divided into two groups. A young man and woman are disseminating content in the frontmost group in the lower left corner. Two people lifted the man and preached excitedly with a loudspeaker (see Fig. 4-③). The people nearby were deeply affected and raised their hands in excitement. The woman was distributing leaflets to the crowd (see Fig. 4-④). The second group was the parading team behind them (see Fig. 4-⑤). The college students were so angry that they raised their hands and shouted slogans, carried banners, and continued to parade forward despite the obstruction of the police. Zhou Lingzhao created a passionate and angry atmosphere regarding figure processing by focusing on the figures’ movements and facial expressions. In terms of colour processing, Zhou Lingzhao applied bright colours such as red, yellow, and blue, symbolising the awakening of the mind.

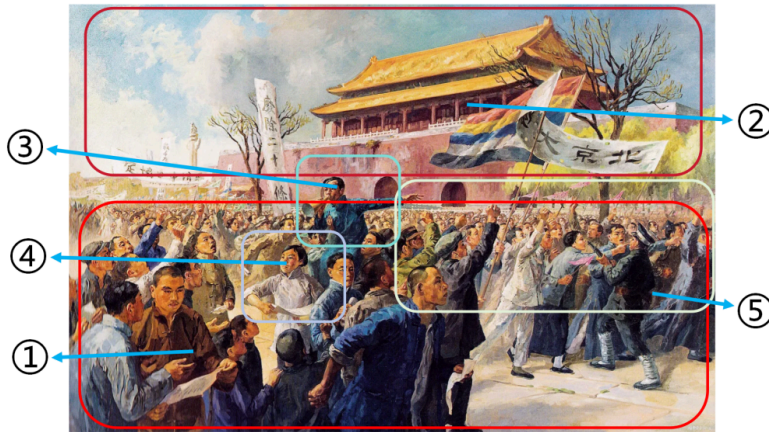


Fig. 4. The Components of May Fourth Movement  
Source: Adapted from Zhou, 1951

### 4.3 Jinggangshan Mountains Meeting

On August 1, 1927, the Nanchang Uprising broke out in Nanchang City, Jiangxi Province (Fang et al., 2022). Following their victory, the Red Army chose to head to Guangzhou to start a new uprising. However, they were besieged by the enemy on the way, which resulted in heavy losses. Following this setback, the CPC understood that the path to victory was initially taking control of the countryside, where the enemy was vulnerable, and subsequently surrounding the cities. As a result, Mao Zedong led his troops into Jinggangshan City, Jiangxi Province, and constructed a rural revolutionary base in Jinggangshan Mountain. To preserve the revolutionary power, Zhu De led his troops into the Jinggang Mountains to join Mao Zedong's troops. Mao Zedong received the news that Zhu De would join him at Jinggangshan Mountain, and he enthusiastically led a team down the mountain to welcome Zhu De's teams. Zhu De climbed up the mountain while Mao Zedong descended the hill, and the two teams finally met at Longjiang Academy (Shen, 2023). In 1957, Wang Shikuo created the oil painting titled *Jinggangshan Mountains Meeting*, which is according to the history of meeting at Jinggangshan Mountain (see Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Jinggangshan Mountains Meeting  
Source: Wang, 1957

In 1952, artist Wang Shikuo received a creative mission to create the oil painting titled *Jinggangshan Mountains Meeting*, assigned by the China Military Museum (now the National Museum of China). After being assigned the mission, Wang Shikuo personally went to Jinggangshan in Jiangxi Province to immerse himself in local life and collect relevant materials. After careful consideration, he chose the moment when Mao Zedong and Zhu De were about to shake hands to express his ideas (see Fig. 6-①). In terms of composition, a head-on angle is used to make the space in the picture appear wide and bright. Regarding figure processing, he paid attention to expressions of the face and movements of the body to make the figures' images more vivid. In light design, the moment when the sun has just risen represents the dawn of victory in the revolutionary journey.

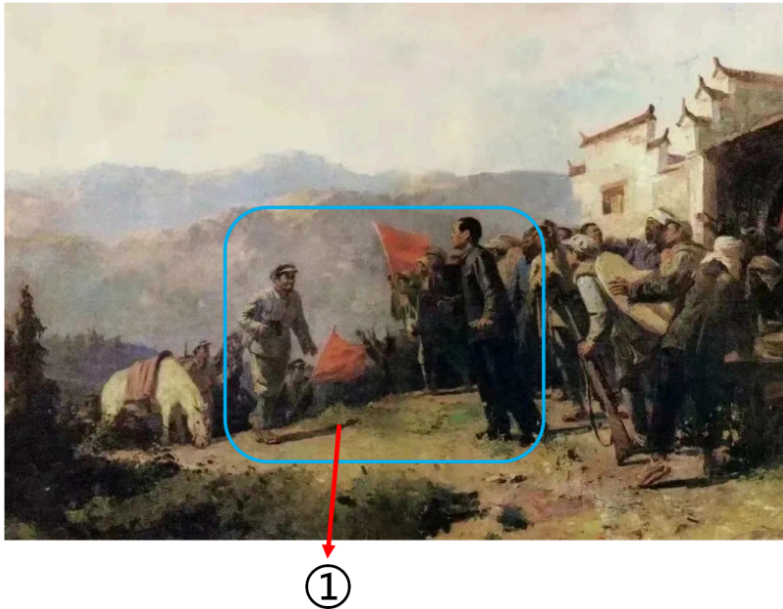


Fig. 6. The Components of Jinggangshan Mountains Meeting  
Source: Adapted from Wang, 1957

#### 4.4 Yan'an Torch

On July 7, 1937, Japan instigated the conflict, leading to the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, and subsequently initiated a full-scale war of aggression against China (Party History Research Office of the CPC Central Committee, 2011). In early August 1945, the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan. On August 15, the Japanese government declared its unconditional surrender (Zhang & Zhu, 2009). China has achieved a victory in the anti-fascist war. When citizens of Yan'an City, Shaanxi Province, heard the news of the victory of the Anti-Japanese War, local citizens hurried to inform one another. The soldiers and local citizens of Yan'an City organised a magnificent torch parade to celebrate the victory of the Anti-Japanese War. The whole city of Yan'an was brightly lit and filled with joy as everyone celebrated (Shen, 2023). Based on this historical background, artist Cai Liang created the oil painting titled *Yan'an Torch* in 1959 (see Fig. 7).





Fig. 7. Yan'an Torch  
Source: Cai, 1959

In 1959, in celebration of the tenth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese Revolutionary History Museum, now known as the National Museum of China, was built. Cai Liang received the mission of creating revolutionary historical paintings. After receiving the mission, he couldn't personally go to Yan'an City to obtain materials because he was pressed for time. However, Cai Liang's experience and feelings of working in Shaanxi Province inspired him. For example, when Cai Liang was working in Yan'an, he encountered a local primary school organising students to parade with lanterns and dance yangko. Another time, Cai Liang went to carry ore in the mountains with local villagers at night. Suddenly, he turned around and saw the villagers' holding torches like a fire dragon. These experiences inspired him a lot. After studying historical documents and consulting old comrades who had participated in the parade, he chose the scene of a torch-holding parade (see Fig. 8-①) at night (Cai, 2015). In terms of composition, Cai Liang adopted an S-shaped composition and used the topography of the mountain to form a flowing curve. Regarding figure portrayal, a happy atmosphere is created through expressions of the face and movements of the body (see Fig. 8-②). Regarding colour tone, the background applied a large dark colour (see Fig. 8-③) to set off the brightness of the torch and the joyful smiles of the figures, showing the great happiness of the Yan'an citizens after winning the Anti-Japanese War.

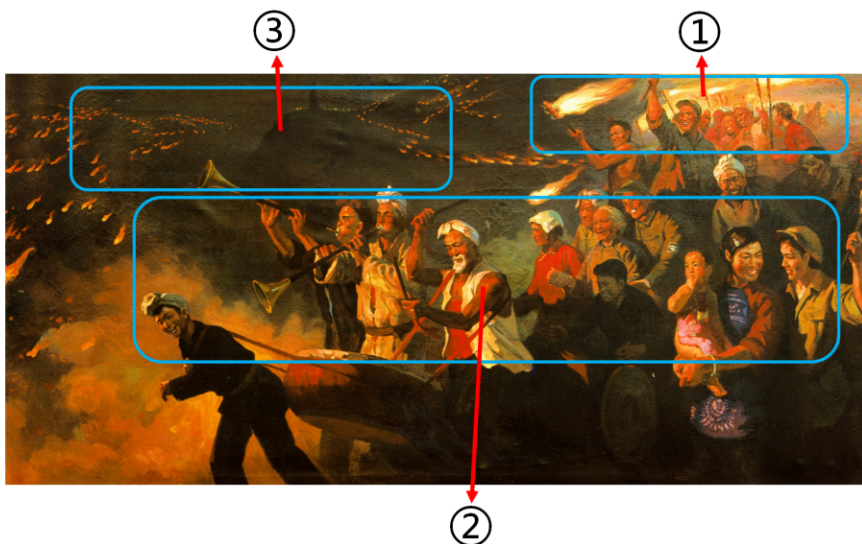


Fig. 8. The Components of Yan'an Torch  
Source: Adapted from Cai, 1959

#### 4.5 A Million Troops March to the South of the Yangtze River



Between September and November 1948, following the significant battles of Liaoshen, Huaihai, and Pingjin, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) defeated the primary military forces of the Kuomintang (Lyu, 2015). The rest of Kuomintang troops were positioned south of the Yangtze River, using it as a barrier for their final resistance. In April 1949, the Battle of Crossing the River was launched by the PLA. The PLA crossed the Yangtze River, successfully broke through the defensive line, and occupied Nanjing, which is the capital of Kuomintang. The PLA ultimately overthrew the Kuomintang's reactionary rule and achieved a revolutionary victory (Shen, 2023). In 1960, artist Dong Xiwen created the oil painting titled *A Million Troops March to the South of the Yangtze River* (see Fig. 9) based on the history of the PLA crossing the Yangtze River and obtaining the victory of the revolutionary war.



Fig. 9. *A Million Troops March to the South of the Yangtze River*  
Source: Dong, 1960

In 1959, to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the PRC's founding, the Central Revolutionary Museum (now known as the National Museum of China) initiated a project focused on creating historical-themed art. Dong Xiwen was invited to create an oil painting titled *A Million Troops March to the South of the Yangtze River*. After receiving the task, Dong Xiwen headed to Jingjiang City, Jiangsu Province, to obtain documentary materials. He found workers who took part in the Battle of Crossing the River and consulted them about the situation during that year (Literary and Historical Materials Research Committee of Jingjiang County Committee of Jiangsu Province, 1992). After collecting the information, he drew many different sketches. For example, some depicted the ship before the sails were raised, and some depicted the ship waiting to set off. In the end, Dong Xiwen chose the scene of about to land on the shore (Ai, 1979). In terms of composition, Dong Xiwen adopted an inverted C shape and used the perspective rules of large near, small far (see Fig. 10-①) to give the entire picture a sense of depth. Since the Battle of Crossing the River occurred in the dark evening, Dong Xiwen's light source was expressed through the intense light emitted by artillery fire, illumination bombs, and signal flares. In terms of colour, Dong Xiwen used purple red (see Fig. 10-②) as the base colour, which strongly contrasts the soldiers wearing yellow-green military uniforms (see Fig. 10-③). At the same time, it highlighted the PLA soldiers and symbolised the shine of the upcoming war victory.

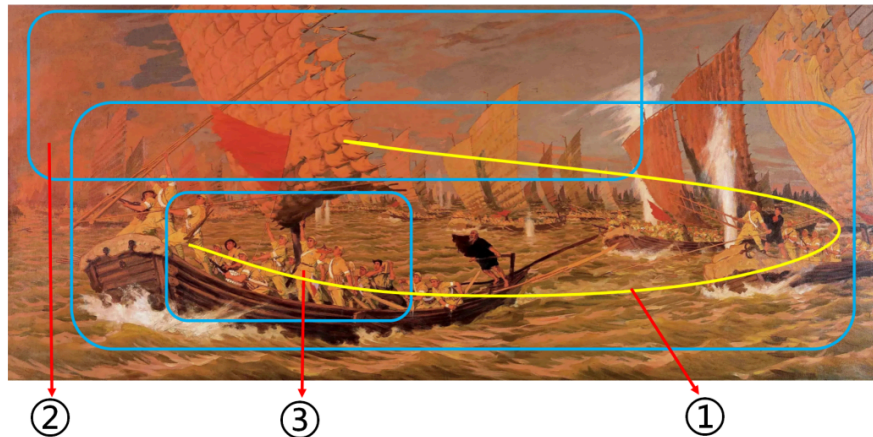


Fig. 10. The Components of a Million Troops March to the South of the Yangtze River  
Source: Adapted from Dong, 1960

Through the discussion of this study, the researcher found the connotations of revolutionary historical themes in Chinese oil paintings, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Themes Connotation of Artworks

| Connotation Title                                        | Spirit | Struggle | Ethnic | Joy | Heroism |
|----------------------------------------------------------|--------|----------|--------|-----|---------|
| Unlocking Shackles                                       | ×      | √        | ×      | √   | ×       |
| May Fourth Movement                                      | √      | ×        | √      | ×   | √       |
| Jinggangshan Mountains Meeting                           | ×      | ×        | ×      | √   | √       |
| Yan'an Torch                                             | ×      | ×        | √      | √   | ×       |
| A Million Troops March to the South of the Yangtze River | √      | √        | ×      | ×   | √       |

By analysing the data, the researcher found some similarities and differences. First, the theme of each work is expressed through the activities of the figures, and Chinese painters will abide by certain methods and steps when creating specific works, striving to achieve a high degree of unity between historical reality and artistic expression. Second, although each theme comes from historical events, the theme content of each work is different, and each artist's expression method is also different. In addition, each theme represents a different connotation. Such as *Unlocking Shackles*, which represents struggle and joy; *May Fourth Movement*, which represents spirit, ethnicity, and heroism; *Jinggangshan Mountains Meeting*, which represents joy and heroism; *Yan'an Torch*, which represents ethnicity and joy; *A Million Troops March to the South of the Yangtze River*, represents spirit, struggle, and heroism.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The researcher found the methods or regularities for Chinese artists to express revolutionary historical event themes. First, the artworks' themes are all derived from actual histories. Moreover, Chinese artists will personally go to the places where historical events occurred to experience life and consult people who have participated in or are familiar with historical events to understand the authenticity of history. Ultimately, Chinese artists often use creative techniques to express the ideas contained or symbolised in their works. By analysing the application of revolutionary historical event themes in the nationalised creation of Chinese oil paintings, the researcher has filled the knowledge gap in the study of the thematic creation of the nationalisation of Chinese oil paintings. Additionally, many oil paintings express themes of revolutionary historical events. In this study, works created from 1950 to 1960 were selected for analysis, which can provide references for other researchers in the future and enrich the achievements of this research field.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Li Hongxian: Conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation and writing-original draft; Azian Tahir: Conceptualisation, methodology, supervision and writing- review; Syed Alwi Syed Abu Bakar: Conceptualisation, methodology, supervision and writing- review; Chen Mi: Literature searching and arranging; Qiu Chen: Language translation, checking, proofreading and revision.

## DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used ChatGPT in order to improve the readability and language quality (the correct use of English terms and grammar translated from Chinese) of the manuscript. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

The authors declare that this research did not involve human or animal subjects. All experimental procedures were performed following the institutional Safety, Health, and Environmental (HSE) protocols of Universiti Teknologi MARA.

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