

# Investigating the Semiotics of Light and Shadows in China Nostalgia Painting through Indexicality and Iconicity

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Received: 26 October 2024 | Accepted: 20 December 2024 | Published: 31 December 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55057/ajress.2024.6.8.25>

**Abstract:** *Through the Chinese light and shadow semiotics in contemporary nostalgic painting, and through different painting styles to present to the audience. Dating back to the 1960s, this painting style is characterized by a combination of traditional light and shadow cultural symbols and complex painting techniques. Due to rapid modernization, globalization, and changes in consumer preferences, the demand for traditional shelf nostalgia has declined, which puts the painting of nostalgic symbols of light and shadow at risk of decreasing. The authors of the study believe that exhibitions that include light and shadow nostalgia for light and shadow semiotic paintings can bring more visitors to the show, increase cultural pride, and provide a steady income for artists. The aim of this project is to investigate creative ways of bringing this creative approach to everyday creation, teaching, consumer perspectives and artistic impact, using classical techniques and symbol-directed research techniques. The aesthetic impact, historical relevance and market viability of using light and shadow symbols in painting will be the main data points to be gained from surveys of individuals working in light and shadow nostalgia painting. The results should help to clarify the semiotic significance of light and shadow.*

**Keywords:** Light and shadow painting, painting installation, visual perception, visual symbol, Cultural symbol

## 1. Introduction

China has a civilization history of thousands of years. In the long history, the customs and habits of people in different regions have provided a steady stream of ideas and materials for the cultural inheritance and characteristics of Chinese people in the creation of paintings. Light nostalgia semiotic painting is a good way to satisfy the growing desire for sustainable painting (Zhang, 2022). As audiences become more aware of the environmental impact of their viewing and consumption decisions, the spread of the spirit of the nation and their enduring creative painting styles is clearly on the rise. In a world of fast pluralistic rules, historical and high-quality light and shadow symbol painting is both a novelty in painting and a tool to promote sustainability by emphasizing the importance of communicating permanence and vital components. This strategy guarantees the honor of light and shadow symbol painting. But it also triggered a change in consumer demand for the contemporary painting market and a greater sensitivity to cultural norms (Zhang, 2022). The new direction is based on highly modern traditions and will undoubtedly ensure that China's cultural symbols remain relevant and recognized in the ever-changing global contemporary art industry.

Zhang Xiaogang, the representative of Chinese contemporary light and shadow painting art, as a veteran artist who has come to today's "85 new trends" of Chinese contemporary art, is an inescapable one. Zhang Xiaogang, a graduate of Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts and a member of the "Star Painting Association", paints paintings of alienation, oppression and subtle pain in the "Star Art Exhibition" in 1979. Old family photos are used to express the relationship between personal memory and society through the depiction of light and shadow (Liu, 2021). He constantly uses light and shadow symbols of Chinese culture to express the memory of The Times. His works such as "Big family series", "Amnesia and Memory Series", "Inside and Outside" and "Green Wall Series" have achieved great success, and Zhang Xiaogang has also gained fame in the art world (Zhao, 2021).

In the late 1980s, Zhang xiaogang studied at the oil painting department of Sichuan Fine Arts Institute. He did not express realistic painting, but began to express the surrealist painting style through concepts, and took the first step in Chinese contemporary painting (Wang, 2021). On the one hand, he was tired of the realistic painting education system at that time; On the other hand, he is full of curiosity and strong spirit of exploration for the new painting art form, and his "blood clan" painting has just entered the era of public vision. Like Zhang Xiaogang's painting practice, the early painting themes were more about the daily life of China's ethnic minorities. In the middle period, the artist used some "nostalgic light and shadow symbols" to stimulate the audience's thinking and criticism of the traditional family cultural concepts of the 1970s (Liu, 2021).

From the end of the 1990s to the beginning of the 21st century, the nostalgic painting of light and shadow symbols in China was in the initial stage of development, mainly influenced by foreign nostalgic art of light and shadow. A group of artists who studied abroad and were inspired by the ideas of painting creation in Western colleges also brought a new visual experience to the nostalgia of light and shadow semiotic painting. Artists born in the 1970s and 1980s, such as Wang Yin, Kang Haitao, and Xia Yu, began to think about the diversity of light and shadow nostalgic symbol painting formed by Chinese culture, symbol directivity, regional characteristics, and even the personality language of the picture in their paintings (Amber, 2021). At the same time, the domestic light and shadow nostalgia painting creation system is also constantly enriched and improved, in 2001, Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts established a new unfamiliar situationism group, in the 1990s, Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts oil painting department was divided into the third studio department, named "new painting studio". The early works of nostalgic painting of light and shadow symbols in China are basically preliminary attempts to explore the combination of semiotics and political significance of light and shadow in painting (Huang, 2021).

In 2015, the nostalgic painting of light and shadow spread and developed in China, and a large number of creators and paintings with a certain degree of activity emerged (Huang, 2020). Major art galleries, galleries and public Spaces in China continue to hold relevant exhibitions, enhancing the audience's sense of participation and visual experience. For example, Beijing's 798 Art District and Shanghai's Oil Tank Art Center have become exhibition and exchange centers for the art of light and shadow semiotics (Amber, 2021).

The early influence of Western Impressionist painting and Japanese Ukiyo-e, the instantaneous change of light and shadow and the use of color make them more free and diversified in the expression of light. It may have inspired Chinese artists to create nostalgic paintings of light and shadow (Zhao, 2020). At the beginning of the 21st century, the integration of science and technology and art in China, some experimental light and shadow movies and interactive light

and shadow devices, and even some daily light and shadow effects, have made it easier for painting creators to obtain inspiration and creative materials. The open and multicultural environment of big cities provides a good soil for the development of light and shadow semiotic painting art. With the increasingly mature exhibitions of art galleries, galleries and public art Spaces, a large number of artists' creation Spaces and opportunities for their works to be displayed have been provided, and the exhibition methods of works have also been unprecedentedly diversified. The government and cultural institutions have increased the support for the creation of nostalgic paintings of light and shadow, and promoted the spread and promotion of nostalgic paintings of light and shadow symbols (Zhao, 2021).

In recent years, nostalgic paintings of light and shadow symbols have appeared in exhibitions in major cities in China, and more and more young art lovers are very satisfied with the visual and sensory experience of art exhibitions, thus enhancing the value of art culture. In all these cases, light and shadow are used to transform space and perception in contemporary art, often in an experiential and immersive way that engages the viewer's senses. The interplay between the interwoven qualities of light and shadow continues to fascinate artists (Zhang, 2019)

### **1.1 Problem Statement**

In the early 1980s, the haze of the Chinese mainland Cultural Revolution gradually dissipated, and the awareness of democracy, equality and freedom was gradually enhanced (Yang, 2019). Past studies have shown that the painting industry has been hit hard by the economic crisis, with many art museums and galleries closing and painting companies ceasing production. The society began to gradually stabilize, the painting market gradually reopened, and the painting material factory gradually resumed production, marking the first step in the reconstruction of Chinese painting (Yang, 2019). Exhibitors and artists often have to work within the framework of politics and censorship, which can lead to the concealment or distortion of historical truth (Yang, 2019). Due to the influence of Western painting and entertainment culture, the tendency to pursue visual experience, short, frequent and fast entertainment will also have an impact on the index and iconicity of painting. The sudden acceleration of the pace of life, the gradual rupture of the original way of life, and the indifference between people have invaded every individual in social life (Li, 2020).

Even in pursuit of nostalgic emotions and artistic effects, nostalgic paintings with light and shadow tend to blur social contradictions, focus on personal fate and friendship stories, and ignore social problems and group experiences. This may lead to the audience's insufficient understanding of social conflicts and social changes in real history (Xu, 2020). The limitations of light and shadow nostalgia painting and the aesthetic pursuit of film make the indicators and iconography of light and shadow nostalgia painting show some obvious aesthetic bias (Xu, 2020). As a result, social classes, women and minorities in certain historical periods have been marginalized or completely ignored, making it difficult to present a true historical picture. This has led to a vague and one-sided treatment of historical authenticity in some paintings. Painting creators and gallerists work within a framework of politics and censorship, which can lead to the concealment or distortion of historical truths (Hu, 2023).

In addition, the study highlights the power of nostalgic paintings of light and shadow to fulfill a dual duty: to preserve culture and foster pride in the symbolic meaning of traditional paintings of light and shadow culture. Presenting the rich cultural history of China in those prominent contemporary nostalgic painting exhibitions can connect the painting language with traditional light and shadow symbols (Xu, 2020). The study shows that adding traditional light and shadow symbols to contemporary Chinese painting is a way for China to counter the homogeneity trend

of global trend painting, while also bringing differences in painting styles and language to the industry. This prominent problem is multifaceted, including such issues as the fragmented dissemination of we-media, impetuous social environment, the negative impact of blindly imitating the trend of Western painting styles, and the homogeneity of the global painting industry. To address these issues, a proposed study will advocate the integration of traditional cultural symbols of light and shadow nostalgia into modern and contemporary painting as an important part of comprehensive painting education and dissemination to preserve cultural heritage, maintain the vitality of contemporary easel painting, and promote a more inclusive and purposeful painting business (Liu, 2020).

## 1.2 Research Gap

In the investigation of the preservation of Chinese light and shadow semiotics nostalgic painting, various research needs are revealed from the aspects of concept, practice and experts. According to the literature review, the nostalgic painting of light and shadow in semiotics is one of the important painting styles in China at present, with a wide range of information (Zhao, 2019). Most of the literature discusses the characteristics of nostalgic painting of light and shadow and its historical collection of development in China (Zhao, 2019). Literature shows that nostalgic paintings are often set in a specific period or social environment, which allows viewers to re-examine the past and reflect on their own cultural identity and self-identity (Zhao, 2019). The indicators and iconography of semiotic light and shadow can arouse the audience's resonance to the past and their own cultural identity through the symbols and images in the painting, so that the audience will pay more attention to and cherish their own cultural identity (Liu, 2019).

## 1.3 Objectives

The main purpose of this study is to explore the types and forms of light and shadow symbols in contemporary visual art, and explore how artists use light and shadow to create visual effects, express emotions and innovate communication methods.

### *Objectives*

- 1) Recognize visual effects and patterns of light and shadow symbols in nostalgic painting semiotics Paintings from the 1980s to the 1990s shaped the emotion of this subject and story
- 2) To analyze the symbolization of light and shadow and depict the light and shadow in Chinese nostalgic paintings from the 1980s to the 1990s, this paper focuses on the study of film symbol and evocation index.
- 3) To developed the study audience perceive and understand the symbolism of light and shadow from a semiotic perspective to analyze nostalgic Chinese paintings from the 1980s to the 1990s, taking into account the cultural and historical context that shaped their interpretation

## 2. Literature Review

Through the clues of the timeline, we can clearly see the evolution process of the nostalgic painting style of light and shadow semiotics from ancient times to the present: oil paintings of classical light and shadow gradient style appeared in the Renaissance, such as wine cellar light and black and white oil paintings appeared in the Baroque period; The scientific light-color segmentation style of oil painting appeared in the Impressionist period (Wang, 2020). In the post-modernism period, multi-style light and shadow painting and even light and shadow installation painting appeared. Developed to the present (cross-border integration of

contemporary art), a large number of interdisciplinary light and shadow paintings with comprehensive materials, ready-made installation paintings (including scientific and technological materials and collages), and freehand light and shadow paintings have emerged at this stage (Wang, 2020). The nostalgic painting of light and shadow semiotics is the artist's reflection on the surrounding environment and survival philosophy through the integration of cross-border concepts, materials and materials in the new era, and causes the audience to resonate with the work. As a nostalgic painting of contemporary light and shadow semiotics, it is neither the traditional painting we once understood nor a simple way of playing, but a multi-dimensional appreciation of painting works, providing more possibilities for painting. "New trend" is the key word to describe this kind of painting (Wang, 2020).

The representative of this painting direction is the famous artist Zhang Xiaogang, whose art takes the surrealistic symbol light and shadow frame painting as the core carrier, and integrates figures, furniture, rooms and other materials into the picture, making the picture in a state of representational, surreal and dreamy (Zhang, 2021). Portrait, bed, TV, desk, corner, etc. They are all cultural symbols that he sought from life experience and conceived into his painting creation. Coupled with his life experience in rural China and his middle age experience of studying Western painting in Europe, the combination of Chinese regional culture and European cultural concepts makes the expressiveness of his paintings perfectly reflected (Wang, 2020).



**Figure 1: Blood Ties by Zhang Xiaogang**  
(Source: Zhangwenji, 2021)

With the spread of foreign digital technology of light and shadow art to China, the light and shadow symbols in contemporary new media painting play an indispensable role, which is the context of art history spanning hundreds of years in China, reflecting the transformation and development of the art education, art forms and cross-media of new media light and shadow nostalgic painting (Wu, 2023). A large number of vivid painting exhibition Spaces have greatly influenced the Chinese audience's deep interaction and visual experience of new media light and shadow painting, which better helps to make the art education of new media light and shadow nostalgic painting and the deep influence of painters, and become more "open and inclusive". In the early stage of new media painting, painting creators mostly painted representational realistic or nostalgic paintings of light and shadow on the shelf, and chose relatively simple materials of light and shadow symbols. In exhibitions, they often only hung their works on the wall for display, and the visual effect presented was relatively limited, only



a straightforward visual experience of the picture, and they were often attracted by the unified light and shadow and realistic details of the picture. With diversified teaching methods, studio teaching in multiple painting directions is assigned according to students' abilities (Wu, 2023). However, with the integration of technology and art, intelligent teaching equipment is equipped in different studios, and information collection and dissemination benefit students. In the early 21st century, the demand for nostalgic painting of light and shadow in new media has exploded. This requires the continuous expansion of the creative means of light and shadow nostalgic painting, the educational concept in colleges and universities and the layout of art galleries and galleries to create rich visual effects of painting (Wu, 2023).

From the early 1980s to the present, the development of China's digital art has gone through four stages: the start-up stage (1990s), the development stage (2000s), the maturity stage (2004-present), and the integration stage (Liu, 2020). "In the space of 30 years, China's digital art has gone from a start, from a lag to rapid development, and has made tremendous changes." Wang Boqiao led the team to review the past, learn from the experience, with a professional and analytical academic attitude, sort out the development of Chinese digital art from the perspective of practice, summarize the history of art in the development of Chinese digital art, and correct the existing problems, and actively held many related exhibitions (Hu, 2023).

After digital art, the second art category that has opened the way for new media art in China is installation painting. In the 1980s, Zhang Xiaogang completed "Blood Family" with a paintbrush and exhibited it at the "Star Art Exhibition", which is the first nostalgic painting of light and shadow symbols in China. The Blood Family in 1980 and the Digital Art Exhibition in 2008 are both Chinese new media art works of light and shadow. Chinese artists began to learn and summarize the concepts and techniques of nostalgic art works of Chinese and Western light and shadow symbols, and their works were created and exhibited in various places (Hu, 2023).

In addition, through the integration of painting language and materials, nostalgic painting of semiotic light and shadow is becoming more and more popular with the public. The audience's aesthetic and artistic knowledge is enhanced, and they visit the exhibition and interact with the works on a daily basis (Wu, 2022). Through the presentation of light and shadow symbols in contemporary visual painting and the visual experience between the audience, it helps to reveal the interactive relationship between painting creation and the audience, provide sensory stimulation and emotional resonance, and thus enhance the audience's sense of painting experience. These exhibition forms are not only limited to traditional exhibition methods, but also obtained a large number of online we-media display and dissemination. At the same time, with the introduction of new technologies (such as AI), the exhibition form and application of nostalgic painting creation of light and shadow semiotics are more frequent in daily public space scenes. With the blessing of science and technology, the creative forms of contemporary semiotic light and shadow nostalgia painting break the traditional boundaries, as well as the transformation of the transmission path and reception mode, and present a diversified trend through different themes and different space exhibition forms. This is the value of artistic innovation (Wu, 2022).

### 3. Methodology

This chapter introduces the research methods of this study. This study uses a qualitative research approach, which is a systematic process that utilizes data collected by a variety of techniques to address research questions. In this study, the author first consulted the relevant

literature on the Internet search platform, analyzed the content and theme of the literature, as well as the current situation of Chinese nostalgic painting of light and shadow, and summarized and defined the characteristics and similarities of the nostalgic film theory (CFA) of nostalgic symbols of light and shadow. Then, qualitative research methods are used to analyze the conceptual creation of nostalgic painting through interviews, questionnaires, case analysis, content analysis, etc., to provide support and analysis for the demonstration of nostalgic painting of light and shadow. Through the contribution of traditional Chinese light and shadow symbols to the spread of Chinese values in nostalgic paintings, this paper discusses the significance of the symbolism and iconicity of light and shadow symbols. It also explains the study design and methodology, including population, sample, and sampling procedures, as well as qualitative methods used for data collection (Muzari, 2022). This paper details how to validate the research tools, and the steps for data collection and analysis (Rahmi, 2021).

#### **4. Discussion and Findings**

The results of the survey show that people believe this strategy has helped increase the popularity of nostalgic paintings of light and shadow, which is good news for the industry. On the other hand, the results showed that people were generally pleasant, with an average score of between 2.7 and 3.6, indicating that they were very much in agreement with the statement. In addition, skewness values indicate a preference for more positive or negative emotions, depending on the question being asked, while kurtosis values indicate the distribution of responses.

While case studies and interview methods in qualitative research confirm that nostalgic light and shadow paintings are highly regarded and may look good at some exhibitions, it also reveals that participants have different opinions about whether this is real, especially among younger audiences. While gender is equally important, it may not capture the nuances of personal taste; At best, it reveals where old age, middle age, youth and children may overlap or differ. With the change of exhibition mode, the nostalgic painting of light and shadow semiotics has developed significantly in recent years. The creators of contemporary light and shadow painting strive to maintain the uniqueness of this painting style language by creating new painting forms and painting languages, using non-traditional materials, and expanding exhibition forms. Light nostalgia painting, a contemporary art form, creates works suitable for modern audiences while being innovative and traditional. The diversity and traditional historical relevance of the contemporary exhibition clearly attest to its continuous continuity in the contemporary period. In fact, the nostalgic painting of light and shadow is still in progress today, which shows that thanks to the nostalgic painting of light and shadow semiotics in China, traditional Chinese culture can survive and spread and even flourish in the contemporary world. Digital platforms offer a great opportunity to showcase paintings created by these artists in a way that appeals to a younger audience. Incorporating nostalgic symbols of light and shadow into contemporary painting creators suggests a sophisticated approach that skillfully combines traditional and modern creative elements. This approach not only returns to the practice of light and shadow painting, but also shows that it is an evolving and timeless art form with plenty of room for innovation. Another key strategy is to bring nostalgic light and shadow paintings into the classroom. In order to truly understand the complexity of this combination of traditional Western art form and traditional Chinese nostalgic cultural elements, young people need to actively participate in traditional classroom environments and online learning environments. Taking a light nostalgia painting course will not only teach you the basics of the industry, but will also help you appreciate your own culture, understand the fun that comes with it, and understand the cultural traditions of our country. This approach demystifies the show and

allows for innovative forms of communication through the use of nostalgic paintings of light and shadow as a tool. Harnessing the power of social media platforms and influencers is another effective strategy.

The significance of the art form and concept of nostalgic light and shadow painting to Chinese visual culture. Explore and understand the style characteristics of light and shadow nostalgia painting, study its cultural significance, and play a role in cultural inheritance. Different types of light and shadow symbols are closely related to the social, political and cultural atmosphere at that time. By studying the use of these symbols, we can gain insight into the cultural background of the time, understand the creative intention of the nostalgic paintings of light and shadow, and provide inspiration for current cultural phenomena. Promoting the sustainable development of Chinese culture: It plays an important role in promoting the sustainable development of local culture through the display and preservation of traditional Chinese symbols and the construction and shaping of Chinese national identity in a specific way, thereby enhancing pride in traditional Chinese culture.

## 5. Conclusion

This article explores the role of light and shadow symbols in contemporary nostalgic painting and how they affect the visual experience of creators and viewers. Using Pierce's semiotics theory and Gibson's direct perception theory, this paper discusses how light and shadow affect artists' creative process. In the nostalgic painting, different angles of light and shadow, contrast of light and shade and metaphorical meaning provide the viewer with multi-level visual experience. It is conducive to the profound interpretation of the creator's emotions and thoughts. In addition, the combination of art and technology has brought new possibilities for painting creation. This cross-border innovation broadens the boundaries of traditional painting art forms. In particular, the innovation of Chinese nostalgic light and shadow painting not only shows the new era value of traditional Chinese light and shadow cultural symbols, but also produces a wider resonance through the combination of modern aesthetics. In terms of research methods, we adopt qualitative research methods, collecting qualitative data, case studies and interviews to systematically explain the works of creators and the meaning behind them. It emphasizes the social value and cognitive value of the creation of contemporary nostalgic light and shadow painting, and holds that this art form has great significance in promoting the inheritance and transmission of traditional Chinese cultural symbols. This study not only fills the gap of relevant literature, but also combines the development trend of global painting with the local cultural background of China, providing a new perspective for the development of contemporary painting. The development of Chinese contemporary nostalgic painting art not only provides strong theoretical support and practical experience for other artists, but also promotes the innovation and development of local painting art under the background of globalization.

## Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the City University of Malaysia for providing the supports for this study.

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