

# From “Art for Art’s Sake” to “Art for Life”: The Interpretation of Chang Shuhong’s Oil Painting Characters Artistic

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**Abstract:** Mr. Chang Shuhong, known as the “The Patron Saint of Dunhuang”, has devoted half of his life to the research and conservation of Dunhuang art, but is also a famous oil painter in China. During the special period of Chinese art field in the twentieth century, Mr. Chang Shuhong, as a pioneer in exploring the national style of oil painting, sought to integrate the language of oil painting with the national spirit through artistic practice. This paper takes Chang Shuhong’s characters oil painting as the object of interpretation, focusing on its oil painting nationalization of artistic thought and style, his early years during his stay in France has been a remarkable achievement, with rigorous and fine brushstrokes to express the beauty of the human body. After returning to China in the transformation of the Dunhuang art, will be the art of perception and respect set in the oil painting brush, portraying a number of national characteristics of the character, the masterpieces of figure oil painting have a special significance of the wrapped with the memory of the history and the national spirit.

**Keywords:** Chang Shuhong; Oil Painting; Characters; Nationalization

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## 1.Introduction

“The Patron Saint of Dunhuang” is a term of high praise for Mr. Chang Shuhong, a renowned oil painter, Dunhuang scholar, and art educator in China (Figure 1) <sup>[1]</sup>. His lifetime coincided with a period of significant social upheaval in the twentieth century, marking a unique epoch in Chinese art. Following the 1911 Revolution, numerous young scholars embarked on a journey abroad to study advanced disciplines in Western science, technology, politics, and art. Chang Shuhong, motivated by his artistic aspirations, self-funded his studies in France, seeking knowledge about Western European art. Concurrently, he remained dedicated to exploring the national style of Chinese oil painting <sup>[2]</sup>. Upon completing his studies, Chang Shuhong returned to China, resolutely abandoning the favorable conditions he enjoyed in France to contribute to the development of art in his homeland. He transformed his passion for Dunhuang into dedicated research and preservation of its art, devoting decades of his life to this cause as if each day were an eternity.

## 2.“Art for Art’s Sake”

Born in 1904 in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, Chang Shuhong was a diligent young man. In 1918, he enrolled in the Zhejiang A-Specialty Industrial School, specializing in dyeing and weaving, and later became a teacher at the institution in 1923. In 1927, he traveled to France to study, attending the Lyon Fine Arts College and the Laurence Studio at the National Higher School of Fine Arts in Paris. During this time, he produced numerous masterpieces that garnered various international

awards and recognitions. His oil paintings encompassed a wide range of themes, particularly excelling in his representations of the human body. While living abroad, Chang Shuhong, motivated by a desire to revitalize Chinese art, was profoundly inspired by Dunhuang art. He returned to China in 1936 to teach at the National Beiping College, later becoming the director of the Dunhuang Art Research Institute in 1944. After returning to China, he devoted over 50 years to safeguarding and studying Dunhuang art, ensuring it remained deeply rooted in the cultural consciousness and allowing its splendor to be appreciated worldwide<sup>[3]</sup>. While meticulously copying and studying Dunhuang murals, he also sought to transform Dunhuang art by integrating it with the zeitgeist of Chinese national culture, creating works that reflect national character imagery. His creations embody rich Oriental meanings and are the result of Mr. Chang's relentless quest for the true essence of art and innovation, demonstrating his steadfast convictions and pursuit of artistic excellence during tumultuous times<sup>[4]</sup>.

*Figure 1: Mr. Chang Shuhong, famous oil painter, Dunhuang scholar and art educator*



During his stay in France, Chang Shuhong was notably influenced by Western classical academic painting, leading to an emphasis on the human body as a vital subject of artistic expression. His oil painting style was profoundly shaped by Lawrence's concise and refined technique, which imparted an elegant and graceful classical aesthetic. Additionally, inspired by the ideals of French Romanticism, he incorporated the exuberance and passion of Delacroix's color palette, fusing it with the rational, serene aesthetic of neoclassicism. This synthesis formed Chang Shuhong's unique artistic style, which reflected the characteristics of Western realistic oil painting, with a focus on light, structure, and color in pursuit of realism, representing a typical Western "academy" style<sup>[5]</sup>. However, during his stay in France, Chang Shuhong did not neglect his concern for Chinese oil painting. While studying, absorbing and borrowing from the West, he was also exploring the development of Chinese oil painting, so that the Chinese oil painting style could express the spirit of the nation and the spirit of the times, as well as creating a new form of art that combines with the artist's style.

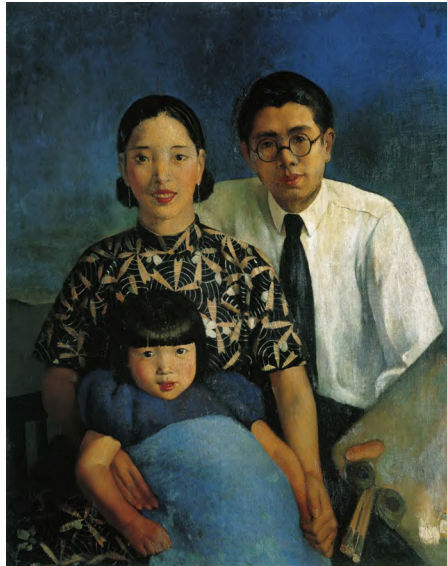
The artworks from this period meticulously depict the emotions of each character through precise brushwork, expressing a sense of liveliness, whether quietly and elegantly or joyfully. For instance, in *Nostalgia Song*, created in 1931, the character is modeled after the artist's wife, Chen Zhixiu. This piece portrays a woman dressed in traditional Chinese attire, seated beside a scroll painting while playing the flute. The harmonious interaction between the realistic representation of the character and the decorative background effectively exemplifies the Chinese sentimentality inherent in the national cultural identity. The 1932 painting, *Portrait of Mrs. G*, depicts the image of a woman seated sideways, with delicate portrayal of the facial features, black bowler hat, long skirt and dark brown leather gloves set against the cool gray background, which further reveals the simplicity and clarity of the twisting and changing character silhouettes, highlighting the finely etched face and the elegant and noble gestures, which reveal a sense of steadiness and mystery. The overall shape of the work is rigorous, the light color is calm, but without losing the subtle changes, the artistic language is concise. The main character's expression conveys a slight fatigue, yet retains a sense of reserved dignity. Painted in 1933, *Lakeside* depicts a woman seated at the seashore. The

female figure in the artwork is modeled after Chen Zhixiu, who is shown sitting on the reef with a smile on her face, with the sea and distant mountains as the backdrop, and her nude body is placed in a natural light environment, which shapes a rich and full form. Painted in 1934, *Bust of an Elderly Man*, the character modeling of the picture is accurate, showing the hale and hearty state of the old man in an appropriate manner, the body, arms on the dark large blocks of the body, although abbreviated, but does not appear to be empty, but instead of light and dark treatment of looseness and contrast is clear. The picture is composed with color, mainly in gray tone, the old man's slightly reddish skin color complements the light green background, presenting the classical oil painting creation style. The 1934 artwork *Man's Body*, in which the man's muscles are shaped tightly and bones are depicted in a clear and strange way, the character's form is structurally accurate and full of masculinity, the composition is rigorous but not overly stereotypical, and the loose brushstrokes and thin coloring make the picture even more comfortable, which is very much in the style of classicist paintings. The 1935 work *Naked Woman* shows a woman reclining on a bench in a moving pose, with delicate three-dimensional features, a firm and full-bodied shape, clear and definite contours, soft and rounded complexion, and a woman's body that is unusually conspicuous in the interplay of light and color. It can be seen, Chang Shuhong in shaping the human body image, in focusing on the characters on the basis of rigorous modeling, more pursuit of the picture of light and color changes, the outline of Chinese painting and Western oil painting on the emphasis on the sense of volume and spatial structure of the arrangement of the integration, so that the characters in the paintings of the natural demeanor of stretching, the works from the image expression to the connotation of the flavor is more intriguing. From these works, we know that during the period of studying abroad, Chang Shuhong was influenced by both western impressionism and academism, and in the depiction of human body subjects during this period, he paid attention to the delicate techniques, harmonious color tones, precise structure, and strong contrasts between light and dark, reality and emptiness, which can be seen in Chang Shuhong's early profound artistic attainments and solid painting skills.

Art is ultimately an activity with national characteristics, art practice is bound to have a national color, projecting the combination of national characteristics and the spirit of the times of social life. Stay in France in the late Chang Shuhong, gradually focus on exploring the nationalized form of Chinese oil painting, such as the creation of the work in 1933, *Painter's Family* (Figure 2), is Chang Shuhong's early works of his own family portrait, the characters in the painting is Chang Shuhong with his wife and daughter three, they snuggle together, depicting a warm and peaceful, quiet and calm family atmosphere, Chang Shuhong hand holding the paintbrush and palette, white shirt and black tie and his wife's dark cheongsam form a strong contrast, and in the dark blue tone of the background. His wife's dark cheongsam forms a strong contrast, and in the dark blue tone background with a strong sense of rhythm, the cheongsam pattern is the most favorite and familiar to the Chinese people and has a strong Chinese national flavor of the blue calico, highlighting the oriental beauty of the national cultural symbols of the characteristics of the picture is located in the foreground of the daughter of the Chang Shana, with short black hair, naive and charming, the whole picture conveys a strong warmth, but also implies the spirit of the simple nationalities. Another example is the 1934 work *Mrs. D*, using classical realism to depict the characters, the woman wearing a white floral bowler hat, wearing a stone-green coat, wearing black leather gloves, simple and elegant tone, placing the characters outdoors, in stark contrast to the traditional Chinese landscape paintings, the characters and the background are almost in the same plane, weakening the three-dimensionality and spatial expression of the picture, but the focus is shifted to an attempt to "nationalize" the oil painting. Instead, the focus shifts to an attempt to "nationalize" the oil painting.

Chang Shuhong's early oil paintings, reflecting a bright and elegant artistic flavor, were praised as having the quiet and intimate realm of Laozi's philosophical thinking, in stark contrast to the art of the arduous and stoic period of his adherence to Dunhuang. However, during his time studying abroad, Chang Shuhong's gradual tendency to focus on society and life formed an artistic outlook that coincided with the realist artistic trend in China in the 1930s, and there was a sense of a ghostly echo that led Chang Shuhong to transform himself from a "painter of Montparnasse" into a "patron saint of Dunhuang" with a sense of mission. "Dunhuang patron saint", become a patriotic artist in a time of national crisis without thinking about the choice. Therefore, Chang Shuhong, with his infinite yearning for Dunhuang art, said goodbye to the favorable creative and living environment in Paris, and returned to his motherland where Dunhuang national art was hidden<sup>[6]</sup>.

Figure 2: Chang Shuhong, *The Painter's Family*, oil on canvas, 100cm x 81cm, 1933



### 3. “Art for Life”

The harsh environment and turbulent life after returning to China made Chang Shuhong turn to portraits and landscapes as the theme of his creations, among which he created more than hundreds of portraits, depicting a wide range of subjects, from grass-roots peasants to great leaders, involving different people from all walks of life, and pursuing a national style of painting language<sup>[7]</sup>. In his artworks, he gradually diluted the western painting style and color mood, and deliberately increased the characteristics of Chinese line drawings, and the concise pictures showed the Chinese painting's spontaneity. For example, *Street Girl* created in 1936, depicting the winter depression in the streets of Peiping, the background is made of large cold gray and brownish gray to show the decorative effect, in strong contrast to the short-haired little girl in the foreground of the picture, wearing a brown cotton jacket and holding a bamboo basket, the portrayal of the little girl's image is exceptionally clear under the accurate depiction of the outer contours, highlighting the strong decorative significance of the national oriental. The image of the little girl is especially clear under the accurate depiction of the outer contours, highlighting the characteristics of the national oriental mood with strong decorative meaning. Some of the recent works, such as *Two Sisters*, *Cat and Naked Girl*, *Portrait of Shana*, and *Dressing*, are representative of this kind of works, portraying the image of oriental women and presenting the artistic expression of oriental aesthetics.

The artwork *Two Sisters*, created in 1936, features Chinese red as the main color, supplemented by black, white and cyan. The white pattern of the cheongsam, the lotus pattern on the wall and the white and red petals on the curtains echo with each other, and the overall harmony of colors and national symbols of the picture further shows the aesthetic standard that implies the oriental flavor. In the distant view of the picture, two symmetrical Chinese paintings are hung on the wall, and a Chinese-style table is placed on the floor, building up an ideal Chinese-style hall scene. By appropriately integrating the formal and stylistic concepts of Western modern decoration into the elements of Chinese tradition, the work demonstrates a unique ethnic aesthetic flavor of the times. The artwork *Cat and Naked Girl*, created in 1937, adopts a realistic approach to portraying the female figure, and uses dark outline lines to strengthen the outline of the body, fully demonstrating the generalization and rhythmic nature of the flexible use of lines. At the same time, when outlining the figures, the thickness of the lines, the change of reality and the weight of the lines, the softness of the contour lines of the whole human body contrasts with the rigidity of the dividing lines of the curtains, the floor and the columns in the background, and the shaping ability of the lines is applied appropriately. The work *Portrait of Shana*, created in 1939, depicts the author, whose home was destroyed by an air raid, comforting the frightened Shana by dressing her daughter in a new dress in the hope of removing the shadows of the war through this work. The work uses classical painting expression to portray the characters, the image portrayal is extremely concise and evocative, and there is no projection from the light source in the picture, and the clothing of the characters, the tiles on the floor, and the background image are flat, but it still shows a strong sense of the overall space. In the painting,

Shana sits on a rattan chair wearing new clothes and sandals and holding a doll, creating a cozy children's room full of childlike innocence and showing Chang Shuhong's strong fatherly love even in his busy schedule. The flowers on Shana's clothes are clearly outlined with lines, with the beauty of oriental patterns, and the background wall also depicts interesting children's pattern elements through flat coloring, together with the bright and colorful picture, which is an exploration of the modernity of the transformation of the national language. Also, for example, the artwork *Dressing* created in 1939 shows a woman combing the hair of a nude woman, the figure is depicted through realistic techniques, while the table, the floor and the wall are represented by geometric symbols, weakening the realism and volumetricity of the space and enhancing the mechanical aesthetics of the picture, so as to make the decorative and flatness of the space form a visual aesthetic of unique impact and highlight the elegance of reconciling the modernized concept of form with the national decorative mood. This highlights the elegance of reconciling the modernized concept of form with the national decorative mood. And then artworks such as *Women's Portrait*, *Family Portrait*, *Chongqing Bombardment*, *The Earth*, *Sichuan Peasants* and other artworks, is Chang Shuhong and the creation of the object of cordial communication after the subjective emotion of the true flow, further strengthen the overall decorative picture and sense of flatness, indicating that Chang Shuhong in the creation of the road of Chinese oil paintings, and continue to explore the use of traditional Chinese painting methods, the formation of Chinese sentiment Characteristic oil painting system style.

The time came to 1942, for Chang Shuhong, is an important turning point in life. In the fall of this year, Chang Shuhong led the preparations for the Dunhuang Art Institute and his party embarked on the road to Dunhuang, accompanied by the yellow sand, the sound of the camel bells, along the ancient Silk Road in February 1943 arrived in Dunhuang, began a long period of more than 40 years of Dunhuang protection and research work, during the period of the Dunhuang art copying, protection of the work of the main, but in the work of the other side, he also created a lot of northwestern characters. During this period, although he was mainly engaged in the heavy work of copying and protecting Dunhuang art, he also created many oil paintings on the theme of the faces of Northwest China. These works of art during the period of work in Dunhuang drew on and absorbed the high skills of Dunhuang art, in terms of color expression, painting language, form and structure, decorative meanings, etc., such as the color tends to be more brilliant and heavy, elegant and deep, the language of painting is also more oriental, the combination of decorative line and surface and pictorial techniques and other artistic expression of his deep feelings for Dunhuang and even the people of the northwest region, reflecting his deep emotions. These artistic expressions express his deep feelings for Dunhuang and even the people of Northwest China, reflect his high artistic attainments, and at the same time serve as a revelation and guidance for Northwest China Plateau Oil Painting, which expresses the warmth and freedom of ethnicity. For example, in the 1944 artwork titled *The Beginning of Copying Work*, the image carries significant ethnic connotations. It draws from the study of mural paintings conducted by two young female artists, utilizing flat red color blocks to represent tablecloth motifs infused with ethnic characteristics. The backdrop features Dunhuang mural paintings that depict scenes of Kabuki Bodhisattvas dancing and interacting, predominantly employing ochre and stone green hues.

After researching and comprehending the ethnic language in Dunhuang murals, Chang Shuhong continued to explore the plane and decorative language [8], advocating the expression of the dynamics and demeanor of the characters in his works, and silently integrating the music and dance scenes of Dunhuang's sutra paintings into the picture space of the characters in a multi-perspective way, forming a cross-cultural, cross-temporal, and intimate dialogue. Works such as *Dunhuang Farmer and Portrait* are all in-depth combinations of Dunhuang art and ethnic painting, reflecting the decorative language of the northwest ethnic style to the extreme. The artwork *Dunhuang Farmer* created in 1947 is a typical representation of western characters, depicting a Northwest Hui farmer wearing a white national hat. The picture portrays a simple and honest farmer with dark and reddish cheeks, wearing a blue cotton jacket, with his hands naturally resting on his knees, and his eyes gazing into the distance, and through the outlining of contour lines, it clearly separates the character from the scene of farming under the Three Dangerous Mountains of Dunhuang behind him. Through the outline line, the character is clearly separated from the scene of farming under the Sanqi Mountain in Dunhuang behind him, and the character and the local customs are closely combined and clearly expressed. The same 1947 work, *Portrait*, ignores the accuracy of the proportions and structure of the characters in the modeling of the picture, and instead uses lines to cut into all corners of the picture, in an attempt to find the

most profound and majestic lines in the Chinese national tradition, and whether inserting them into a realist subject matter can produce new visual ripples and shocking significance. Chang Shuhong's easy strokes and warm colors in his figure works at this time were the fruit of being deeply imbued with the Northern Wei style of painting and Dunhuang art, thus completely rejecting the characteristics of Western classical realism, and such works as *Portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Zhang*, *Portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Huang*, *Kazakh Woman*, *Uyghur Girl in Xinjiang*, *Old Peasant in Dunhuang*, *In the Mongolian Yurt*, etc., all of which were painted from 1948 to 1954. As well as the portraits of Chairman Mao Zedong and Commander-in-Chief Zhu De created for the troops stationed in Xinjiang, etc., perfectly combined the fusion painting method of ancient China a thousand years ago with the oil painting art of Western countries, forming the ideological interest and emotional expression deeply infused with Chinese traditional culture, and becoming an important achievement of China's modern exploration of the national style of oil painting. For example, the work *Kazakh Women* was made in 1953, in which Kazakh women are sitting on a fine carpet with porcelain bowls in their hands and wearing gorgeous clothes, behind them is a gorgeous tent wall carpet, and beside them is a stove and a copper kettle for cooking ghee tea, the whole piece of work is better than the previous works in terms of the decorative expression of color, with a high purity of color, and the simplicity with a wild style of painting fully demonstrates the national style and charms of the Kazakhs in the Northwest China. The painting style fully demonstrates the ethnic flavor and charm of the Kazakh people in Northwest China. Painted in 1954, the work *In the Mongolian Yurt* (Figure 3) depicts a scene of three Kazakhs roasting around a fire and drinking milk tea. In this work, Chang Shuhong, while borrowing the experience of Western classical oil painting in terms of realism and expressiveness, integrates the decorative meaning and linear expressiveness of Dunhuang murals into the structural modeling of the characters as well as the decorative motifs of the carpet and the tent and emphasizes the three-dimensionality of the linear form through the thickness, intensity and light color of the lines, highlighting the artistic language characteristics of lines that are very general, strong and deep in the works of realistic subjects.

*Figure 3: Chang Shuhong, In the Yurt, oil on canvas, 76cm×108cm, 1954*



After many years of profound influence of Dunhuang art, Chang Shuhong's oil paintings of human subjects completely completed the localization of transformation and transformation, artistic style tends to mature and stable, with obvious national spiritual color and personal creative style, almost no trace of Western classical realism. The artworks are also very different from the style of the early stay in France, such as the 1958 Dunhuang art exhibition held in Japan when the oil paintings *Portrait*, In 1959, he visited India and made oil paintings such as *Sketch of the President of India*, *Indian Workers*, and *Ode to the Cafeteria* in 1960, etc. In 1963, he produced a piece titled *Accordion Girl*, which depicted a young girl wearing a white blouse on top and an orange blossom skirt underneath, and she was concentrating on playing the accordion.

The background space of the picture is more decorative, and the color is no longer the classical grey tone, the purity is further increased, and the slogan “Learn from Comrade Lei Feng” inscribed by Chairman Mao hangs on the background wall, which is full of the strong atmosphere of the times. Chang Shuhong’s artwork depicting Chairman Mao Plum Blossoms Rejoice in the Sky of Snow created in Dunhuang in 1972, and his large-scale oil paintings Portrait of Mao Zedong and Portrait of Hua Guofeng created in Lanzhou in 1976 can be said to be a perfect summary of the history of his creation of figure paintings. At this time, the subject matter of the works is closer to the national life and nature, although the romance and elegance of the French style has been faded, the simple and unadorned picture and the content of the local flavor add more national affinity and more national identity, the concise and subtle use of the brush makes the picture quiet and poetic, the color treatment is harmonious and unified by visual experience, and the use of lines and colors that are connected with each other makes the picture natural and elegant, and the unrelated and complicated subjective feelings such as delicacy, excitement and intensity are calmly integrated into the picture, which makes the oil paintings show more national styles.

## 4. Conclusion

Looking back to Chang Shuhong’s figure subject oil painting art road, with his life experience and constantly evolving. Chang Shuhong in the 1930s, although in a foreign country to learn advanced western oil painting techniques, but always concerned about the development of the motherland’s oil painting, determined to create a new picture of Chinese oil painting art with the times and nationalities, exploring the relationship between the national spirit and culture and the fusion of personal artistic style. After returning to China, Chang Shuhong mostly used national characters as the subject matter for creation, the picture structure is more accurate, the coordination of light and color performance is extremely natural and comfortable, while focusing on the depiction of natural objects of life, emphasize the national ornamentation and fine pattern outlining, the national decorative and formal aesthetics of the fusion of each other, so that the characters in the paintings to show the hidden oriental spiritual feelings, expressing the painter’s open and rational attitude of creativity<sup>[9]</sup>.

During the special period of the twentieth century in the field of Chinese art, Chang Shuhong, as a pioneer in exploring the national style of oil painting, sought through artistic practice to integrate the language of oil painting with the national spirit<sup>[10]</sup>. In order to protect, study and promote the art of Dunhuang, he decided to return to his homeland. On the basis of the profoundness of Dunhuang art and the self-improvement of the national spirit, his figure oil paintings combine the essence of Western art with traditional Chinese art, harmonize the language of Western classical realism with traditional Chinese decorative art style, and create works that are fundamentally based on the lives of local ethnic people, thus forming their own unique national artistic outlook. Throughout the figure oil painting works, the art of elegant but not deceiving, simple but not kitsch, natural picture expression and resonance of thought and emotion, is the most in line with the vast masses of people’s appreciation of the pursuit. Chang Shuhong believes that valuable art should be produced from the depths of the heart, he will be artistic perception and reverence set in oil paintings, portraying a large number of national characteristics of the characters, figure oil paintings is the masterpiece of his true feelings of the actual flow of the test and more and more brilliant. These works not only provide the most favorable guidance and inspiration for current and future artistic creation, but also have a special significance wrapped in historical memory and national spirit.

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## Conflict of Interests

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