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SCULPTING MEMORY, PAINTING PEACE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SINO-RUSSIAN MEMORIAL ART ON THE 80TH ANNIVERSARY OF VICTORY

Summary: This paper presents a comparative analysis of Chinese and Russian memorial art, grounded in the 2025 Sino-Russian Art and Culture Series at Tianjin University. Moving beyond a conventional East-West dichotomy, the study argues that while distinct foundational traditions persist — with Chinese art often anchored in narrative realism and Russian art in philosophical symbolism — a more significant and dynamic convergence is occurring in the contemporary realm. Through an examination of symposium discourses and exhibition artworks, this paper identifies a shared frontier of modern

1. Introduction

The commemoration of cataclysmic historical events often crystallizes in the realm of art, where memory is sculpted into form and narrative is painted into consciousness. As principal allies in the World Anti-Fascist War, China and Russia have developed profound, yet distinctly articulated, traditions of memorial art that serve as cornerstones of national identity and cultural memory. The 80th anniversary of the victory in 2025, coinciding with the China-Russia Culture Year, provided a pivotal moment to re-examine these traditions not as static artifacts, but as living practices in dialogue. The series “Art Inscribing History, Dialogue Enriching Humanity,” hosted by Tianjin University’s School of Humanities and Arts, served as a critical platform for this investigation, blending an international symposium with a extensive online exhibition.

This paper utilizes this event as a primary lens to advance a nuanced comparative study. It challenges a simplified narrative that contrasts Chinese

expression, where artists from both nations are actively employing abstraction, temporal dialogue, formal reconstruction, and new media to reinterpret historical memory. Ultimately, it contends that contemporary memorial art in China and Russia is collectively evolving from a commemorative function focused on the past towards a proactive, future-oriented practice of peace advocacy, thereby co-creating a transnational space for dialogue through aesthetic innovation.

Keywords: *Sino-Russian Cultural Exchange, Memorial Art, Modernity in Art, Cultural Memory*

“figurative” art with Russian “abstract” art. Instead, it proposes a more complex framework: to first acknowledge the divergent aesthetic foundations rooted in each culture’s historical and philosophical context, and second, to foreground the convergent contemporary innovations that are reshaping the very language of remembrance in both countries. By analyzing the theoretical propositions of scholars alongside the material experiments of artists, this study seeks to answer: How do modern Chinese and Russian artists navigate and transform their commemorative traditions? What new aesthetic strategies — such as abstraction, temporal montage, and symbolic reconstruction — are being deployed to engage contemporary audiences? And how do these parallel innovations facilitate a shared transition from memorializing past sacrifice to advocating for future peace? In answering these questions, this paper aims to demonstrate that the most vital dialogue between Chinese and Russian memorial art today lies not in their differences, but in their

mutual, innovative journey toward redefining the social role of art in an interconnected world.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This analysis is situated at the confluence of memory studies, comparative aesthetics, and visual culture. It is guided by Aleida Assmann’s concept of “functional memory,” which is active, identity-forming, and often institutionalized through monuments and memorials. However, it also engages with theories of “post-memory” and “prosthetic memory,” which address how later generations engage with traumatic pasts they did not directly experience, often through mediated, imaginative, and aesthetic forms — a process clearly at work in contemporary commemorative art.

The methodology is a qualitative, integrated content analysis of the 2025 Tianjin University events. The recorded proceedings and presentations from the Sino-Russian Art and Culture Symposium (September 2) provide the discursive and theoretical layer, capturing the intentions and reflections of curators, scholars, and artists. The curated online art exhibition constitutes the primary visual corpus. This dual-source approach allows for a hermeneutic analysis, where scholarly discourse illuminates artistic practice, and artistic practice tests and extends theoretical claims, creating a robust framework for understanding the evolution of memorial art.

3. Foundational Aesthetics: Divergent Roots of Remembrance

The historical bedrock of Chinese and Russian memorial art reveals distinct priorities, which continue to inform but do not confine contemporary practice.

3.1 Chinese Art: The Didactic Power of Narrative Realism

The dominant tradition in Chinese modern memorial art has been one of narrative realism, serving a clear pedagogical and moral function. This approach seeks to make history tangible, heroic, and continuous. The exhibition featured quintessential examples: “Self-There Will Be Successors” (Wu Jinguo) portrays a precise generational transfer of spirit through hyper-realistic detail, while “Anti-Japanese Heroine Ba Yunying” (Chen Suixiao) commemorates a specific historical figure with dignified, representational clarity. This tradition aligns with the scholarly emphasis noted in the symposium on creating works “based on respect for historical facts” (Sun Lie), ensuring that art acts as a faithful witness and a teacher of collective values.



《胜利的旗帜》（俄罗斯卫国战争纪念碑）

3.2 Russian Art: The Metaphysical Reach of Symbolism

Conversely, a powerful strand in Russian memorial art has engaged with philosophical symbolism and metaphysical form. Here, the aim is often contemplation over narration, universal resonance over specific biography. Works like “Requiem” (A. N. Burganov) deconstruct the human form into surreal, architectural elements — wheels, a suspended hand — to evoke cycles of time, sacrifice, and mourning beyond a single event. “The Sibyl” (M. A. Burganova) invokes the mythological prophetess, shifting the gaze from historical fact to the timeless human struggle with destiny and foresight. This tendency abstracts the particular into the allegorical, inviting viewers into a space of philosophical reflection.

4. Convergent Modernities: Shared Strategies in Contemporary Practice

The most compelling finding of this study is the emergence of parallel, and sometimes intersecting, strategies of modernization within both traditions. Artists are not abandoning their foundations but are critically expanding upon them.

4.1 Abstraction and Formal Reconstruction

Both Chinese and Russian artists are exploring reduced forms and reconstructed symbols. In the



敬礼的老人 (黑龙江省军区)

Chinese context, this marks a significant departure from pure representation. A piece like "Li" (Standing) by Hu Huiting moves toward a columnar, simplified human form, using a dynamic twist and monolithic presence to convey resilience and forward momentum — an abstracted essence of the commemorated spirit. Similarly, some Chinese artists engage in formal reconstruction, breaking down iconic historical images or symbols and reassembling them into new visual syntheses that speak to both heritage and contemporary perception.

Russian artists, while already adept in symbolism, push further into formal experimentation. "Requiem" is itself a masterclass in abstract reconstruction. The painting "Past War, Future War" (A.V. Zhernoklyuev) employs a stark, graphic juxtaposition of a wounded soldier and a child, using symbolic composition and visceral color fields (red "brushstrokes and splashes") to create a psychologically charged tableau about the inheritance of conflict.

4.2 Dialogues Across Time and Space

A particularly innovative strategy involves creating aesthetic dialogues that collapse linear time. Chinese keynote speaker and sculptor Jing Yumin champions this approach. His signature practice of placing historical soldiers and contemporary youths within the same sculptural tableau creates a powerful "temporal montage." This technique makes the



作品3 《胜利的回忆——莫斯科反法西斯纪念活动写生》 马丹丹 (解放军某部)

act of remembrance itself — the ongoing dialogue between past and present—the central subject of the work. It is not about depicting a historical scene but about staging the continuous, living encounter with history.

This theme resonates in other Chinese works. "Looking Back and Moving Forward 3" (Huang Jinhua) explicitly thematizes this encounter by depicting modern visitors interacting with a monument within the artwork. The Russian work "Slavic Farewell" (A.V. Bogachev), while set in a unified time, uses the enduring medium of music (the accordion melody) to become a conduit for memory, connecting the past moment of the song's origin with the present moment of its performance and the future it implies for the listening child.

5. Functional Evolution: From Communal Memory to Global Peace Advocacy

Underlying these aesthetic innovations is a profound evolution in the perceived function of memorial art, a shift actively discussed in the symposium and realized in the exhibition's curation.

5.1 Engaging the Public and Educating Future Generations

Scholars from both nations emphasized art's role in active public engagement. Russian Academician M.A. Burganova elaborated on the "educational significance" of monuments, while Chinese



《家园》(A.H.Burganov 俄罗斯艺术科学院院士)



黄河儿女 (沈阳军区某部)



新时期战士 (辽宁鞍钢军分区)

discussions focused on leveraging digital media to reach new audiences. This shared concern translates into art that is designed to provoke interaction and thought, whether through the emotional immediacy of a realistic scene or the intellectual puzzle of a symbolic form. The goal is to transform passive viewing into active remembering and critical thinking, a necessity highlighted by scholar A. N. Burtasenkov's call to make memory a "perceivable and inheritable spiritual force."

5.2 Thematic Transcendence: From Sacrifice to Coexistence

The ultimate shared evolution is the thematic journey from commemorating past trauma to envisioning future harmony. The exhibition's narrative arc — from "Resistance and Sacrifice" to "Peace and Coexistence"—is programmatic. In the final chapter, art fully embraces its role as an advocate. Chinese works like "Peace" (Yang Jian & Yang Shunhe), featuring a contemporary student releasing doves, and "Hope" (Sun Qiang), depicting the mundane freedom of a motorcycle ride, visualize peace as a lived, present reality to be cherished. The Russian piece "The Victory of Labor: World Peace" (M. F. Baburin) synthesizes this idea iconographically, placing the soldier alongside the farmer and the dancer, framing peace not as mere absence of war but as the safeguarded condition for creativity, labor, and joy. This collective shift positions memorial art as

a foundational practice for building a "community with a shared future for mankind."

6. Conclusion

The 2025 Sino-Russian artistic dialogue reveals that the memorial landscapes of China and Russia are not frozen in the aesthetics of the mid-20th century. They are vibrant, evolving fields of practice. While their roots differ — nourished by narrative pedagogy in one instance and philosophical symbolism in the other — their conterminous growth is strikingly aligned.

Today, leading artists in both countries are pioneering a shared modern lexicon of remembrance, employing abstraction, temporal dialogue, and formal reconstruction to make historical memory resonate with contemporary sensibility. This is not a homogenization but a parallel development that enriches both traditions. More importantly, this aesthetic modernization serves a greater functional evolution: the transformation of memorial art from a ritualized look backward into a proactive force looking forward. By forging new aesthetic languages to articulate a common vision of peace, Chinese and Russian artists are collaboratively constructing a transnational space. In this space, art does not merely record a shared past victory; it actively drafts, in form and color, the blueprint for a shared future. This is the true, forward-looking legacy of their commemorative dialogue: using the innovative power of art to turn common memory into a common hope.

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