

The Changes in The Aesthetic Thoughts of Chinese Artists in Beijing Biennale during the COVID-19 Period

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Abstract: This study explores the transformative journey of Chinese aesthetics amidst the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the Beijing Biennale as a lens into the shifting paradigms of artistic expression. Before the pandemic, the Biennale emphasized global themes like enriching the world, cultural integration, the Silk Road, memory, and ideal life. However, the outbreak prompted a profound metamorphosis. During the COVID-19 period, the exhibition pivoted toward themes of life reflection, anti-epidemic efforts, and hope, mirroring a broader transformation in Chinese aesthetics. It delves into the evolution from global narratives to localized, human-centered expressions. The pandemic compelled artists to reflect deeply, resulting in works that pondered existential questions and showcased human resilience. Aesthetic expressions shifted from grand global ideals to the immediacy of local life experiences. The study highlights the vital role of hope and solidarity in contemporary Chinese art, portraying them as beacons of light amid the darkness of uncertainty. This research illuminates the profound transformations that have taken place in the artistic landscape.

Keywords: Aesthetic Thoughts; Beijing Biennale; The COVID-19 Period.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Aesthetic thoughts refer to the philosophical and intellectual ideas and theories that pertain to the study of aesthetics, which is the branch of philosophy that explores the nature, perception, and appreciation of beauty and art. Aesthetic thoughts encompass a wide range of concepts and perspectives that seek to understand the nature of art, its purpose, its relationship with beauty, and its impact on individuals and society. Aesthetic thoughts have explored many issues [1]. For example, how do different cultural and historical contexts shape aesthetic experiences? How does art contribute to the formation of personal and collective identities? How do aesthetic experiences enhance our understanding of the world? What is the role of the artist in creating and interpreting art? etc.

Central to traditional Chinese aesthetic thought is the concept of harmony (héxié). In traditional Chinese art and philosophy, harmony refers to the balance between contrasting elements, whether in art, nature, or human life. According to Confucian teachings, harmony is achieved through the proper balance of relationships, ethics, and aesthetics. The famous Confucian scholar Confucius emphasized the importance of balance in all aspects of life, stating, "In all things, success depends on previous preparation, and without such previous preparation, there is sure to be failure." Taoism, another major philosophical tradition in China, emphasizes the appreciation of natural beauty. Taoist aesthetics are rooted in the idea that the natural world embodies inherent beauty and wisdom [2]. Laozi, the founder of Taoism, emphasized the importance of embracing the natural flow of life, stating, "Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished". This perspective deeply influenced traditional Chinese landscape painting, where artists sought to capture the essence of nature and convey a sense of tranquility and harmony.

In contemporary China, traditional aesthetic principles

continue to shape artistic expression, even in the face of rapid modernization and globalization. Contemporary Chinese artists often blend traditional techniques with modern materials and themes, creating a unique fusion of the old and the new. This synthesis is aptly captured in the words of renowned contemporary artist Ai Weiwei, who stated, "The internet is great, but it doesn't really matter. It's about human resources. It's about freedom of speech" [3].

Traditional Chinese aesthetic thought, rooted in Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist philosophies, laid the foundation for the enduring aesthetic sensibilities of Chinese culture. These traditional principles continue to influence contemporary Chinese aesthetics, but they have also evolved to reflect the complexities of the modern world. Artists like Ai Weiwei and scholars engaged in the ongoing dialogue between tradition and modernity exemplify the dynamic nature of Chinese aesthetic thought. By embracing both its rich heritage and the challenges of the present, China's aesthetic discourse remains a vital and evolving force in the global art and philosophical communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged in late 2019, has had far-reaching consequences across the globe. In the realm of the arts, the pandemic has significantly impacted the production, exhibition, and reception of contemporary artworks. The lockdowns and social distancing measures imposed to curb the spread of the virus severely disrupted the working conditions of artists. Many found their studios inaccessible, leading to a halt in the creation of physical artworks. In response, artists turned to digital platforms, creating a surge in online exhibitions and virtual art experiences. "COVID-19 forced us to explore the digital realm more extensively, blurring the lines between physical and virtual art spaces." [4]

Physical art galleries, a vital space for artists to showcase their work, faced unprecedented challenges due to restrictions on public gatherings. Many galleries had to close temporarily, leading to financial strain and uncertainty. In response, virtual exhibitions and online viewing rooms emerged as viable alternatives, allowing galleries to reach a global audience [5].

The pandemic-induced economic uncertainty influenced the art market, impacting both the buying and selling of artworks. While some high-end artworks faced a decline in sales, there was a surge in interest for mid-range and digital artworks. Collectors and investors sought refuge in art assets, considering them relatively stable in times of economic volatility [6].

Chinese contemporary artists responded creatively to the pandemic, reflecting on themes of isolation, resilience, and the human spirit. Artworks inspired by the pandemic ranged from paintings and sculptures to multimedia installations, providing a powerful commentary on the collective experience of the crisis: "Art has the unique ability to capture the essence of our shared struggles and resilience. Many artists found inspiration in the pandemic, creating thought-provoking artworks that resonate with viewers worldwide." [7]

1.2. Research Object

This article investigates of the changes in aesthetic thoughts before and after the COVID-19, within the varieties of representations that illustrate the components of Beijing Biennale. The study aims to examine how artists aesthetic thoughts and creative approaches evolved or shifted in response to the unique challenges and circumstances posed by the pandemic during their participation in the Beijing Biennale.

1.3. Research Significance

The study provides valuable insights into how a global crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, impacts the creative processes and aesthetic choices of artists. This understanding is crucial for scholars, art historians, and curators studying the intersection of art and societal events. By exploring how Chinese artists adapted their aesthetic thoughts during a challenging period, the research sheds light on the resilience and adaptability of artists in the face of adversity. It can serve as an inspiration for other artists and art communities navigating similar challenges. The changes in aesthetic thoughts of artists often reflect broader cultural and social shifts. Studying these changes can offer insights into the cultural dynamics and societal responses to crises, providing a nuanced perspective on the cultural climate during the COVID-19 period in China. It provides a specific case study that can be referenced and compared with other similar studies, enriching the scholarly discourse on the relationship between art and societal contexts.

2. Changes in Aesthetic Thought

Beijing International Art Biennale is a well-known national exhibition in China. It was co-sponsored by the Chinese Literature and Arts Association, the Beijing Municipal People's Government and the Chinese Artists Association. Since 2002, this Biennial has successfully held nine times, and more than 5,000 artists in more than 150 countries have participated in this biennial exhibition. The audience exceeded one million. Beijing International Art Biennale has become the most international art exchange platform in the world [8].

2.1. Beijing Biennale before the COVID-19

The 8th Beijing International Art Biennale focuses on several aesthetic concepts. The idea of a "colorful world" celebrates the beauty of diversity and plurality. It recognizes the multitude of cultures, perspectives, and identities that

exist in our global society. The aesthetics associated with this concept emphasize the vibrant and varied expressions of art, reflecting the richness and uniqueness of different cultures. The notion of a "common destiny" highlights the interconnectedness and shared experiences of humanity. The aesthetic ideas associated with this concept often evoke a sense of harmony and unity. Through artistic expression, artists seek to bridge divides, foster empathy, and emphasize the commonalities that bind us together as human beings. The notion of a "common destiny" highlights the interconnectedness and shared experiences of humanity. The aesthetic ideas associated with this concept often evoke a sense of harmony and unity. Through artistic expression, artists seek to bridge divides, foster empathy, and emphasize the commonalities that bind us together as human beings [9].

There are many excellent art works in the 7th Beijing International Art Biennale, which shows special aesthetic ideas. The Silk Road was a conduit for the exchange of goods, ideas, and cultures across vast regions. Artists explore the aesthetic beauty of cultural diversity by representing the vibrant array of artistic traditions, architectural styles, costumes, and rituals that emerged along the Silk Road. They highlight the intermingling of different aesthetics and the synthesis of artistic influences, showcasing how diverse cultures merged and influenced each other [10].

The aesthetic thoughts of art works in The 6th Beijing International Art Biennale make us have a deep impression. The juxtaposition of contrasting elements can be used to highlight the tension between memory and ideals. These artworks juxtapose past and present, tradition and modernity, or personal and collective memories, creating a dynamic interplay that invites viewers to contemplate the complexities of these concepts [11].

2.2. Beijing Biennale during the COVID-19

In 2022, The theme of the Biennale is "Light of Life". The exhibition time is from January 21, 2022 to February 15, 2022. As the official urban cultural activity during the Beijing Winter Olympics, the ninth China Beijing International Art Biennale has particularly important historical significance. At that time, people all over the world were experiencing COVID-19 epidemic. We jointly respond to the serious global crisis brought by this virus. In disaster, in fact, it is better to highlight the spirit of human beings. "Life is precious. Fate is connected". In this era, the importance of Olympic spirit and values is particularly prominent. It is a symbol of unity and "light of life". China is the promoter of the Olympic spirit, and the Beijing Biennale uses wonderful artistic creation to declare human confidence and courage. This shows the power of life through competitive sports and defeat the invasion of the disease. People will welcome a better future. The theme of "Light of Life" includes the Olympic spirit and the spirit of Anti-epidemic. These two-spiritual fusion. This makes this year's Beijing Biennale has special historical significance.

The aesthetic ideas expressed in the theme of "Light of Life" revolve around unity, resilience, and the power of collective action. It invites viewers to reflect on the profound impact of the pandemic on our collective humanity and the need to prioritize the well-being and dignity of every individual. Through artistic expressions, the artworks convey messages of gratitude, resilience, interconnectedness, and the importance of cherishing and protecting life [8].

2.3. The Change of Aesthetic Thought during the COVID-19

The shift in focus from enriching the world, cultural integration, the Silk Road, memory, and ideal life to themes of life reflection, anti-epidemic efforts, and hope at the Beijing Biennale during the COVID-19 pandemic signifies profound changes in Chinese aesthetics. These shifts reflect the evolving sensibilities of Chinese artists, capturing the zeitgeist of the times and demonstrating the resilience and adaptability of Chinese art.

2.3.1. Embracing Realism and Reflection

The pandemic has prompted a move toward realism in Chinese aesthetics. Artists have turned their focus inward, reflecting on personal experiences, societal changes, and the human condition. The artworks now delve into introspection, capturing the nuances of human emotions and the complexities of contemporary life. This shift signifies a departure from idealized depictions to a more authentic portrayal of the world. Artists used their works to ponder existential questions, exploring themes of isolation, uncertainty, vulnerability, and resilience. This introspective turn in aesthetics allowed for a deeper exploration of the inner worlds of individuals and the collective psyche of society.

2.3.2. Nurturing Hope and Optimism

Amidst the challenges posed by the pandemic, Chinese aesthetics have embraced themes of hope and optimism. Artworks at the Beijing Biennale have become beacons of positivity, offering glimpses of a brighter future. Whether through vibrant colors, uplifting imagery, or narratives of resilience, artists are nurturing a sense of hope that transcends the difficulties of the present. This infusion of optimism into aesthetics serves as a testament to the human spirit's capacity to endure and overcome challenges.

The exhibition's emphasis on anti-epidemic efforts and hope showcases the transformative power of art. It serves as a medium for expressing solidarity, conveying messages of encouragement, and instilling a sense of hope and determination in both artists and viewers. Art becomes a source of inspiration and motivation, contributing to the collective emotional well-being. Artists created works that conveyed messages of optimism, solidarity, and the human capacity to overcome adversity. These aesthetics served as a source of inspiration and motivation during challenging times.

2.3.3. Reimagining Cultural Narratives

The COVID-19 has led to a reimagining of cultural narratives in Chinese aesthetics. Artists are exploring themes of unity, community, and shared humanity, transcending geographical and cultural boundaries. The focus on anti-epidemic efforts underscores the importance of collective action, emphasizing the shared responsibility of global citizens. This shift in perspective reflects a more inclusive and interconnected worldview, where cultural identity is defined by mutual understanding and collaboration. While themes like cultural integration remained important, there was a renewed appreciation for traditional Chinese cultural elements and values. Artists explored the intersection of modernity and tradition, seeking to define a contemporary Chinese aesthetic that incorporates both. Artworks captured the shared struggles, losses, and triumphs of communities,

serving as a form of collective memory and a testament to the strength of human bonds.

2.3.4. Emphasizing Digital Innovation

With physical interactions limited, Chinese artists have increasingly turned to digital mediums and technology to express their creativity. Virtual exhibitions, augmented reality installations, and digital art forms have gained prominence. Artists explored digital art forms, online exhibitions, and virtual experiences as a means to reach audiences despite physical limitations. This emphasis on digital innovation not only reflects the adaptability of artists but also opens new avenues for artistic expression, blurring the lines between the physical and virtual realms.

3. Conclusion

The changes in the thematic focus of the Beijing Biennale highlight the transformative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Chinese aesthetics. Through realism, healing, reimagined cultural narratives, digital innovation, and messages of hope, Chinese artists are adapting their creative expressions, reflecting the profound shifts in societal values and individual experiences during these unprecedented times. These changes reflect the adaptability and responsiveness of Chinese artists in the face of a global crisis.

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