

Intertwining of History and Reality: An Exploration of the Creation of Wang Yingsheng's "The Return of Hong Kong"

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Abstract: This article aims to delve into the background, process, artistic techniques, and cultural significance and social impact of Wang Yingsheng's important artistic work "The Return of Hong Kong." Through an analysis of Wang Yingsheng's artistic style, combined with a detailed interpretation of "The Return of Hong Kong", this article reveals how Wang Yingsheng integrated his personal artistic pursuits with significant historical events to create a work that is both characteristic of the times and full of artistic appeal. Simultaneously, this article explores the position of "The Return of Hong Kong" in the history of Chinese contemporary art and its influence on Chinese culture.

Keywords: Wang Yingsheng; "The Return of Hong Kong"; Cultural significance; Artistic techniques

Online publication: November 13, 2024

1. The creative background of "The Return of Hong Kong"

The roots of the Hong Kong issue can be traced back to a series of unequal treaties imposed on China by colonial aggressors in history. After the Opium War in 1842, the Qing government signed the "Treaty of Nanjing" with Britain, resulting in the cession of Hong Kong Island to Britain and its transformation into a colony. It was not until 1982 when Margaret Thatcher, the then Prime Minister of Britain, visited China and engaged in deep discussions with Comrade Deng Xiaoping regarding the future of Hong Kong.

During this meeting, Comrade Deng Xiaoping proposed the concept of "One Country, Two Systems" as a solution to reclaim sovereignty over Hong Kong. He stated firmly, "China has no room for the concession on the issue of sovereignty" and further emphasized, "By 1997, China will take back Hong Kong" ^[1]. Following negotiations, both parties decided to address the Hong Kong issue through diplomatic channels, reaching an agreement in 1984. Shortly after, British Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe publicly announced that Britain would relinquish its sovereignty over Hong Kong after 1997. This series of decisions and

declarations laid a solid foundation for Hong Kong's return to China and the implementation of the "One Country, Two Systems" policy.

The return of Hong Kong marks a significant event in modern Chinese history, reflecting the Chinese government's renewed jurisdiction over Hong Kong. It holds profound importance for achieving the complete reunification of the motherland and ensuring the country's long-term stability and prosperity ^[2]. This momentous occasion, immortalized in the annals of history, represents a triumphant achievement led by the Chinese Communist Party and the people of China. Indeed, "when China's national flag and the flag of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region rose together in Victoria Harbor, the Chinese Communist Party presented a satisfactory answer to the people of the whole country and even the world" ^[3]. It was within this historical backdrop that Wang Yingsheng created the painting "The Return of Hong Kong", capturing this pivotal moment with distinctive artistic techniques. This article aims to analyze the creative process, artistic approach, and thematic ideas expressed in "The Return of Hong Kong" through the lens of Wang Yingsheng's artistic style. Furthermore, it explores the cultural significance and social impact of this work, seeking to gain a deeper understanding of its artistic and historical value.

2. The artistic style and creative concept of "The Return of Hong Kong"

Wang Yingsheng is a renowned contemporary Chinese artist who has earned prestige in the art world for his unique artistic style and profound social insight. His artistic approach is grounded in realism, emphasizing the portrayal of characters' inner worlds and the essence of social phenomena. Wang actively participates in major national thematic art creations. Fan Di'an once commented on Wang's works, stating, "Each piece can be considered a contemporary masterpiece, forming a grand narrative about significant themes through expansive scenes, numerous characters, and diverse forms of expression. These not only reflect his profound skills in modeling but also demonstrate his pursuit of integrating historical sensibility with contemporary elements" ^[4]. In terms of color application, Wang excels in using contrast and symbolism, giving his works strong visual impact and emotional expressiveness. His paintings deeply reflect his profound concern for social reality and his in-depth analysis of human nature. Wang's artistic style is deeply influenced by traditional Chinese painting techniques, while also incorporating Western painting methods, resulting in a distinctive artistic style. In "The Return of Hong Kong", he employs traditional Chinese painting techniques and compositional principles, combined with Western lighting and color application, to present a scene that is both traditionally Chinese and modern.

In terms of creative philosophy, Wang Yingsheng not just consistently adheres to the principle that art originates from life but also transcends it. He believes artists should be attentive to social reality and reflect the spirit of the times and people's emotions through their artistic works. When creating "The Return of Hong Kong", Wang based his work on this creative philosophy, combining his personal artistic pursuit with a significant historical event, resulting in a great work that is both timely and artistically powerful. It was learned during an interview about a major national historical theme art creation project that "The Return of Hong Kong" was commissioned by the state. To gather more detailed and objective information and further enhance the on-site atmosphere, Wang visited Hong Kong twice, specifically visiting the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center and several sub-venues. Apart from his direct on-site experiences, Wang also utilized video and image materials as creative references.

Furthermore, from the epic work “The Return of Hong Kong”, people can discern the author’s creative philosophy in the following aspects. Firstly, respecting tradition while daring to innovate. Wang Yingsheng respects and learns from tradition in his creations, but he also dares to break through conventions and innovate. This combination not only gives the work a profound cultural foundation and historical inheritance but also exhibits a unique artistic style and characteristics of the times. Secondly, emphasizing emotional authenticity and formal perfection. Wang believes that the vitality of artistic works lies in their emotional authenticity and formal perfection. In “The Return of Hong Kong”, he conveys profound emotional connotations through delicate character portrayals and grand narrative scenes, while employing rich colors and clever compositions to achieve formal perfection. Thirdly, pursuing dialogue between the individual and the world. Wang emphasizes the solitude inherent in the artistic creation process, believing that artists need to face their inner loneliness alone and find their own artistic language and expression through continuous self-exploration and discovery. In “The Return of Hong Kong”, he expresses his emotions, thoughts, and ideas through his work, engaging in spiritual dialogue with the audience. Fourthly, keeping pace with the times. Wang’s creations have always been synchronized with the times. He continually explores intrinsic connections and ventures into new paths with his cultural ideals and dedication to presenting exquisite works to the people. In “The Return of Hong Kong”, he demonstrates the firm steps of the Chinese nation on the journey of great rejuvenation through the profound exploration and artistic treatment of historical events.

3. Analysis of the work “The Return of Hong Kong”

“The Return of Hong Kong” is one of Wang Yingsheng’s representative works. Set against the historical event of Hong Kong’s return, the painting skillfully captures the exciting scene through clever composition and rich color usage. With Victoria Harbor in the background, the foreground features the fluttering flags of China and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. Behind them, a bustling crowd and the dazzling night view of Hong Kong create a vibrant atmosphere. The entire scene is filled with a celebratory and solemn mood, reflecting the pride and joy of the entire nation as Hong Kong returns to the motherland.

In this work, Wang Yingsheng artistically interprets the official transfer of power from Britain to China. The core of the painting features the flags of China and the United Kingdom, symbolizing this power transition. In the foreground, he strategically places the delegation involved in the handover ceremony and the solemn national emblem. Through symmetrical composition and a frontal perspective, the entire ceremony appears grand and dignified. Notably, a countdown board behind the flags boldly states: “The Chinese government resumes sovereignty over Hong Kong countdown. There are 0 days left until July 1, 1997”^[4]. This detail adds a strong documentary element to this significant historical event, as if time has been frozen at this pivotal moment.

In the center of the painting, Wang Yingsheng meticulously depicts the individuals involved in the power transfer. They are lined up, with then-Chinese President Jiang Zemin and Prince Charles of the UK in the middle, surrounded by representatives from both sides.

Wang Yingsheng exercises remarkable craftsmanship in shaping the characters. He focuses on capturing the expressions and demeanors of the Chinese and British representatives. The joy and pride on the Chinese side contrast sharply with the melancholy and resignation on the British side. This contrast not only evokes a sense of national pride among the Chinese people but also underscores China’s journey under the leadership

of the Communist Party, washing away the shame of the past and steadfastly moving towards “the Chinese Dream of realizing national rejuvenation, pursuing national prosperity, rejuvenation, and the well-being of the people”^[5]. Additionally, Wang Yingsheng enhances the painting’s depth and dimensionality by carefully rendering details such as clothing and posture.

Artistically, Wang Yingsheng skillfully incorporates various symbolic and contrasting elements. The fluttering flags of China and Hong Kong not only represent the restoration of national sovereignty but also herald a new beginning for Hong Kong. The vibrant crowd and the glittering night scene form a striking contrast, highlighting Hong Kong’s prosperity and vitality while conveying the deep expectations and wishes of the Chinese people for Hong Kong’s return. Furthermore, the artist’s use of warm tones and contrasting colors adds a festive and celebratory atmosphere to the entire composition.

It is worth mentioning that Wang Yingsheng skillfully links the past, present, and future of Hong Kong through narrative techniques and compositional forms borrowed from traditional mural paintings. In the multiple fragments above the artwork, the first thing that catches the eye is a group of figures dressed in late Qing dynasty attire, which reminds people of the painful history of the Qing government’s ceding of Hong Kong over a hundred years ago. Immediately following this, people see a scene from 1982 where Deng Xiaoping and Margaret Thatcher negotiate Hong Kong’s return. It was during this meeting that Deng Xiaoping firmly expressed the Chinese government’s determination to recover Hong Kong and uphold national sovereignty and unity, pointing the way forward for the successful resolution of Hong Kong’s future. On the right side of the countdown, a solemn and dignified flag-raising ceremony for the national and regional flags is taking place, while the farthest right of the painting shows a jubilant crowd, undoubtedly symbolizing Hong Kong’s bright and hopeful future. The use of such narrative techniques and compositional forms not only enhances the historical depth of the painting but also allows viewers to more deeply understand the historical significance and far-reaching impact of Hong Kong’s return while admiring the artwork^[6]. The entire work conveys a clear message: Hong Kong’s return to the motherland is the will of the people, and under the correct guidance of the “One Country, Two Systems” basic principle, Hong Kong, backed by a strong motherland, will continue to maintain prosperity and stability^[7].

In terms of thematic ideas, “The Return of Hong Kong” is the historical moment of Hong Kong’s return to the motherland and the firm stance on national unity. This artwork is not only an oil painting with extremely high artistic value but also a masterpiece carrying deep historical significance and national emotion^[8]. At the same time, it expresses the joy and pride of the Chinese people in Hong Kong’s return, while also conveying a firm belief in national unity and territorial integrity. Through artistic means, the work transforms the historical event of Hong Kong’s return into an artistic creation with profound connotations and wide-ranging influence, allowing people to feel the weight of history and the inheritance of culture while appreciating art.

Wang Yingsheng’s “The Return of Hong Kong” has become a classic in the history of Chinese art due to its profound thematic ideas and exquisite artistic expression. It not only witnesses the great significance of the historic moment of Hong Kong’s return to the motherland but also conveys the firm belief and determination of the Chinese nation to pursue national unity and realize national rejuvenation^[9]. This artwork will forever be remembered in the hearts of the Chinese people, inspiring them to strive for the prosperity and strength of the motherland.

4. The cultural significance and social impact of “The Return of Hong Kong”

As an important artistic work, “The Return of Hong Kong” not only possesses exceptional artistic value but also carries profound cultural significance and social influence.

In terms of cultural significance, first and foremost, it highlights the theme of national unity and rejuvenation. Through artistic means, “The Return of Hong Kong” showcases the historical moment of Hong Kong’s return, embodying the profound theme of national unity and rejuvenation. Elements such as the raised flags of China and the United Kingdom, the solemn ceremony of power transfer, and the presentation of the national emblem fully demonstrate the significance and gravity of this historical event. This cultural expression not only ignites the national pride of the Chinese people but also underscores the determination and belief in the gradual realization of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation under the leadership of the Communist Party of China. Secondly, it reflects the exchange and integration of Chinese and Western cultures. Hong Kong, as a crucial intersection of Chinese and Western cultures, its return signifies not only political unity but also cultural exchange and integration^[10]. In Wang Yingsheng’s work, the diversity and inclusivity of Hong Kong culture are exhibited through the narration and elaboration of Hong Kong’s past, present, and future^[11]. This cultural expression enriches the cultural connotations of the Chinese nation and provides valuable references for the exchange and integration of Chinese and Western cultures.

In terms of social impact, “The Return of Hong Kong” first and foremost stimulates social cohesion and patriotic fervor. As a work with profound historical connotations and national sentiment, its presentation of a dignified, solemn, and joyful atmosphere deeply infects the vast audience. Through the power of art, this work ignites social cohesion and patriotic fervor, making people more profoundly aware of the importance of national unity and rejuvenation while appreciating art. This social impact is reflected not only in the commemoration and review of historical events but also in the inspiration and motivation for contemporary society^[12]. Secondly, it promotes the development and innovation of contemporary art. Wang Yingsheng employs rich artistic techniques and innovative composition methods in “The Return of Hong Kong”, successfully combining historical events with artistic creation, providing valuable references and insights for the innovation and development of contemporary art. This work not only showcases Wang Yingsheng’s artistic talent and creativity but also reflects contemporary artists’ unique perspectives and deep reflections on handling historical themes and expressing the national spirit^[13]. The work quickly garnered attention and discussion from various sectors of society after its exhibition, becoming one of the cultural focal points of the time. Through appreciating this work, people not only felt the artist’s creative talent and artistic charm but also deeply understood the importance and significance of the historical event of Hong Kong’s return. Furthermore, this work has inspired more artists and creators to engage in artistic creations centered on significant national events, thus promoting the prosperity and development of Chinese contemporary thematic art.

In conclusion, through in-depth research and analysis of Wang Yingsheng’s “The Return of Hong Kong”, people can more deeply recognize the important status and value of the historical event of Hong Kong’s return in Chinese history and culture. Simultaneously, people should also acknowledge that the themes of national unity, rejuvenation, and the exchange and integration of Chinese and Western cultures embodied in this work have profound implications for advancing social progress and cultural development today. Therefore, people should place greater emphasis on and pay more attention to the development and innovation of contemporary art, contributing more artistic power to realizing the Chinese dream of national

rejuvenation.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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