

Artistic Priorities in Contemporary Chinese Visual Arts during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Comparative Study of the Chengdu and Beijing Biennales

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant changes to artistic practice and aesthetic discourse across the globe. In China, major biennial exhibitions became important sites for documenting collective experiences, reflecting social concerns, and expressing cultural resilience during the public health crisis. This study explores the changing aesthetic priorities of contemporary Chinese art through a comparative analysis of the Chengdu Biennale and the Beijing International Art Biennale during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a qualitative content analysis, the research examines selected artworks, exhibition catalogues, curatorial statements, and relevant scholarly literature to investigate how artists interpreted the social realities of the pandemic and how aesthetic thinking developed in response to these unprecedented circumstances. The analysis shows that both biennials redirected their attention toward themes of life, care, and collective responsibility, yet each adopted a distinct artistic orientation. The Beijing International Art Biennale focused on collective resistance, heroism, public health, and respect for life, whereas the Chengdu Biennale placed greater emphasis on human vulnerability, collective trauma, individual suffering, and the interconnected relationship between humanity and nature. The findings suggest that contemporary Chinese art during the pandemic shifted away from earlier concerns with globalization and cultural diversity toward an aesthetic perspective centred on ethics of care, social solidarity, and ecological awareness. This transformation reflects a broader reconfiguration of aesthetic thought in contemporary Chinese art, demonstrating how artistic practice responded to a period of crisis by engaging with issues of human wellbeing, social responsibility, and the relationship between people and the natural environment. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of contemporary art in interpreting social crises and advancing aesthetic discourse in times of profound societal change.

Keywords: Collective experience, COVID-19, Beijing Biennale, Chengdu Biennale, Contemporary Chinese art, Aesthetic thought.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic represents one of the most significant global disruptions of the twenty-first century. Beyond its profound medical, economic, and social consequences, the pandemic also reshaped cultural production and artistic practice. Across the world, artists responded to lockdowns, social isolation, uncertainty, and the widespread loss of life by producing works that documented personal experiences, expressed collective emotions, and reflected on the changing relationship between individuals and society. In China, major biennial exhibitions became important cultural platforms through which these experiences were recorded, interpreted, and communicated to the public. As large-scale national exhibitions that engage artists, institutions, and audiences, biennales provide valuable evidence of how artistic priorities evolve in response to periods of social crisis.

Among these exhibitions, the Beijing International Art Biennale and the Chengdu Biennale occupy particularly significant positions within the development of contemporary Chinese art. Both exhibitions have consistently

served as influential platforms for presenting current artistic practices while reflecting broader social, cultural, and political developments in China. Before the outbreak of COVID-19, their exhibitions largely emphasised themes such as globalisation, cultural diversity, international dialogue, urban transformation, technological advancement, and cultural exchange. The pandemic, however, prompted a noticeable shift in artistic concerns, encouraging artists and curators to engage more directly with issues of public health, collective responsibility, human vulnerability, and ecological sustainability.

Although a growing body of literature has examined the social and economic impacts of COVID-19, comparatively little research has investigated how the pandemic transformed aesthetic thinking within major Chinese art exhibitions. Existing studies have generally focused on individual artworks, artists, or the social functions of art during the pandemic, while limited attention has been given to the broader changes in exhibition narratives and aesthetic values presented by China's leading biennales. A comparative examination of the Beijing International Art Biennale and the Chengdu Biennale therefore provides an important opportunity to understand how different curatorial approaches interpreted the same historical crisis through distinct artistic perspectives.

The Beijing Biennale increasingly highlighted themes of public health, collective resilience, medical workers, volunteers, and social solidarity. Works such as *Light of Life* paid tribute to frontline healthcare professionals and positioned the protection of human life as a central aesthetic and ethical concern. In contrast, the Chengdu Biennale adopted a broader perspective by exploring ecological interdependence, coexistence, environmental awareness, and the fragile relationship between humanity and nature. While both exhibitions responded to the pandemic, they reveal different interpretations of contemporary social responsibility and demonstrate how aesthetic priorities can shift according to curatorial vision and cultural context.

Investigating these changes is important because art not only reflects historical events but also shapes public understanding of them. Examining how major biennales responded to COVID-19 contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between artistic production and social transformation during periods of crisis. The findings of this study will expand current scholarship on contemporary Chinese art by documenting the evolution of aesthetic values during one of the most significant global events of recent history. Furthermore, the study offers a useful comparative framework for analysing how national art exhibitions respond to future social, environmental, or humanitarian challenges.

The significance of this research extends beyond the field of art history. It will benefit researchers by providing a reference for future studies on contemporary Chinese art, exhibition studies, and visual culture during times of crisis. Curators and museum professionals may gain insights into how large-scale exhibitions can respond meaningfully to changing social realities while balancing artistic innovation with public engagement. Art educators and students can use the findings to better understand the relationship between aesthetic practice, cultural values, and historical context. More broadly, the study contributes to discussions on the role of art in documenting collective memory, fostering social reflection, and promoting resilience during periods of profound social change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Contemporary Chinese aesthetics has developed through a continuous dialogue between traditional philosophical thought and the social realities of modern China. Rather than abandoning classical aesthetic principles, contemporary artists have reinterpreted classical philosophies in response to rapid economic development, urbanisation, globalisation, and changing cultural identities (Andrews & Shen, 2012; Gao, 2011). Consequently, contemporary Chinese art represents an ongoing negotiation between inherited cultural traditions and present-day experiences, allowing artistic practice to function both as a continuation of cultural heritage and as a reflection of contemporary social life.

A significant contribution to understanding this relationship is provided by Li Zehou's theory of practical aesthetics (*shijian meixue*), which argues that aesthetic experience is inseparable from human practice and social existence (Li, 2010). According to Li (2010), beauty does not exist as an abstract or purely formal quality but emerges through human labour, historical development, and interaction with the material and social world. Art is therefore closely connected to everyday life, cultural values, and collective historical experience. Within this

framework, artworks are not merely objects of visual appreciation but cultural expressions that embody social consciousness while preserving historical memory (Li, 2010; Wang, 2013).

Building upon Li's theoretical perspective, subsequent scholars argue that contemporary Chinese art has increasingly shifted beyond formal experimentation towards greater engagement with collective memory, national identity, social responsibility, and public experience (Andrews & Shen, 2012; Wu, 2014). This development reflects an expanding expectation that artistic practice should participate in public discourse by documenting contemporary realities, encouraging critical reflection, and responding to social transformation. Rather than functioning solely as an individual creative activity, art increasingly serves as a cultural practice through which shared values are negotiated and historical experiences are interpreted (Wu, 2014; Gao, 2011).

The development of international biennials has been instrumental in facilitating this transformation. Since the 1990s, biennials have become influential platforms for exhibiting contemporary art while fostering dialogue among artists, curators, scholars, and audiences across different cultural contexts (Filipovic, Van Hal, & Øvstebø, 2010; Green & Gardner, 2016). Unlike conventional museum exhibitions, biennials frequently engage with current social, political, environmental, and cultural issues, making them important indicators of changing artistic priorities. In China, the Beijing International Art Biennale and the Chengdu Biennale have emerged as two of the country's leading exhibition platforms. Besides promoting Chinese contemporary art internationally, both exhibitions provide opportunities for artists to interpret national experiences within broader global artistic discourses (Wu, 2014; Green & Gardner, 2016).

Before the outbreak of COVID-19, both biennales primarily emphasised themes associated with globalisation, multiculturalism, cultural diversity, technological innovation, international cooperation, and sustainable urban development (Green & Gardner, 2016; Filipovic et al., 2010). These curatorial directions reflected China's expanding role within global cultural networks as well as the country's rapid economic growth and urban modernisation. Artistic production during this period frequently celebrated intercultural dialogue, scientific progress, and cross-cultural understanding, corresponding closely with broader objectives of cultural diplomacy and international exchange (Andrews & Shen, 2012; Wu, 2014).

The emergence of COVID-19, however, fundamentally altered both the social environment and the concerns of artistic production. As societies experienced lockdowns, travel restrictions, fear of infection, and prolonged uncertainty, artists were confronted with unprecedented questions concerning vulnerability, loss, resilience, and human interdependence. These experiences contributed to what scholars have described as a new form of "pandemic aesthetics," characterised by an increasing emphasis on ethical responsibility, emotional testimony, and social engagement rather than purely formal innovation (Bishop, 2020; Paul, 2023).

Within this emerging aesthetic framework, recurring visual imagery—including medical workers, hospitals, protective clothing, face masks, vaccination programmes, community volunteers, and deserted public spaces—became powerful symbols of collective experience (Paul, 2023). These visual motifs functioned not merely as documentary records but also as metaphors for sacrifice, compassion, solidarity, and hope. Artistic representation during the pandemic therefore expanded beyond individual narratives to acknowledge shared social experiences, demonstrating how art can preserve collective memory while fostering empathy and public reflection (Bishop, 2020; Azoulay, 2021).

The pandemic also stimulated renewed interest in ecological aesthetics within contemporary Chinese art. As the global health crisis exposed the close relationship between environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, public health, and sustainable development, artists increasingly questioned humanity's relationship with the natural world (Morton, 2018; Soper, 2007). Traditional Chinese philosophical concepts such as *tian ren he yi* (the unity of heaven and humanity) consequently regained renewed relevance within contemporary artistic discourse. Rooted in both Confucian and Daoist philosophy, this concept emphasises harmony between humans and nature, proposing that human wellbeing depends upon maintaining ecological balance rather than dominating the environment (Tu, 1985; Ames & Hall, 2001). During the pandemic, these philosophical perspectives acquired renewed significance as artists reflected upon ecological interconnectedness and the environmental conditions that contributed to global vulnerability.

This ecological orientation became particularly evident in the Chengdu Biennale, where numerous artworks explored themes of coexistence, biodiversity, environmental sustainability, and the reciprocal relationship between human civilisation and the natural environment. Rather than presenting nature merely as an aesthetic subject, many artists portrayed it as an active participant in human existence, encouraging audiences to reconsider assumptions concerning progress, consumption, and environmental responsibility. By comparison, although ecological concerns also appeared within the Beijing International Art Biennale, its curatorial narrative placed greater emphasis on public health, collective solidarity, and the contributions of frontline workers. Together, these contrasting curatorial approaches demonstrate how China's major biennales interpreted the same global crisis through distinct yet complementary aesthetic perspectives.

Taken together, the existing literature suggests that COVID-19 did more than introduce new artistic themes; it accelerated broader transformations in contemporary Chinese aesthetic thinking. The pandemic encouraged artists and curators to reconsider the relationship between art, society, history, and ecology, resulting in a noticeable shift from globalisation-oriented narratives towards artistic representations grounded in collective responsibility, human resilience, and ecological awareness (Bishop, 2020; Green & Gardner, 2016). Nevertheless, comparative studies examining how these evolving aesthetic priorities were articulated across different Chinese biennales remain limited. Most existing research has focused on individual artists, specific artworks, or the social impact of the pandemic rather than undertaking systematic comparisons between major national exhibitions. A comparative analysis of the Beijing International Art Biennale and the Chengdu Biennale therefore offers an opportunity to extend current scholarship by revealing how different curatorial frameworks interpreted the same historical event and how aesthetic values evolved within contemporary Chinese art during a period of profound social transformation.

METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative research design using qualitative content analysis to examine the transformation of aesthetic thought in contemporary Chinese art during the COVID-19 pandemic through a comparative analysis of the Beijing International Art Biennale and the Chengdu Biennale. Qualitative content analysis is particularly appropriate for interpreting visual and textual materials because it enables researchers to identify recurring themes, symbolic meanings, aesthetic values, and ideological perspectives embedded within cultural artefacts (Schreier, 2012). Rather than quantifying artistic elements, the method seeks to understand how artworks construct meaning within specific historical, social, and cultural contexts.

The study investigated how the two biennales responded to the pandemic by examining changes in curatorial themes, artistic representations, and aesthetic priorities before and during the COVID-19 period. Particular attention was given to identifying shifts in artistic concerns, including representations of public health, collective resilience, ecological awareness, social responsibility, and human–nature relationships. Through this comparative approach, the research explored how different curatorial strategies reflected broader transformations in contemporary Chinese aesthetic thought.

A. Data Collection

The primary data comprised official exhibition catalogues, curatorial statements, thematic descriptions, artists' statements, and selected artworks presented at the Beijing International Art Biennale and the Chengdu Biennale. These materials were sourced from official biennale publications and exhibition archives to ensure their authenticity and reliability. For the visual analysis, three paintings were selected from each biennale, giving a total of six artworks. A purposive sampling approach was employed based on predetermined selection criteria. The selected works had to (1) be paintings rather than installations, sculptures, photographs, or other forms of media; (2) have been officially exhibited in the respective biennale; (3) demonstrate a clear relationship with the main exhibition theme or curatorial direction; (4) have sufficient visual and contextual information to support detailed analysis; and (5) provide relevant evidence for examining the aesthetic characteristics, thematic concerns, and artistic approaches addressed in the study. An initial review of the paintings exhibited at both biennales was conducted, after which the works were screened against these criteria. Three paintings from each biennale were subsequently selected based on their thematic relevance, their representation of the respective

curatorial concerns, and the availability of supporting contextual materials. This approach ensured that the selected artworks were determined by their relevance to the research objectives and analytical framework rather than by visual preference alone.

B. The Coding Process

The three main analytical categories—Issue, Context, and Visual Representation—were developed from the research questions, the conceptual direction of the study, and the nature of the primary data. The Issue category focuses on identifying the social, cultural, environmental, and human concerns reflected in the selected artworks and, more specifically, on examining the changes in aesthetic thinking represented through the paintings. The Context category considers the wider circumstances that shape and give meaning to these issues, including the socio-cultural, historical, temporal, and curatorial settings of the respective biennales. Relevant information from artists' statements, curatorial descriptions, and exhibition materials was also considered as part of the contextual analysis. The Visual Representation category addresses how these issues and contextual concerns are expressed through the visual and aesthetic language of painting. The analysis considered elements such as subject matter, figures, objects, imagery, colour, composition, spatial arrangement, symbolism, visual metaphor, artistic techniques, and narrative features.

The three categories served as the initial analytical framework and were not treated as predetermined findings. Specific codes and sub-categories were developed through a close reading of the six selected paintings and their related contextual materials. Each artwork was first examined individually, and relevant observations were assigned to Issue, Context, or Visual Representation. Within the Issue category, recurring concerns such as public health, collective solidarity, ecological consciousness, human resilience, social responsibility, and cultural continuity were identified. The Context category captured references to circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic, environmental conditions, social change, cultural circumstances, and the curatorial direction of each biennale. For Visual Representation, attention was given to recurring formal and symbolic features, including imagery, colour, composition, spatial organisation, human figures, objects, symbolism, and artistic techniques. The codes were then compared across the selected artworks to identify recurring patterns, similarities, and differences. Related codes were grouped and refined through repeated comparison with the original visual evidence and supporting textual materials.

Coding was conducted as an iterative process, allowing codes to be retained, revised, combined, or removed as the analysis developed. Each emerging interpretation was checked against the artwork and its supporting contextual information to ensure that the coding remained relevant to the research questions. The three categories were subsequently considered in relation to one another to examine the connection between the issues represented, the contexts in which they emerged, and the visual means through which they were expressed. This approach provided a basis for comparing the selected artworks from the Beijing International Art Biennale and the Chengdu Biennale and for identifying broader patterns in aesthetic thinking. Thus, the Issue–Context–Visual Representation framework enabled the study to examine not only what the artworks communicate, but also why those concerns are significant within their particular contexts and how they are constructed and conveyed visually.

C. Analysis Procedure

The analysis was carried out in several related stages. Each of the six selected paintings was first examined individually and coded according to three analytical categories: Issue, Context, and Visual Representation. Relevant observations were identified and given descriptive codes based on their connection to each category. The initial codes were then compared across the selected artworks to identify recurring ideas, similarities, and differences. Codes with similar meanings were grouped into broader sub-categories and checked against the original artworks as well as the relevant artists' statements, curatorial descriptions, and other supporting materials. This process involved repeated comparison between the visual evidence and contextual information to ensure that the emerging interpretations remained closely grounded in the data.

The three categories were subsequently considered together to develop a more comprehensive interpretation of each artwork. The Issue category addressed what concerns or meanings were conveyed by the artwork, while the Context category examined the social, cultural, historical, and curatorial circumstances that informed those concerns. Visual Representation focused on the ways in which these concerns were expressed through the visual language of painting, including imagery, symbolism, composition, colour, spatial organisation, and artistic techniques. Examining these dimensions in relation to one another allowed the study to identify connections between the issues represented, their contextual significance, and the visual strategies adopted by the artists. The recurring patterns identified through this process were then compared across the Beijing International Art Biennale and Chengdu Biennale to establish broader themes and patterns in aesthetic thinking.

D. Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by Li Zehou's theory of Practical Aesthetics (Shijian Meixue) which provides an appropriate conceptual framework for understanding how aesthetic values in contemporary Chinese art evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic. Li argues that aesthetics should not be regarded merely as the appreciation of beauty or as an individual's subjective emotional response. Instead, aesthetic consciousness is historically produced through human practice (shijian) and is inseparable from the social, cultural, and material conditions in which people live (Li, 2006, 2010). Art, therefore, is not an autonomous activity detached from society but a cultural practice through which historical experiences are transformed into visual expression.

Drawing upon Marxist philosophy while incorporating Confucian and traditional Chinese aesthetic thought, Li proposes that aesthetic experience develops through the continuous interaction between human beings and their social environment. Human labour, everyday life, cultural traditions, and historical events collectively shape aesthetic consciousness over time. As Li (2006) explains, beauty is neither an inherent quality of objects nor purely the result of subjective perception; rather, it emerges through the practical relationship between human beings and the objective world. This understanding shifts aesthetic inquiry away from formal artistic qualities alone and towards the broader historical and social processes that give rise to artistic meaning.

A central concept in Li's practical aesthetics is the "humanization of nature" (renhua ziran), which refers to the transformation of the natural and social world through human activity and cultural practice. According to Li, artistic creation reflects this process because works of art embody accumulated historical experience, cultural memory, and collective consciousness rather than merely reproducing external reality (Li, 2010). Artistic forms therefore become visual manifestations of changing social values and historical circumstances. As societies encounter new experiences, aesthetic concepts also evolve, resulting in new modes of artistic representation and interpretation.

Li further argues that aesthetic experience represents the integration of emotion, reason, and historical consciousness. Emotional responses expressed through art are never isolated personal feelings; instead, they are shaped by broader cultural psychology and collective historical experience. He describes aesthetics as a process in which subjective emotion becomes socially meaningful through shared historical practice (Li, 2006). Consequently, artworks should be interpreted not only in terms of their visual composition but also in relation to the historical conditions that produced them.

This theoretical perspective is particularly relevant to the COVID-19 pandemic, which fundamentally altered patterns of social life, public behaviour, and collective emotional experience throughout China. The pandemic was not simply a medical crisis but a significant historical event that reshaped social interactions, cultural priorities, and perceptions of humanity. Consistent with Li's theory, changes in social practice inevitably generated corresponding changes in aesthetic expression. As artists experienced lockdowns, public health measures, collective sacrifice, and social solidarity, their artistic concerns shifted accordingly. Themes of cultural exchange and global dialogue that characterised many pre-pandemic biennales increasingly gave way to representations of healthcare workers, community resilience, compassion, loss, hope, and national solidarity.

Within Li's framework, these artistic transformations should not be understood merely as individual creative choices or temporary thematic preferences. Rather, they represent historically conditioned responses arising from new forms of collective experience. The pandemic became a catalyst for reconstructing aesthetic values

because it transformed the lived realities from which artistic production emerged. The resulting artworks document not only the visual appearance of the crisis but also the evolving relationship between individuals, society, and history.

Li's practical aesthetics also provides an important framework for interpreting the role of biennales as cultural institutions. Biennial exhibitions do more than present individual artworks; they organise artistic narratives that reflect contemporary cultural values, ideological orientations, and collective social concerns. Curatorial themes, exhibition structures, and artwork selection are themselves forms of cultural practice that respond to historical circumstances. Consequently, analysing the Beijing International Art Biennale through Li's theoretical perspective enables the study to examine how institutional curatorial strategies participated in constructing new aesthetic discourses during the pandemic.

Accordingly, this study employs Li Zehou's Practical Aesthetics as an interpretive lens to analyse representative artworks exhibited before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through qualitative content analysis, the research examines how visual themes, symbolic imagery, narrative strategies, and curatorial approaches reflected changing aesthetic priorities. Rather than treating these developments as isolated artistic trends, the study interprets them as historically situated responses to profound social transformation. Integrating practical aesthetics with qualitative content analysis therefore enables the research to explain not only what aesthetic changes occurred but also how and why these changes emerged within the unique historical circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Analysis

A. Beijing Biennale

Figure 1 Chen Zhijie (2021), Together. Antiepidemic (Foshan Edition), Chinese painting, 130x65cm



Source: The Organizing Committee of the 9th Beijing International Biennale. (2022). In The 9th Beijing International Art Biennale 2022: The Light of Life (Catalogue). Foreign Languages Press.

Table 1 Together - Antiepidemic (Foshan Edition) coding analysis

Dimension	Codes (Key Elements)	Description / Interpretation
1. Issue	- COVID-19 pandemic - Public health emergency - Emotional and psychological stress - - Need for collective responsibility	Created in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the artwork reflects the realities of the public health crisis while emphasising resilience and collective responsibility. The incorporation of traditional Chinese aesthetic elements reinforces cultural continuity, demonstrating how artistic

	- Cultural continuity in crisis	practice preserved shared cultural values amid an unprecedented national emergency.
2. Context	- Chinese social response to COVID-19 - Foshan city as cultural setting - National unity and mass mobilization - Use of heritage aesthetics during crisis - Societal need for hope and healing	Drawing upon the cultural identity of Foshan, the artwork situates local heritage within a broader narrative of national solidarity. Traditional artistic forms are reinterpreted to communicate resilience, hope, and mutual support, illustrating the continuing relevance of cultural heritage during a period of social crisis.
3. Image Representation	- Medical workers, volunteers, testing sites - Crowds cooperating in orderly roles - Foshan landmarks and natural landscapes - Traditional colors and brushwork - Reinterpretation of Qingming Shanghe Tu - Symbolic balance of realism and hope	The composition brings together depictions of frontline healthcare workers, local residents, and recognisable landmarks in Foshan through the use of traditional Chinese painting techniques. By reimagining the compositional framework of <i>Qingming Shanghe Tu</i> in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the artist establishes a dialogue between historical tradition and contemporary experience, highlighting collective resilience and enduring cultural values.

Together - Antiepidemic (Foshan Edition) presents a contemporary reinterpretation of the classical Qingming Shanghe Tu (Along the River During the Qingming Festival), transforming one of China's most iconic artistic compositions into a visual narrative of the COVID-19 pandemic. The painting depicts a large-scale nucleic acid testing programme in Foshan, Guangdong Province, where healthcare workers, volunteers, security personnel, and local residents work together to contain the spread of the virus. Characterised by meticulous detail, the composition incorporates recognisable urban landmarks alongside traditional Chinese brushwork and colour palettes, creating a dialogue between historical artistic conventions and present-day realities (Ding, 2022). Rather than simply documenting a public health event, the painting records a significant moment of collective social experience through a familiar cultural framework.

The work places collective resilience at the centre of its visual narrative. Ding (2022) notes that the composition portrays 136 medical workers among a total of 345 figures, illustrating the coordinated efforts of healthcare professionals, volunteers, and citizens during the pandemic. Scenes of nucleic acid testing, community assistance, and public order are carefully integrated to emphasise cooperation rather than individual achievement. In doing so, the painting departs from earlier biennale themes centred on cultural exchange or artistic experimentation and instead foregrounds solidarity, mutual assistance, and social responsibility. Frontline workers are represented not merely as professionals performing their duties but as symbols of courage and public service whose collective efforts enabled society to respond to an unprecedented crisis.

Beyond documenting social action, the painting also reflects the close relationship between cultural heritage, place, and collective identity. The setting in Foshan is significant because its historic landmarks and urban landscape connect local cultural memory with a broader narrative of national unity. According to Chen (2020), the integration of architectural landmarks and surrounding natural scenery reinforces the interconnected relationship between humanity and the environment, reminding viewers that public health and ecological well-being cannot be separated. This ecological dimension extends the meaning of the work beyond the immediate pandemic, encouraging reflection on the shared responsibility of protecting both society and the natural world.

The reinterpretation of Qingming Shanghe Tu further strengthens the painting's cultural significance. Gong (2022) argues that adapting this celebrated Song Dynasty masterpiece enables the artist to connect historical tradition with contemporary experience. While the original painting documented everyday urban life, Together - Antiepidemic reimagines that visual structure to record a defining historical event of the twenty-first century. The juxtaposition of traditional compositional methods with images of healthcare workers, volunteers, and modern city landmarks creates a visual continuity between China's cultural heritage and its contemporary social reality. As Gong (2022) observes, the work achieves a balance between realism and symbolism, allowing detailed representations of everyday activities to coexist with broader themes of resilience, hope, and collective responsibility.

The painting's emotional impact is reinforced by its careful attention to both human activity and environmental context. Detailed portrayals of medical procedures, community interactions, and the surrounding urban landscape enhance the authenticity of the narrative while inviting viewers to empathise with those who experienced the pandemic firsthand. Rather than presenting the crisis solely as a tragic event, the artist constructs a visual narrative centred on perseverance, compassion, and optimism. These symbolic qualities transform the painting into both a historical record and a reflection of the social values that emerged during the pandemic.

The interview findings support this interpretation. Interviewed Expert 5 observed that many Chinese artists responded to the pandemic by reflecting contemporary social realities while expressing hope for the future. Similar tendencies could also be found internationally, suggesting that art became a shared means of communicating collective emotions during a global crisis. In this context, Together - Antiepidemic (Foshan Edition) extends beyond a local or national narrative to express universal themes of solidarity, resilience, and human compassion. Interviewed Expert 9 likewise noted that the pandemic heightened awareness of the fragility of life, encouraging artists to emphasise hope, courage, and mutual support. According to the experts, artworks produced during this period assumed broader educational, inspirational, and healing functions by offering emotional reassurance and reinforcing collective confidence in the face of uncertainty. Consequently, Together - Antiepidemic (Foshan Edition) exemplifies the shift in contemporary Chinese art towards socially engaged aesthetic practice, where artistic expression became closely intertwined with historical experience, collective memory, and public resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 2 Ding Zhiwei (2021), Light of Life , Chinese painting, 300x280cm



Source: The Organizing Committee of the 9th Beijing International Biennale. (2022). In The 9th Beijing International Art Biennale 2022: The Light of Life (Catalogue). Foreign Languages Press.

Table 2 Light of Life coding analysis

Dimension	Codes (Key Elements)	Explanation / Interpretation
1. Issue	- COVID-19 pandemic - Public health emergency - National crisis requiring coordinated action - Emotional and psychological strain on society - Need for collective sacrifice	Created during the height of the COVID-19 outbreak in China, the artwork captures the urgency of the public health crisis and the immense challenges faced by frontline medical personnel. By depicting the emotional and physical demands placed on healthcare workers, government authorities, and the wider community, it conveys the human impact of the pandemic while recognising their collective efforts to protect public health.
2. Context	- Chinese national response to COVID-19 - Wuhan as the center of the outbreak - Patriotic sentiment and national solidarity - Elevated role of public figures (e.g., Dr. Zhong Nanshan) - Shift in artistic focus from diversity to shared human experience	The artwork reflects China's nationwide response to the pandemic, emphasising values of solidarity, shared responsibility, and collective sacrifice. The inclusion of Dr. Zhong Nanshan symbolises trusted medical leadership, while the portrayal of coordinated action among healthcare workers, volunteers, and citizens highlights the importance of cooperation in overcoming a national crisis.
3. Image Representation	- Firefighters, doctors, soldiers in protective gear - Dr. Zhong Nanshan as a central symbolic figure - Scenes of treating patients, supporting Wuhan, and military-medical cooperation - Banners celebrating anti-epidemic heroes - Realistic portrayal of exhaustion, determination, and teamwork - Dynamic colors, strong lighting, expressive gestures	Through realistic representation and expressive visual detail, the artwork commemorates the courage and perseverance of frontline workers. Dr. Zhong Nanshan serves as a symbolic focal point, while the collective portrayal of medical teams reinforces the shared nature of the struggle against COVID-19. The integration of realist techniques with elements of classical Chinese artistic tradition strengthens the work's commemorative character, presenting resilience, compassion, and national unity as its central aesthetic themes.

Light of Life documents three significant moments from China's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, presenting a visual narrative that honours the dedication of frontline workers. The first scene features firefighters, medical personnel in protective equipment, and the distinguished epidemiologist Dr. Zhong Nanshan beneath a banner celebrating the return of anti-epidemic heroes. The second depicts doctors caring for patients against the backdrop of the "Helping Wuhan" campaign, symbolising nationwide support for the city most affected by the outbreak. In the final scene, medical teams and soldiers work side by side in Wuhan, emphasising the coordinated response between healthcare professionals and the military. Through these interconnected episodes, the painting transforms contemporary events into a coherent narrative of collective sacrifice and national resilience.

Rather than focusing on cultural diversity or regional identity, *Light of Life* reflects a notable shift in the thematic priorities of contemporary Chinese art during the pandemic. Wu (2022) argues that the painting foregrounds patriotism, national solidarity, and collective responsibility, presenting doctors, firefighters, soldiers, and volunteers as individuals united by a shared commitment to protecting society. Their actions are portrayed not simply as professional duties but as acts of public service and moral responsibility. The prominence of Dr. Zhong Nanshan reinforces this interpretation. As one of the most recognisable figures in China's pandemic response, he functions as both a medical authority and a symbol of public confidence, representing leadership, expertise, and perseverance during a period of profound uncertainty (Wu, 2022).

The visual language of the painting further strengthens its emotional and commemorative impact. Li (2022) notes that the artist employs vivid colours, dynamic composition, and expressive contrasts of light and shadow to convey the urgency of the crisis while highlighting the determination of those working on the front line. Careful attention to facial expressions, gestures, and body language allows viewers to engage with the emotional experiences of the figures, transforming documentary representation into a compelling narrative of courage, compassion, and sacrifice. The combination of realistic representation with classical artistic techniques elevates the work beyond a record of historical events, positioning it as a tribute to those who confronted the pandemic.

The interview findings support this interpretation. Interviewed Expert 6 observed that many Chinese artists shifted away from grand narratives centred on cultural diversity and instead focused on the everyday experiences of individuals affected by the pandemic. Greater attention was given to the emotional realities of healthcare workers, patients, and ordinary citizens, reflecting themes of empathy, resilience, and mutual assistance. Similarly, Interviewed Expert 3 noted that artistic expression during this period increasingly emphasised shared human experience rather than difference or diversity, with realism becoming an important means of documenting collective struggle. Interviewed Expert 9 further suggested that by affirming the value of life and commemorating the sacrifices of frontline workers, *Light of Life* illustrates how contemporary Chinese art responded to the pandemic through themes of hope, solidarity, and moral responsibility. Collectively, these perspectives demonstrate that the artwork represents not only a visual record of a national crisis but also a broader transformation in aesthetic priorities, where historical experience, collective memory, and humanitarian values became central concerns of artistic practice.

Figure 3 Zhou Mo (2020), *Life. Most Beautiful Adventurer*, oil painting, 65x185cm



Source: The Organizing Committee of the 9th Beijing International Biennale. (2022). <https://www.biab.org.cn/exhibition/2022-the-light-of-life>

Table 3 *Life Most Beautiful Adventurer* coding analysis

Dimension	Codes (Key Elements)	Description / Interpretation
1. Issue	- COVID-19 pandemic and national crisis - Public health emergency	The artwork responds to the COVID-19 pandemic by portraying it as both a public health emergency and a shared national experience. It highlights the importance of protecting life through collective responsibility, while presenting resilience,

	• Collective responsibility and unity • Resilience and value of life	solidarity, and sacrifice as defining values that shaped artistic expression during the crisis.
2. Context	• National mobilization against COVID-19 • Role of soldiers and frontline workers • State-led solidarity and social responsibility • Biennale as an official cultural platform	Set within the context of China's coordinated response to the pandemic, the artwork portrays frontline workers and military personnel as symbols of national unity and collective commitment. Exhibited in the Biennale, it extends beyond artistic representation to reinforce shared cultural values, social cohesion, and public confidence during a period of uncertainty.
3. Image Representation	• Soldiers in white protective suits • Soldiers in green military uniforms • Repetition and group portrait composition • Aircraft as a symbol of hope and progress	The horizontal composition and repeated group portrayals emphasise cooperation and the collective efforts of frontline workers. The visual contrast between medical protective clothing and military uniforms represents the complementary roles of care and defence, while the aircraft introduces a sense of hope and progress. Through the combination of realism and symbolic imagery, the artwork conveys perseverance, unity, and optimism.

Life Most Beautiful Adventurer is composed as a horizontal narrative divided into three interconnected scenes that portray soldiers participating in China's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the first and third sections, soldiers wearing white protective suits carry disinfection equipment as they move purposefully across the composition, representing their frontline role in safeguarding public health. The central section contrasts these images by depicting soldiers in traditional green military uniforms, while an aircraft flying overhead introduces a sense of movement and continuity. The alternation between protective clothing and military attire creates a visual rhythm that highlights the multiple responsibilities assumed by military personnel during the pandemic, emphasising both medical assistance and national defence (Wu, 2022).

The painting reflects a significant shift in the aesthetic orientation of contemporary Chinese art during the pandemic by placing collective action at the centre of its narrative. Rather than celebrating individual achievement, the repeated portrayal of groups of soldiers underscores cooperation, discipline, and shared responsibility. Wu (2022) argues that the dual representation of soldiers in medical protective clothing and military uniforms symbolises resilience, adaptability, and unwavering commitment to public service. The aircraft further reinforces this message by suggesting hope, progress, and confidence in overcoming the crisis. Together, these visual elements transform the artwork into a symbolic representation of national unity during a period of unprecedented social disruption.

This emphasis on collective experience represents a departure from earlier artistic concerns that frequently explored cultural diversity or rapid social transformation. As He (2022) observes, many artworks produced during the pandemic redirected attention towards solidarity, mutual assistance, and the shared value of human life. Formal aesthetic qualities became closely connected with ethical and social concerns, reflecting a renewed commitment to humanitarian values. Within this context, Life Most Beautiful Adventurer demonstrates how contemporary Chinese artists used realism and symbolic imagery to express resilience while reinforcing the cultural importance of collective responsibility. The repeated group formations not only communicate coordinated action but also reflect the long-standing cultural belief that unity provides strength in times of crisis.

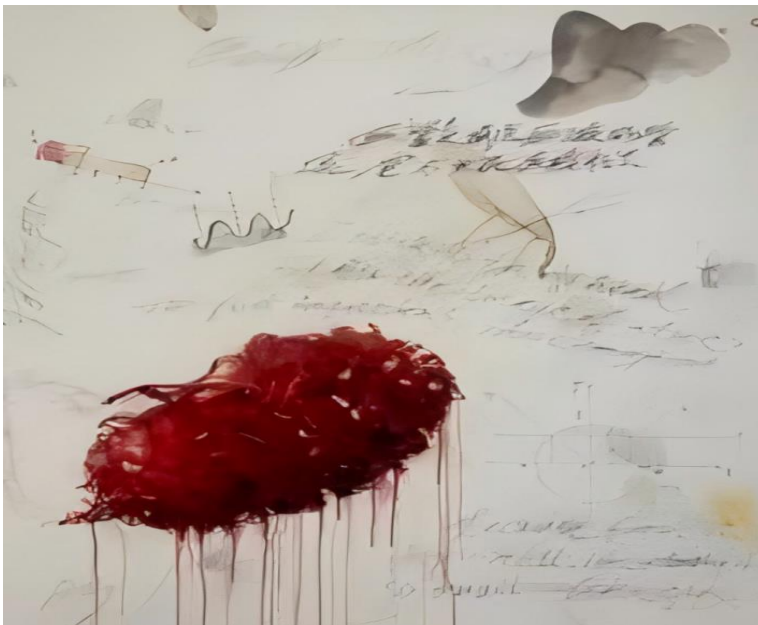
The interview findings further support this interpretation. Interviewed Expert 5 noted that pandemic-era artworks increasingly employed symbolism and realism to represent both individual heroism and collective perseverance, emphasising that meaningful social change is achieved through cooperation rather than isolated effort.

According to the expert, this focus on collective strength resonates strongly with Chinese cultural values, where solidarity is regarded as an essential source of resilience during national emergencies. Interviewed Expert 8 similarly observed that the return to realist representation and classical artistic techniques enabled artists to document the pandemic while encouraging reflection on broader questions concerning life, health, and social responsibility. By engaging directly with contemporary reality, these works assumed an important humanitarian role beyond aesthetic expression.

Within the context of the Biennale, Life Most Beautiful Adventurer also functions as a form of cultural mobilisation. He (2022) argues that artworks exhibited during the pandemic were intended not only to commemorate events but also to foster public confidence, emotional resilience, and social cohesion. As an official cultural platform, the Biennale encouraged artistic narratives that promoted hope, mutual support, and national solidarity during a period of widespread uncertainty. Through its integration of realism, symbolism, and collective imagery, Life Most Beautiful Adventurer therefore operates simultaneously as a historical record, a tribute to frontline workers, and a visual affirmation of the resilience and unity that characterised China's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

B. Chengdu Biennale

Figure 5 Fan Bo (2021), Mutations, Fabric painting, 150×120cm



Source: 2021 Chengdu Biennale Curatorial Team. (2021). In Super Fusion: The 2021 Chengdu Biennale. Sichuan Fine Arts Publishing House.

Table 4 Mutations coding analysis

Dimension	Codes (Key Elements)	Description/Interpretation
1. Issue	Pandemic, Human Vulnerability, Psychological Strain	It reflects the physical, emotional, and psychological toll of the COVID-19 pandemic. The mutated, bleeding heart symbolizes human fragility, suffering, and the pervasive sense of disruption and uncertainty experienced globally. The artwork captures both individual and collective experiences of trauma, highlighting the profound vulnerability induced by the crisis.
2. Context	Body Symbolism,	The painting aligns with a broader trend in Chinese contemporary art, where body elements, particularly organs, serve as metaphors for health, emotion, and identity. The use of the heart connects

	Health, Emotional Expression, Cultural Integration	physical suffering with emotional and psychological distress. Integration of Traditional Chinese Medicine concepts further emphasizes the cultural and symbolic dimensions of the human body .
3. Image Representation	Mutated, Bleeding Heart, Feathery/Furry Texture, Chaotic Graffiti Background	The artwork depicts a grotesque, oval-shaped heart with a feathered or furry texture, bleeding against a backdrop of chaotic graffiti texts. This visual combination conveys physical pain, emotional turmoil, and mental disarray. The mutated heart functions as a visceral metaphor for pandemic-induced suffering, while the graffiti emphasizes urgency, confusion, and the psychological impact of the crisis.

Mutations presents a striking image of a red heart transformed into an elongated, bleeding form with a surface resembling feathers or fur. The familiar anatomical organ is deliberately distorted, creating an unsettling visual that immediately conveys vulnerability and physical discomfort. Surrounding the central image are layers of graffiti-like texts that fill the background with fragmented marks and restless energy. Together, these elements create an atmosphere of instability, mirroring the uncertainty and emotional tension associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The mutated heart functions as the painting's central metaphor for the physical and psychological consequences of the global health crisis. Ding (2021) argues that its abnormal form symbolises the profound disruption brought about by the pandemic, expressing not only illness but also fear, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion. Rather than representing an individual experience, the distorted organ embodies a shared sense of human vulnerability. The surrounding graffiti intensifies this interpretation by evoking the confusion, information overload, and emotional pressure that characterised daily life during the pandemic. Through this combination of symbolic imagery and expressive visual language, Mutations captures the instability that defined the COVID-19 era while inviting viewers to reflect on its broader human consequences.

The painting also reflects a broader development in contemporary Chinese art in which the human body has become an important site for exploring questions of health, identity, and social experience. Instead of depicting the body realistically, the artist transforms the heart into a symbolic image that communicates emotional and cultural meanings alongside biological ones. Interviewed Expert 4 observed that vulnerable or altered body forms became increasingly prominent during the pandemic because they enabled artists to express empathy for collective suffering while examining the relationship between the body, society, and cultural identity. The unsettling appearance of the heart therefore extends beyond physical illness, becoming a visual expression of shared psychological trauma and emotional fragility.

This symbolic interpretation is further strengthened by references to traditional Chinese cultural thought. Interviewed Expert 2 noted that many contemporary Chinese artists have increasingly incorporated concepts associated with Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), where internal organs are understood to possess both physiological and emotional significance. Within this cultural framework, the heart represents not only physical health but also emotional balance, mental well-being, and spiritual vitality. By presenting the heart in a damaged and transformed state, Mutations reflects the disruption of both bodily health and emotional stability experienced during the pandemic. The work therefore connects contemporary social realities with longstanding Chinese cultural understandings of the body.

Viewed collectively, the interpretations offered by Ding (2021) and the interviewed experts suggest that Mutations is more than an artistic depiction of the COVID-19 pandemic. The bleeding, deformed heart operates as a visual metaphor that conveys both the physical consequences of the virus and the emotional distress experienced by individuals and communities. While Ding (2021) emphasises the heart as a representation of pain, uncertainty, and human vulnerability, Interviewed Expert 4 extends this reading by arguing that the altered body functions as a cultural symbol through which artists examine shared experiences of crisis, suffering, and

resilience. By combining distorted bodily imagery with symbolic and cultural references, Mutations reflects a broader shift in contemporary Chinese art towards exploring the psychological, emotional, and human dimensions of the pandemic. In doing so, the artwork demonstrates how the body can serve as a compelling vehicle for expressing collective memory, historical experience, and the enduring impact of a global public health crisis.

Figure 5 Ren Zhitian (2015), Out of control, photography



Source: 2021 Chengdu Biennale Curatorial Team. (2021).In Super Fusion: The 2021 Chengdu Biennale. Sichuan Fine Arts Publishing House.

Table 5 Out of control coding analysis

Dimension	Codes (Key Elements)	Description/Interpretation
1. Issue	Pandemic, Loss of Control, Psychological Disruption	It addresses the emotional, psychological, and social disruptions caused by COVID-19. The exaggerated black tongue symbolizes the unpredictability, fear, and loss of control experienced during the pandemic, highlighting how individuals struggle to maintain composure while facing profound upheaval.
2. Context	Exaggeration, Surrealism, Human-Nature Relationship, Social Critique	The artwork reflects a broader trend in Chinese contemporary art during the pandemic, where artists use deformation and grotesque imagery to explore extreme emotional states, identity, and societal issues. This approach encourages reflection on human vulnerabilities, social injustices, and the interconnectedness between humanity and the environment.
3. Image Representation	Bald Man, Gray Clothing, Black-Frame Glasses, Grotesque Black Tongue	The photograph depicts a bald man in gray attire with black-frame glasses, featuring an unnaturally large black tongue occupying nearly half of his face. The contrast between his composed demeanor and the grotesque tongue visualizes the tension between external control and internal chaos, evoking fear, uncertainty, and the pandemic's profound impact on human and social conditions.

Out of Control is a compelling photographic work portraying a bald man dressed in a plain grey outfit and black-framed glasses. At first glance, his calm posture and direct gaze suggest composure and self-control. This sense

of normality is abruptly disrupted by the presence of an unnaturally enlarged black tongue that dominates much of his face. The striking distortion transforms an otherwise ordinary portrait into an unsettling image, creating a strong visual tension between outward calm and internal disorder. As Fan (2021) observes, this contrast conveys the fragile balance between maintaining emotional stability and confronting the uncertainty brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The exaggerated black tongue functions as the central metaphor of the work, symbolising the profound disruption caused by the pandemic. Fan (2021) and Peng and Hong (2021) interpret this distorted bodily feature as an expression of fear, uncertainty, and the loss of control experienced during the global health crisis. Although the subject appears physically composed, the abnormal transformation of the tongue suggests that the pandemic fundamentally altered everyday reality in ways that were both visible and invisible. Its dark colour reinforces feelings of anxiety, isolation, and psychological distress, while the exaggerated scale intensifies the emotional impact of the image.

The work also invites broader reflection on the relationship between humanity and the natural world. Zhang (2021) argues that the surreal transformation of the human body represents the unnatural consequences of the pandemic and encourages viewers to reconsider the fragile relationship between human society and the environment. Rather than depicting illness literally, the distorted tongue becomes a symbolic reminder that human well-being is closely connected to ecological balance. In this sense, the artwork extends beyond personal suffering to raise questions about the wider conditions that contributed to the global crisis.

The interview findings reinforce this interpretation. Interviewed Expert 6 observed that many Chinese artists adopted exaggeration and bodily deformation during the pandemic to communicate emotional intensity and psychological vulnerability. Distorted figures became effective visual devices for expressing fear, anxiety, hope, and resilience while encouraging audiences to reflect on broader social and environmental concerns. Similarly, Interviewed Expert 1 noted that grotesque imagery emerged as a significant expressive strategy in contemporary Chinese art because it enabled artists to confront the harsh realities of the pandemic more directly. Through the symbolic distortion of the body, artists exposed not only the destructive effects of the virus but also deeper social tensions and human fragility revealed by the crisis.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that *Out of Control* is far more than an image of physical abnormality. The enlarged black tongue serves as a powerful visual metaphor for the emotional, psychological, and social consequences of COVID-19, while the surreal treatment of the human body reflects broader concerns about vulnerability, environmental imbalance, and collective uncertainty. By combining realism with symbolic deformation, the artwork exemplifies the growing tendency in contemporary Chinese art to use the body as a vehicle for examining historical events, social realities, and the complex emotional experiences generated by the pandemic.

Figure 6 Li Fan (2019), *Copy for powerless*, Acrylic painting, 600×200cm



Source: 2021 Chengdu Biennale Curatorial Team. (2021). *In Super Fusion: The 2021 Chengdu Biennale*. Sichuan Fine Arts Publishing House.

Table 6 Copy for powerless coding analysis

Dimension	Codes (Key Elements)	Description/Interpretation
1. Issue	Pandemic, Human Vulnerability, Collective Trauma	It addresses the deep despair, helplessness, and vulnerability experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The skeletal, frail figures symbolize the physical and emotional toll of the crisis, reflecting collective trauma and the widespread sense of powerlessness across different demographics.
2. Context	Compassion, Social Responsibility, Interconnectedness, Human-Nature Relationship	The painting reflects a broader shift in Chinese contemporary art toward emphasizing human fragility, empathy, and the need for holistic consideration of well-being. The work encourages reflection on the relationship between humanity, society, and nature, highlighting moral and social responsibilities during and after the pandemic.
3. Image Representation	Skeletal Figures, Squatting and Standing Rows, Long Cloth Wrapping, Sunken Eyes, Morbid Expressions	It depicts extremely thin individuals arranged in two rows, wrapped in long cloth, with limbs resembling sticks and deeply sunken eyes. Their expressions range from sadness and pain to numbness, conveying a spectrum of emotional suffering. The morbid visual language emphasizes fragility, vulnerability, and collective trauma, while the cloth symbolizes protection and human-nature connections.

Another work that employs distortion and exaggeration to convey the emotional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is Copy for Powerless. Executed in acrylic, the painting depicts a group of men, women, older adults, and infants arranged in two rows, with one group squatting while the other stands behind them. The figures are rendered as emaciated, skeletal bodies with elongated limbs, hollow eyes, and expressionless faces wrapped in long strips of cloth. Their physical appearance and subdued expressions create an atmosphere of grief, exhaustion, and helplessness, evoking the profound emotional and psychological burden associated with the pandemic.

The exaggerated depiction of the human body serves as a metaphor for vulnerability and collective suffering. Zhang (2021) argues that the contrasting postures of the figures symbolise the uneven ways in which individuals experienced the pandemic, while their gaunt forms and vacant expressions communicate feelings of fear, despair, and emotional exhaustion. Rather than portraying specific victims, the painting presents a universal image of human fragility, inviting viewers to reflect on the shared trauma brought about by prolonged uncertainty, isolation, and loss.

The symbolism of the long cloth surrounding the figures further deepens the work's meaning. Zhang (2021) interprets it as a reference to the protective measures adopted during the pandemic, while simultaneously suggesting the persistent sense of exposure and insecurity experienced by many people. Fan (2021) offers a broader interpretation by viewing the cloth as a metaphor for the delicate relationship between humanity and the natural environment. The juxtaposition of weakened bodies with symbolic references to protection and nature encourages reflection on the interconnectedness of public health, ecological balance, and human existence, themes that became increasingly prominent in contemporary Chinese art during the pandemic.

The interview findings reinforce these interpretations. Interviewed Expert 2 observed that the Chengdu Biennale underwent a noticeable shift in aesthetic priorities during the COVID-19 period, moving away from diverse thematic explorations towards artworks that foregrounded human vulnerability, compassion, and social care. In this context, Copy for Powerless reflects an increased concern with the physical and emotional consequences of crisis rather than purely formal or conceptual experimentation. Interviewed Expert 9 similarly noted that the use of morbid imagery represents an expression of artistic responsibility, drawing attention to the fragility of human life and the loss of dignity experienced during the pandemic. Interviewed Expert 6 further suggested that such

works encourage deeper reflection on questions of survival, psychological resilience, and the meaning of life, prompting audiences to reconsider their relationship with society, nature, and their own existence.

Viewed collectively, these perspectives indicate that Copy for Powerless extends beyond the representation of physical suffering. Through its distorted figures, restrained colour palette, and symbolic imagery, the painting explores the emotional, social, and existential consequences of the pandemic. The work exemplifies a broader transformation in contemporary Chinese art, where bodily deformation becomes a visual language for expressing collective trauma, empathy, and the search for human dignity during a period of unprecedented global crisis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 7 Beijing Biennale and Chengdu Biennale comparative coding analysis

Analytical Aspects	Beijing Biennale	Chengdu Biennale
1. Issue	Responds to COVID-19 as a national emergency by emphasising collective responsibility, frontline heroism, patriotism, social cooperation, and public resilience. The artworks celebrate the protection of life and the collective effort to overcome the crisis.	Examines the physical, emotional, and psychological consequences of the pandemic. The artworks explore fear, anxiety, suffering, uncertainty, isolation, mortality, and the fragility of human existence while encouraging reflection on broader social and environmental issues.
2. Context	Rooted in China's coordinated national response to the pandemic. The artworks reflect government mobilization, healthcare systems, military support, volunteerism, and cultural values of unity, sacrifice, and mutual assistance. Exhibited within the Biennale, they also function as instruments of cultural encouragement, reinforcing social cohesion and national identity during the crisis.	Situated within the lived experiences of the pandemic, focusing on individual and collective trauma rather than institutional responses. The artworks reflect changing aesthetic priorities in contemporary Chinese art, shifting towards humanistic concern, psychological healing, bodily vulnerability, and philosophical reflection on life, health, and humanity's relationship with nature.
3. Image Representation	Employ realistic compositions, narrative storytelling, and group portraiture. Frontline workers, doctors, soldiers, volunteers, and recognisable urban landmarks dominate the imagery. Traditional Chinese artistic elements are reinterpreted through contemporary subjects, with symbolism reinforcing hope, solidarity, perseverance, and national unity.	Employ distorted anatomy, bodily deformation, surreal symbolism, grotesque imagery, and expressive visual metaphors. Mutated organs, exaggerated body parts, skeletal figures, and fragmented compositions communicate emotional suffering, vulnerability, and existential anxiety. Realism is often combined with symbolic or expressionistic techniques to intensify psychological impact.
4. Dominant Aesthetic Orientation	Collective aesthetics; social realism; commemorative representation; patriotism; humanitarian responsibility; optimism and resilience.	Humanistic aesthetics; expressive symbolism; psychological realism; existential reflection; empathy; emotional vulnerability.
5. Relationship to Li Zehou's Aesthetics	Demonstrates how art emerges from collective social practice by documenting shared historical experience and reinforcing social values such as cooperation, responsibility, and collective identity.	Demonstrates how aesthetic expression transforms lived experience into symbolic reflection, using the body and emotion to express the historical, psychological, and cultural impact of the pandemic on society.

The six artworks examined in this study reveal two distinct yet complementary aesthetic responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in contemporary Chinese art. Although all of the works were produced within the same historical context, they differ considerably in their thematic concerns, cultural orientation, and visual strategies. The first group—Together. Antiepidemic (Foshan Edition), Light of Life, and Life Most Beautiful Adventurer—emphasises collective resilience, social responsibility, and national solidarity. In contrast, the second group—Mutations, Out of Control, and Copy for Powerless—focuses on individual vulnerability, psychological trauma, and existential reflection. These differences demonstrate that the pandemic did not generate a single artistic response but instead broadened the scope of contemporary Chinese aesthetics by accommodating both collective and personal experiences.

1. Issue

The primary distinction between the two groups lies in the issues they seek to address. The first group approaches the pandemic as a national emergency requiring collective action. The artworks celebrate the courage of healthcare workers, soldiers, volunteers, and ordinary citizens who worked together to contain the outbreak. Rather than dwelling on suffering, they foreground responsibility, sacrifice, resilience, and hope. Human life is represented as something that can be protected through unity, coordinated action, and mutual support. In these works, the pandemic becomes a narrative of collective perseverance rather than individual tragedy.

By comparison, the second group shifts attention from society as a whole to the emotional and psychological consequences experienced by individuals. Instead of depicting organised responses to the crisis, these artworks examine fear, uncertainty, isolation, physical vulnerability, and emotional distress. The bleeding heart in *Mutations*, the enlarged black tongue in *Out of Control*, and the skeletal bodies in *Copy for Powerless* all function as metaphors for the invisible wounds left by the pandemic. Rather than celebrating victory or resilience, these works ask viewers to confront the fragility of human existence and the psychological burdens created by prolonged crisis.

Although their thematic emphasis differs, both groups remain concerned with protecting human life. The first group expresses this concern through collective responsibility and public action, whereas the second explores the internal consequences of the same historical event by examining emotional suffering and existential uncertainty.

2. Context

The contextual orientation of the two groups also differs significantly. The first group is closely associated with China's national response to COVID-19. Healthcare systems, military personnel, volunteers, and public institutions become central subjects, reflecting the coordinated mobilisation undertaken throughout the country. Exhibited within official Biennale platforms, these artworks extend beyond aesthetic expression to perform broader social functions. They reinforce national solidarity, encourage public confidence, and commemorate the contributions of frontline workers. Consequently, the artworks operate simultaneously as artistic productions and cultural narratives that document a defining historical moment.

The second group emerges from a more introspective context. Rather than concentrating on institutional responses or national mobilisation, these works investigate the lived experiences of individuals confronted with illness, fear, isolation, and uncertainty. They engage with broader philosophical questions concerning mortality, mental health, bodily vulnerability, and the relationship between humanity and nature. The pandemic is therefore interpreted less as a political or social event than as a profound human experience that altered perceptions of life, health, and emotional well-being. This shift reflects an increasing interest among contemporary Chinese artists in humanistic concerns and psychological experience.

The contrast between these contextual perspectives illustrates how the pandemic generated multiple layers of artistic meaning. While some artists documented collective action and social responsibility, others turned inward, exploring the emotional consequences that accompanied the crisis.

3. Visual Representation

The visual language employed by each group further highlights these contrasting aesthetic directions. The first group adopts a predominantly realist approach supported by narrative composition. Large group portraits, recognisable architectural landmarks, military uniforms, medical protective clothing, and documentary-style scenes establish a strong connection with historical reality. Traditional Chinese artistic conventions are retained but adapted to represent contemporary events, particularly through the reinterpretation of classical compositions such as Qingming Shanghe Tu. Symbolic elements—including aircraft, banners, and coordinated group formations—reinforce ideas of optimism, national unity, and collective perseverance without departing from representational realism.

The second group employs markedly different visual strategies. Instead of documenting external events, these artists transform the human body into a symbolic site of meaning. Deformed organs, grotesque facial features, elongated limbs, skeletal figures, and surreal imagery replace conventional realism. These distortions are not intended merely to shock viewers; rather, they externalise invisible emotions such as fear, anxiety, grief, and psychological instability. Symbolism therefore becomes the dominant visual language through which complex emotional experiences are communicated. While realism remains present in certain aspects of bodily representation, it is deliberately disrupted through exaggeration and deformation to convey the emotional intensity of the pandemic.

The contrast demonstrates that realism and symbolism were not opposing artistic approaches during the pandemic but complementary strategies for representing different dimensions of the same historical event. One records collective action, while the other visualises emotional experience.

4. Aesthetic Orientation

The differing visual strategies correspond to broader shifts in aesthetic orientation. The first group reflects a socially engaged aesthetic grounded in collectivism, historical documentation, and humanitarian commitment. These works reaffirm long-standing Chinese cultural values, including social harmony, mutual assistance, and collective responsibility. Heroic representation and commemorative narratives dominate the visual discourse, presenting optimism as a response to crisis.

Conversely, the second group adopts a more introspective and expressive aesthetic. The emphasis shifts towards emotional truth, bodily vulnerability, and existential reflection. Rather than presenting idealised heroes, these works expose human weakness, psychological suffering, and uncertainty. The body becomes a symbolic medium through which artists question the meaning of health, identity, mortality, and resilience in an unstable world.

Together, these contrasting orientations reveal the diversity of contemporary Chinese artistic responses during the pandemic. They demonstrate that contemporary aesthetics can simultaneously celebrate collective resilience while acknowledging individual suffering.

5. Interpretation through Li Zehou's Aesthetics

The relationship between the two groups becomes particularly evident when interpreted through Li Zehou's theory of Practical Aesthetics. Li argues that artistic creation is inseparable from historical conditions and emerges from human social practice rather than abstract aesthetic ideals. The pandemic fundamentally transformed everyday life, and these changing social realities generated corresponding changes in artistic expression.

The first group illustrates Li's concept through artworks that record collective practice and historical experience. The emphasis on frontline workers, national mobilisation, and public solidarity reflects the social activities that characterised China's response to COVID-19. Art becomes a cultural expression of shared historical experience, reinforcing collective identity and social values.

The second group reflects another dimension of Li's theory by demonstrating that aesthetic consciousness also develops through lived emotional experience. The distorted bodies and symbolic imagery represent the psychological and existential consequences of the pandemic, transforming private suffering into collective cultural expression. Rather than documenting events directly, these works reveal how historical crises reshape emotional consciousness and aesthetic perception.

Viewed together, the two groups demonstrate that the transformation of aesthetic thought in contemporary Chinese art extended beyond changes in subject matter. The pandemic influenced the ways artists understood beauty, humanity, responsibility, and the role of art itself. Some responded by documenting collective resilience and national solidarity, while others explored vulnerability, psychological trauma, and the fragility of life. Both approaches emerged from the same historical circumstances, confirming Li Zehou's argument that aesthetic values are historically constructed through social practice and continually evolve alongside changes in society.

Overall, the comparative analysis demonstrates that the COVID-19 pandemic prompted a broad transformation in the aesthetic orientation of contemporary Chinese art rather than a simple shift in subject matter. While *Together. Antiepidemic (Foshan Edition)*, *Light of Life*, and *Life Most Beautiful Adventurer* present the pandemic through narratives of collective solidarity, public responsibility, and national resilience, *Mutations*, *Out of Control*, and *Copy for Powerless* adopt a more introspective perspective by exploring vulnerability, psychological distress, and the fragility of human existence. Despite these differences, both groups are united by a common concern with the human condition and the social realities created by the pandemic. Their contrasting visual strategies—ranging from documentary realism and heroic group portraiture to bodily distortion and symbolic expression—illustrate the expanding scope of contemporary Chinese artistic practice in responding to an unprecedented historical event. Viewed through Li Zehou's theory of Practical Aesthetics, these works demonstrate that aesthetic values evolve in response to changing social practice and lived experience, confirming that art functions not only as a reflection of historical reality but also as a means of interpreting, preserving, and giving meaning to collective human experience during times of crisis.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped the aesthetic orientation of contemporary Chinese art by redefining both the thematic concerns of artists and the cultural functions of major biennial exhibitions. The comparative analysis of the Beijing International Art Biennale and the Chengdu Biennale demonstrates that, although both exhibitions responded to the same public health crisis, they adopted markedly different curatorial strategies and artistic approaches. The Beijing Biennale foregrounded collective resilience, national solidarity, and public optimism through realist narratives that commemorated frontline workers and reinforced social cohesion. In contrast, the Chengdu Biennale focused on bodily vulnerability, psychological trauma, and existential reflection, encouraging audiences to confront the emotional and human consequences of the pandemic through symbolic and experimental forms of expression. Rather than representing opposing viewpoints, these complementary approaches reveal the breadth of contemporary Chinese artistic practice and its capacity to address complex social realities from multiple perspectives.

The findings further demonstrate that the pandemic did not simply introduce new artistic subjects; it transformed the underlying aesthetic priorities of contemporary Chinese art. Collective identity, humanitarian concern, emotional resilience, and the value of human life emerged as central themes, while artists increasingly engaged with questions of public responsibility, social ethics, ecological awareness, and psychological well-being. Interpreted through Li Zehou's theory of Practical Aesthetics, these developments illustrate how aesthetic values evolve in response to historical experience and social practice, confirming that artistic creation is inseparable from the cultural and social conditions in which it is produced.

This study contributes to the growing scholarship on contemporary Chinese art by providing a comparative analysis of two major biennales during the COVID-19 period, an area that has received limited scholarly attention. By integrating qualitative content analysis with Li Zehou's Practical Aesthetics, the research offers a theoretical framework for understanding how large-scale public crises influence artistic production, curatorial narratives, and aesthetic transformation. The study also extends discussions on socially engaged art by

demonstrating that contemporary Chinese artists responded to the pandemic not only by documenting historical events but also by interpreting their broader emotional, cultural, and ethical implications.

The significance of this research extends beyond art history and visual culture. It highlights the role of art as a form of cultural memory, public communication, and social reflection during times of crisis, illustrating how artistic practice can foster resilience, empathy, and collective understanding. These findings provide a valuable reference for future research examining the relationship between art and major societal challenges, while offering insights for curators, cultural institutions, and policymakers seeking to strengthen the contribution of art to public engagement, cultural sustainability, and community resilience in an increasingly uncertain world.

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