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The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Development and Regional Integration of International Meeting

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Abstract: With the continuous development of human society, international meetings have increasingly become an important form of interaction and contact between countries around the world, and occupy a more and more prominent position in the international community. However, with the COVID-19 epidemic, the international meetings industry is in trouble. This paper empirically studies the impact of COVID-19 on the international meetings industry worldwide through a report published by CIMERT. Among the five globe regions, COVID-19 was found to have the greatest impact in Asia, followed by Africa, with Europe, North America and Latin America being the least affected. It was also found that, based on attendance, medium-sized meetings were the most affected followed by large meetings. The small and super large meetings, however, were the least affected. Finally, beneficial suggestions are made on how the meetings industry should develop in the future.

Keywords: International Meeting; Regional Integration; ICCA

1. Introduction

Covid-19 is a major global threat to human health, with World Health Organization (WHO) statistics showing 178.5 million cases and 3.9 million deaths worldwide as of June 22, 2021. As of 21 June 2021, a total of 2,414,347,324 vaccine doses have been administered. Since COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020, there has been a widespread impact on global trade flows, economic development and social activities, and a severe blow to the international meetings and exhibition industry, which is highly dependent on accumulation of factors, transportation and personnel has suffered a crippling blow.

Following the outbreak, ICCA estimated that 6.6% of meetings affected by the outbreak had been postponed or canceled and that companies needed to redefine their post-epidemic recovery strategies, strengthen internal teamwork and build positive interactions with government departments, not only to gain approval for events but also to ensure that they contributed more to the national economy.

During the epidemic outbreak, scholars have discussed the enormous impact of COVID-19. Liu (2020) has studied the trends in the performance of three major types of conferences in the post-epidemic era: international government conferences, international association conferences and international corporate conferences. He believed that global international conferences will hardly recover in a short period of time, and will even decrease, but regional international conferences will increase. Ning *et al.* (2021) believe that academic conferences held in a combination of online and offline formats will flourish under the normal prevention and control situation of COVID-19. Alon and Bretas (2021) believe as well that COVID-19 will bring about a new global landscape.

Based on these empirical studies, it is clear that the impact of the epidemic continues to spread and be erratic, which will continue to affect the global meetings industry. This paper examines the extent of the impact of COVID-19 on various regions of the world, the extent to which the scale of the four medium-sized meetings has been affected and provides insight into the impact on meetings in China. Following the ICCA classification, the world is divided into six regions: Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, Middle East, and North America. According to data from ICCA and CIMERT, this paper empirically studies the development of international meetings from 1963 to 2019 and the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on regional integration of international meeting.

2. CIMERT

CIMERT is the Center of International Meetings Research and Training, supported by the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA). In February 2020, Chengdu Municipal Bureau of Exposition advised CIMERT to study the impact of COVID-19 on the international meetings industry with the big data obtained from ICCA and wield its think bank's influence to support ICCA in guiding the work of the hard-hit international meetings industry. CIMERT established a special research group and tracked and monitored the dynamics of the international conferences across the world in the ICCA database, analyzed the changes of international conferences, predicated the situation in the short, medium and long terms, and made countermeasures and suggestions for the development of the meetings industry throughout the world.

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During this period, CIMERT has set up a task force group consisting of 15 university students and 3 lecturers, under the helm of Professor Zhu Dan, Dean of the School of Tourism and Cultural Industry. They tracked and monitored the dynamics of the international conferences across the world in the ICCA database, analyzed the changes of international conferences, predicated the situation in the short, medium and long terms, and made countermeasures and suggestions for the development of the meetings industry throughout the world. The report goes into the details on the impacts to China. More importantly, it also tracks changes in overview of entry and exit restrictions across the world. This statistical significance will be of benefit to the industry and destinations on how COVID-19 is going to reshape the global meetings industry, whether in the short term or for the long haul. It monitors the dynamics of the international meetings across the world in the ICCA database, analyses the changes of international meetings, and provides insights on countermeasures for the industry.

3. Impact of COVID-19

Most countries have strengthened restrictive measures for entry into the country in response to the spread of variants of COVID-19. At the same time, a small number of countries and regions have relaxed their restrictive entry measures for people who have completed vaccination against NCCV. As of 5 May, a total of 198 countries and regions have adopted measures for the entry of people. And the situation in India is not encouraging, as the cumulative number of confirmed cases of New Coronary Pneumonia in the country has surpassed 20 million, second only to the United States. Experts from the WHO say that the actual number of cases of NCCP in India may be several times higher than the official figures. To curb the spread of the Newcastle pneumonia outbreak, at least 11 states and districts in India have issued strict restrictive measures such as city closures, curfews and controlled social distances. As the variant B1.617 found in India has been seen in at least 17 countries and regions as of 27 April 2021, several experts have also advised the Indian government to lock down the country again.

Today, some countries and regions have announced the adoption or maintenance of strict preventive measures to strengthen the prevention and control of the Newcastle pneumonia epidemic, while a few countries and regions are gradually relaxing some of the restrictive measures as planned due to the slowing down of the Newcastle pneumonia epidemic situation. A few countries and regions are gradually relaxing some of the restrictive measures as planned due to the epidemic's slowdown.

4. Meeting Data Around the World

4.1. Membership Rules

International conferences, ICCA lists the following restrictive criteria: a meeting must take place on a regular basis, host at least 50 participants, and rotate between a minimum of three countries to be included in the Database.

4.2. Data Sources

The data was selected for the period 1963 to 2019, spanning 57 years. Unless otherwise stated, all data are from the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the International Meetings Industry, A Modern History of International Association Meetings-UPDATE: 1963-2017, Regional insights into the global association meetings market and 2018 & 2019 ICCA Statistics Report: Country & City Rankings-Public Abstract.

4.3. Data Deadline

As of 6 April 2020, this paper analyses data collected by ICCA on 1,749 international meetings held between February and June 2020.

4.4. Data Analysis

4.4.1. The Development of International Association Meetings around the World

From 1963 to 2019 the overall upward trend in the number of international association meetings held per decade. International association meetings increase 259 from 1963 to 1970; international association meetings increase 580 from 1970 to 1980; international association meetings increase 1,142 from 1980 to 1990; international association meetings increase 2,367 from 1990 to 2000; international association meetings increase 5,971 from 2000 to 2010; international association meetings increase 2,726 from 2010 to 2019. And the index has doubled every decade for 57 years (Figure 1).

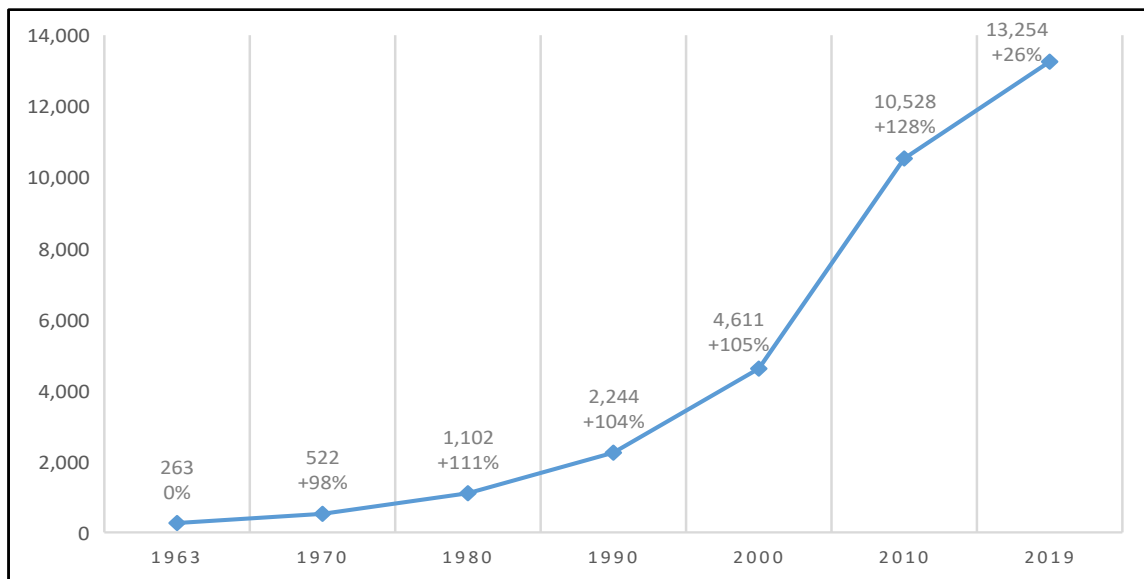
Table 1. Number of meetings per country (1963-1997).

Rank	Country	63-67	68-72	73-77	78-82	83-87	88-92	93-97
1	U.S.A.	167	275	411	638	951	1,279	1,711
2	Germany	144	208	297	454	645	754	872
3	United Kingdom	162	223	314	470	541	729	947
4	France	144	198	285	368	485	751	869
5	Spain	49	77	110	147	251	433	561
6	Italy	100	121	169	236	399	530	678
7	China-P.R.	0	0	1	7	54	138	203
8	Japan	61	82	123	191	296	484	636
9	Netherlands	88	116	157	226	316	495	584
10	Canada	32	62	142	207	330	407	536
11	Brazil	14	15	55	78	124	183	238
12	Republic of Korea	4	8	17	30	61	116	198
13	Portugal	10	22	16	46	92	153	237
14	Austria	74	58	118	145	191	280	367
15	Australia	18	44	68	92	164	277	457
16	Sweden	70	80	115	149	251	334	374
17	Belgium	48	75	97	160	197	248	326
18	Switzerland	64	95	143	195	244	297	326
19	Poland	24	25	42	54	55	72	149
20	Mexico	28	52	63	95	76	107	198
	Other	422	729	1,078	1,573	2,187	3,127	4,822
	Total	1,723	2,565	3,821	5561	7,910	11,194	15,289

Table 2. Number of meetings per country (1998-2019).

Rank	Country	98-02	03-07	08-12	13-17	18	19
1	U.S.A.	2,415	3,312	4,481	5,014	947	934
2	Germany	1,308	2,001	2,952	3,633	642	714
3	United Kingdom	1,271	1,685	2,406	3,117	574	567
4	France	1,210	1,696	2,393	2,868	579	595
5	Spain	913	1,515	2,336	2,830	595	578
6	Italy	1,105	1,643	2,304	2,666	522	550
7	China-P.R.	386	1,038	1,882	2,186	449	539
8	Japan	843	1,248	1,661	2,032	492	527
9	Netherlands	752	941	1,421	1,722	355	356
10	Canada	750	1,043	1,402	1,596	315	336
11	Brazil	469	832	1,351	1,422	233	209
12	Republic of Korea	369	681	1,152	1,422	273	248
13	Portugal	399	684	1,053	1,405	306	342
14	Austria	442	829	1,184	1,384	240	231
15	Australia	727	844	1,125	1,283	265	272
16	Sweden	576	726	1,089	1,275	257	237
17	Belgium	398	562	1,009	1,158	252	237
18	Switzerland	488	766	1,112	1,116	208	221
19	Poland	277	488	786	1,039	211	213
20	Mexico	354	632	869	988	172	197
	Other	7,206	12,401	20,055	25,100	5,050	5,151
	Total	22,658	35,567	54,023	65,256	12,937	13,254

The number of international meetings growing slowly from 1963 to 2000 but rapidly from 2000 to 2010. It is believed the rise of Asia and a closer union with Europe that drive the development of entire conference industry around the world. However, after a certain point in the growth of meetings, most of the countries will focus more on the quality of meetings rather than the quantity, so the rate of growth in the number of meetings has decreased from 2010 to 2019.

**Figure 1.** Total number of International association meetings 1963-2019.

4.4.2. The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the International Meetings

The results suggest that the epidemic has a larger impact on the Asia-Pacific region compared to other parts of the world and 47.92% of the international meetings to be held in this region has been adjusted, followed

by Africa where the proportion is 30.43%, while North America, Europe and Latin America are only 12.07%, 16.45% and 16.48%. The most affected country in the Asia-Pacific region was China, with 51.16% of meetings being affected (Table 3). The outbreak was earlier in Asia and later in regions such as Europe and North America, so the outbreak had a greater impact on the hosting of international conferences in Asia.

Based on the size of attendance, the researchers have divided all international conferences offering expected attendance into very small, medium-sized, large and super large conferences and have calculated their respective percentages according to categorizing by the proportion of changed meetings in the total meetings of the same scale then have calculated their respective percentages. For the world, there are 381 international conferences offering expected participation, of which medium-sized conferences have been adjusted 193 times, or 50.66% of the total; large conferences have been adjusted 78 times; super large conferences have been adjusted 72 times; small conferences have been adjusted 38 times. For the Asia Pacific region, the researchers have divided 161 international meetings into small, medium, large, and super large by the size of estimated participants, of which medium-sized conferences have been adjusted 77 times, or 48.43% of the total; large conferences have been adjusted 37 times, or 50.68% of the total; super large conferences have been adjusted 30 times; small conferences have been adjusted 10 times. This phenomenon coincides with the scale and classification of international conferences across the world. But if it is categorized by the proportion of changed meetings in the total meetings of the same scale, the most affected are large meetings followed by the medium-sized ones.

For China, there are 44 international conferences offering expected participants, of which medium-sized conferences have been adjusted 23 times, or 53.49% of the total; large conferences have been adjusted 11 times, or 68.75% of the total; super large conferences have been adjusted 5 times; small conferences have been adjusted 3 times.

The medium-sized meetings are the most affected, followed by large meetings and medium-sized. The small meetings are the least affected. The medium and large conferences are most affected because they are relatively large and not particularly important. The medium-sized meetings are usually holiday greetings and recognition meetings, academic exchange meetings and staff meetings of large enterprises and institutions, and such meetings are not mandatory. More than the severity of the epidemic, meetings like this can be postponed or simply canceled, and people can just have holiday greetings or commendations. Expos and trade fairs are large meetings, and such meetings are not necessary for people, and it is very difficult to have such meetings on line, so it is good to cancel or postpone them. In general, mega conferences are very important international meetings. The 73rd World Health Assembly, for example, is a super large conference and is closely related to COVID-19. The conference discusses the progress of countries in the fight against the epidemic and the changes in the epidemic, so it cannot be postponed or canceled.

Table 3. Changes in the world's international meetings industry in early 2020 under the influence of COVID-19 epidemic.

	Number of canceled meetings	Number of postponed meetings	Number of meeting places changed to other cities	Total planned sessions in early 2020	Total changed sessions in early 2020	Change ratio
Asia-Pacific region (including data from China)	42	111	8	336	161	47.92%
China	10	32	2	86	44	51.16%
North America	18	9	1	232	28	12.07%
Europe	61	101	6	1,021	168	16.45%
Latin America	5	9	1	91	15	16.48%
Africa	2	18	1	69	21	30.43%
The whole world	128	248	17	1,749	393	22.47%

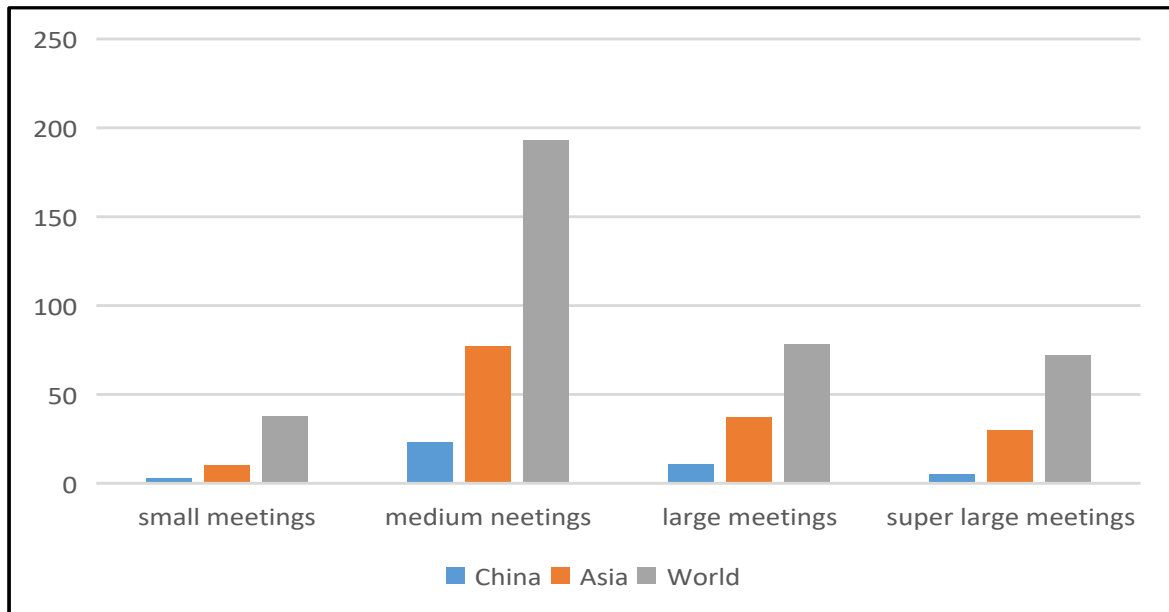


Figure 2. Changes in international conferences by hierarchical classification.

5. Conclusion and Suggestion

According to the ICCA and CIMERT reports, this paper analyzed how the international meetings industry has been affected by COVID-19 from two perspectives: the six global regions and the size of attendance, and draws the following conclusions. As of April 6, 2020, the international conference industry in Asia Pacific and Africa is the most affected by the COVID-19, but the situation in South America, Latin America and Europe is not optimistic depending on the future course of the epidemic. In terms of attendance, medium-sized meetings are most affected by COVID-19, followed by large meetings, and small and extra-large meetings are least affected. The international conference industry is currently at an important stage in its development, and different planning is needed for how to move it forward.

The conference industry is a sunrise industry and it is essential for international cooperation and exchange between countries. Countries need to strengthen global cooperation, obtain support from local government policies, develop digital industry coverage, promote the number of vaccine injections, and establish national-level regulatory mechanisms for the conference industry to turn the crisis into an opportunity. During the epidemic response period, conference companies should also make full use of channels such as international conference industry organizations and professional online resources to vigorously strengthen online training, improve teamwork models and enhance their entrepreneurial spirit to provide a stronger competitive edge for future conference staging. At the same time, countries also need to deepen the integration of cities and international conferences, give full play to the conference industry as a link between industrial platforms and the modern market economy, innovate new conference consumption scenarios, connect upstream and downstream industrial resources and consumer demand, promote international and urban trade activities, and achieve economic recovery.

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