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The Impact of Dunhuang Murals on Modern and Contemporary Chinese Art

Yuhan Song
Bard College

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The Impact of Dunhuang Murals on Modern and Contemporary Chinese Art

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by
Yuhan Song

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To the universe if you concern with this.

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the 20th century, China began to undergo a series of dramatic changes in the march towards modernization, including various social reformations and political changes which led to a number of cultural movements. The field of art in China is an inseparable part of Chinese culture, and it responded to these stages of development. As art kept developing, it absorbed things from its surroundings, and new art forms and art styles gradually appeared. During this process, artistic language, which means the features such as line, shape, and color that constitute an artwork, was one of the main elements that changed in art. Choosing artistic language, producing different kinds of art, and reflecting new ideas would be the main tasks of an artist. Guiyan He, a curator, once mentions: “Whether the media, methods, rhetoric, and artistic language used by the artists is regional, academic, sinicized, or internationalized? This is the question that is considered more often by the nowadays artists”¹. In his opinion, the artists should value the origin of artistic language during the creation especially in the current context of internationalization. In the 20th century, due to the social circumstances of the on-going transformation in China, people sought a new art that could represent the identity of modern China, and the problem of selecting a new artistic language in order to constitute the new art was a challenge to the modern artist. It is fair to say that artistic language constantly

¹ He Guiyan, “the Anxiety about the language of Contemporary Chinese Art”. *China Culture Daily Art Weekly*, 2017.

remains to be a topic for not only the modern artists, but also for contemporary artists to consider.

The art movement in China experienced a period of chaos after the 19th century. Since the end of the 19th and early 20th century, western culture entered China, exposing artists to western art education. By the 1920s, the visual language of Chinese artworks responded to the new style of western art. Although the themes of Chinese art remained closely related to China's national events, the visual language absorbed the aesthetic concepts, styles, and art forms from the west. With the establishment of the new Communist government in 1949, Literati art, which was one of the most important traditional forms of Chinese painting, together with other native art forms, came under criticism for being 'the representation of feudalism and backwardness'. Communist art adapted western techniques of realistic depiction for its propaganda art and the native traditions were largely subsumed. Then, in the 1980's, western influences came again and western contemporary artistic language comprising style, medium, materials, palette, spatial composition, and three-dimensional drawing continue to be a very important part of artistic expression in China even until today. However, modern Chinese artists also started to consider their traditional and native artistic heritage of such ancient monuments as the medieval Dunhuang Caves located in the far northwest. Dunhuang Grottoes had drawn a good deal of attention as a treasure of traditional Chinese art. As it was 're-discovered' by the modern artists, it started to influence the art community, Dunhuang art has become a new inspiration for not only the modern artist but, in time also for

contemporary artists. In fact, the mural art of Dunhuang influenced many artists not only on the choice of artistic language but also in its spiritual content.

Since society is constantly changing, the idea of artists and their artistic goals changes as well, and artists are influenced in different ways in accord with their living experiences, their age, and the times. This project will explore the influence that the Dunhuang murals had on modern and contemporary artists, where modern art is defined as the time period from 1911, the final year of Qing Dynasty and the beginning of modernization in China, to around the year of 1983. Contemporary art begins after the 85 New Trend starting from 1983 to the current time. Chinese art. This project will present two Chapters--one focuses on the Dunhuang mural's influence on modern Chinese art, and the other one introduces the influence on contemporary Chinese art. But to begin, we should first get familiar with Dunhuang art.

Chapter 1. Dunhuang on Modern Chinese Art

Dunhuang Mural Art and its Development

The Dunhuang Grottoes, located in Gansu, northwestern China, is one of the world's cultural heritage sites (Figure 1). At around 138 B.C., the site gradually became a transportation hub due to the frequent cultural and commercial exchanges between ancient China and the western regions along the Silk Route. Once a military base of the Han Dynasty during the wars with the nomadic peoples living along its borders, it soon became a center for merchants and missionaries who, along with their goods, brought Buddhism into the region and then south to China. Eminent monks who traveled to the western regions and the central plains often stayed or preached in Dunhuang, making it an important center for religion as well.



Figure 1. Panorama of the western Thousand-Buddha Grottoes

Imitating the sacred grottoes of India, Chinese artists excavated more than 700 Dunhuang Grottoes as early as the fourth century. Many of them had a central pillar filled with sculptural icons, others a large religious scene on the rear wall (Figure 2 & Figure 3). They filled them with various kinds of arts including murals, painted sculptures, prints, embroidery and so on. Generally, the artistic formation of Dunhuang Grottoes can be divided into three parts: its architecture, painted sculptures, and murals.

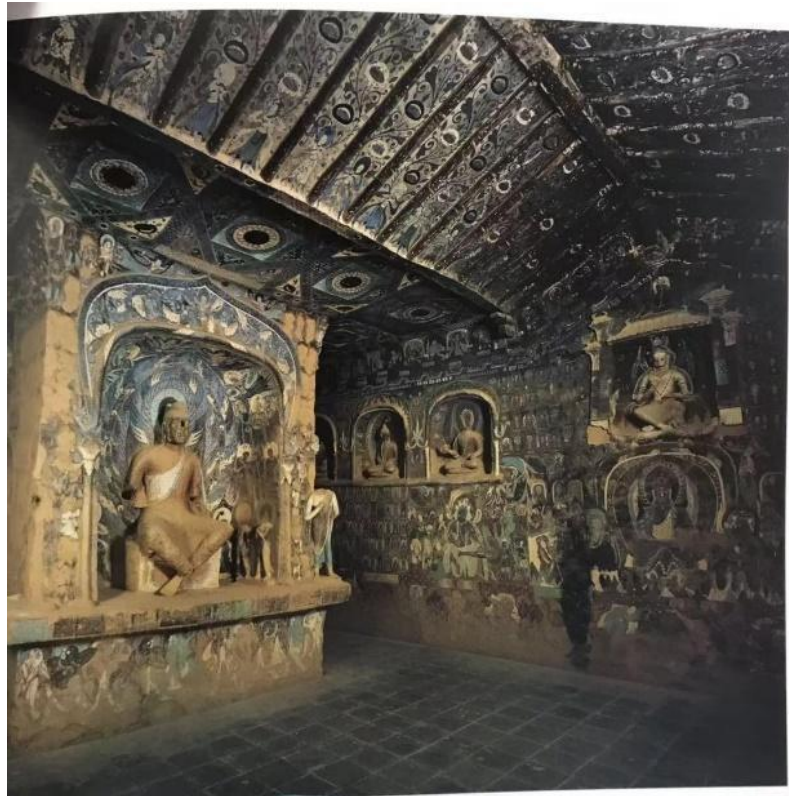


Figure 2. Interior view, Dunhuang Mogao Cave 254, North Wei Dynasty

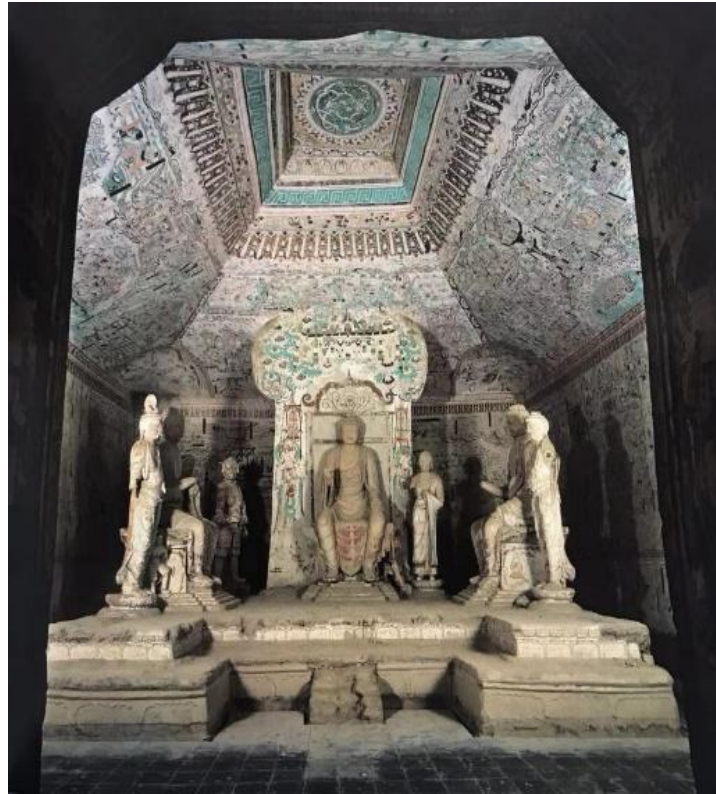


Figure 3. Interior view, Dunhuang Mogao Cave 55, Song Dynasty²

Murals can be found in almost every part of the grottos' surface, showing the religious themes that accompanied the sculptural icons. Brilliantly colored, the murals convey the sacred visions, forming a unique artistic atmosphere. The method of making murals includes several steps: first, using sand and mud to build a flat surface the cave wall. Second, the artist draws contour lines to determine the position of each part. The next step is the coloring process. The color mostly comes from inorganic materials. The base color is painted first so that the whole cave will have a unified tone. Then, the artist uses the shading methods to model the forms. After, the details are carefully filled in. In the end, many layers of pigment are applied to the wall, thus

² Photo Source: Fan Shijin, Wu Jian, *Dunhuang: A Pearl on the Silk Road, A Treasure Trove of Buddhist Culture*, Dunhuang research Academy, 2014.

most of the colors are thick. The final step is to outline the details of the facial features, hands and feet, and the clothes to make the figure outstanding. Sometimes the artist will add highlights as well.

The total surface area of the murals is about 50000 square meters feet occupying 522 grottoes. The contents of the murals include icons of Buddhist deities, religious activities, and religious stories. The narratives and the artistic style are quite different from that of Chinese literati painting of that time. Coming from the west, Dunhuang murals absorbed Indian and Central Asian art styles, which could be seen in the technique of highlighting and modeling of the figures, the presence of nude figures, and the brilliant colors. The anatomy of the figures at Dunhuang is relatively precise, and the figures always appear half-naked, wearing only a skirt and scarf. Some specific figures such as flying angels became really famous because of their unique visual characteristics and odd postures of flying, with scarves aflutter. In contrast, Chinese paintings were relatively inaccurately drawn, valuing the sense of decorum and freehand brushwork more than the anatomically correct proportions and perspectival rendering of the human form. The idea of realistic portrayals derives from the art of Greece and Rome that traveled the silk route to India, Afghanistan to Central Asia. The more varied color choices and larger areas occupied by color, and highlighting and shadowing that create a sense of volume are also from the west. The style is apparent in many less well-known Grottoes, such as the nearby Qiuci Grottoes.³

³ Qiuci Grottoes: the grottoes that were built in Quici in Eastern Han Dynasty until Tang Dynasty.

The murals gradually became more Chinese in style since they were influenced over time by artistic trends in China. With the succeeding dynasties, the changes became more pervasive. For example, in the Wei-Jin Dynasties (4th- 5th centuries), the Chinese popular gods such as Hsi Wang Mu⁴, began to appear together with the Buddhist deities in the murals. At the same time, the Chinese ideal of lean and slender bodies completed with sensitive and varied lines dominated and artists paid less attention to three-dimensional rendering accomplished by using thick and vital colors. The decorative patterns in the murals also began to include some Chinese cultural symbols such as the phoenix and dragon. In addition, landscape, which began to develop in the Wei and Jin Dynasties, was included. Also, the murals completed in the Wei Dynasty (535-556 A.D.) had a white background in contrast to the western red background (Figure 4). However, due to the traffic along the Silk Road, in the Sui Dynasty (581 -618), western influences from India were again felt: proportions of the human body became more naturalistic, appearing as if the figures were capable of moving. Also, a close relationship between China and Persia evolved, and Persian patterns appeared in Dunhuang murals as well. Then, by the time of the Tang dynasty (618-907), the famous Chinese blue-green landscape style was used as backdrops for Dunhuang narratives. Artists at that time wanted to both illustrate the plots of stories and pay attention to the visual experience of the murals. They used the technique of blue-green landscape to reflect the broad artistic conception of story while pursuing the beauty of artworks. In addition, Dunhuang artists adopted the “iron-line”, or the

⁴ His Wang Mu (西王母): the famous Daoist Goddess.

unchanging width of line in Indian style drawing.



Figure 4. Mural on Ceiling, Dunhuang Mogao Cave 249, Northern Wei dynasty



Figure 5. Mural, Dunhuang Mogao Cave 103, Tang Dynasty

The murals that were completed in the Sui and Tang Dynasty (581-907 A.D.) show the more emphatic brushstroke and content, as well as the gradual transformation from Buddhist narratives to real life depictions (Figure 5). In China

beginning in the Wei-Jin, Southern, and Northern Dynasties, blue-green landscape gradually became the main theme in the literati painting instead of remaining as the background features. Soon, it developed into an independent style that influenced Dunhuang through cultural communication in the Tang dynasty.⁵ Around this time period, Dunhuang mural had reached the height of its artistic development. By the time of the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), the artistic language of painting tended to be standardized and stylized, hence Dunhuang art had lost its vitality.

History of the Caves

As a result of the stylistic development of the Dunhuang murals, Chinese artists were able to receive a number of sources of inspiration for painting style, composition and figural types. However, Dunhuang art faced the downfall of the attention paying to it. After the Tang Dynasty, literati art gradually took over the leading role among all the art forms in ancient China; folk art, including mural art, was no longer popular.⁶ When the Silk Road was closed due to the Arab invasions in the 8th century, Dunhuang art faded out of the artistic vision until the Europeans discovered it at the very beginning of the 20th century. For them, Dunhuang had great value. For example, the 17th cave, or called the library cave, was filled with thousands of documents and scriptures that offered a rich number of materials for research on not only religion but

⁵ Zhao Shengliang, *Ten Lectures on Dunhuang Art*, Beijing, Cultural Relics Publishing House. 2020.)

⁶ Yue Feng, *Dunhuang Art in the Context of Contemporary Art*, The Silk Road. 2009 No.24. p.64.

also culture, politics, or language, etc. In China, the decaying Qing Government (1636-1912) was no longer able to spare its attention on the preservation of Dunhuang Grottoes, leaving them unprotected by the government force. Around the year of 1906, the Europeans sent expeditions to Xinjiang and Tibet to collect military information and ancient cultural relics; some of them were interested in the artistic and historical value of Dunhuang. For example, the English archaeologist Marc Aurel Stein (1862-1943) took much of the manuscripts and paintings home in 1907 buying them from Wang, a Taoist who arrived at Dunhuang in 1900, discovering the Library cave, but its value was still unrecognized by the local gentries. In 1914, Stein traded with Wang for hundreds of paintings and scriptures while cutting off some murals on his second expedition to Dunhuang. In 1908, the French sinologist Paul Pelliot (1878-1945) who led a French expedition acquired thousands of items, and most of which are in the Museum of Guimet (Musée Guimet) now. There are also other foreigners, including Russians and Americans, who came and also took the artworks home beginning in the 1910s.

As China was experiencing chaos from the change of political power from Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China (1912-1949) ruled by Kuomintang (KMT), the new Government did not notice Dunhuang until China got involved into the World War II, when the Northwest became important for the defense of China. During this time period, nationalism took root and sprouted, generating the desire for 'national painting style'. As a result, Dunhuang art became the ideal art form to start a 'national cultural

renaissance', and in 1944 the government founded the Dunhuang Art Institute⁷ to restore ethnic relations in the northwest. Due to frequently changing political circumstances, the institute disappeared in 1945, but it had introduced the art of Dunhuang to the public. In the 1950s, a new research institution called Dunhuang Research Academy was made. It was responsible for the preservation and research of Dunhuang art. More and more artists were able to reach to and gain various inspiration from Dunhuang art, and their art is the subject of this study: we will look at a few modern artists to see the importance of this national monument in modern Chinese art in this chapter.

Dunhuang on Modern art and the Modern artists

Since the government, some artists, and scholars tried to preserve the cultural heritage in Dunhuang, under the advocacy of the government and the voice of the public, there was an upsurge of national borderline development in China starting in the 1930s. There were all kinds of cultural products, such as movies and publications, that emerged for encouraging the Chinese to develop the northwest⁸. The 'northwest fever' brought the chance for Dunhuang art to flourish again among the modern artist community. Meanwhile, the anti-Japanese war had forced some teachers, scholars, and artists to flee to the northwest where they reached Dunhuang, a source of advertising the war of

⁷ Dunhuang Art Institute (敦煌国立研究所), proposed in 1941, founded in 1944.

⁸ Mingjun Lu, *Revolution of Art and Modern China: Radical Origins of Chinese Contemporary Art*, (Beijing, The Commercial Press, 2020). P.149.

resistance. In a word, the northwest, including Dunhuang, became a new inspiration for the artists who received either a western art education or traditional Chinese literati art education, bringing new elements into their artworks.

The art of Dunhuang exerted a different kind of influence on each artist. First, the artists had different life experiences and artistic pursuits. Secondly, the reasons that they had for visiting Dunhuang also affected the extent to which their arts changed in Dunhuang. In this chapter, we will principally look at the work of Zhang Daqian⁹ and Chang Shuhong¹⁰ in order to see the influence that Dunhuang had on modern Chinese art.

Zhang Daqian

Zhang Daqian was one of the very first artists who went to Dunhuang for study after 1900. He was recognized as one of the most important artists in modern times for his accomplishments in literati painting and ink painting, and his trip to Dunhuang from 1941 to 1943 has always been regarded as a turning point since his style of art and interpretation of Chinese art changed after the trip.

Zhang was born in Sichuan, China in 1899. He went to Japan to study textile and fine arts from 1917 to 1918. After returning to China, he studied calligraphy while copying ancient, mostly literati Chinese paintings under the guidance of Zeng Xi and

⁹ Zhang Daqian: 张大千 (1855-1983)

¹⁰ Chang Shuhong: 常书鸿 (1904-1994)

Li Ruiqing.¹¹It was this process that laid the foundation for his later study and the perfect copying of the Dunhuang murals. The study of literati arts influenced Zhang not only in the aspect of technique but also in the aspect of aesthetics-- he learned the traditional way by copying the many Tang and Song Dynasties' paintings he collected. In the 30s, Zhang has already become an eye-catching artist among the Chinese art community because of his excellent masterpieces of literati art.

Zhang often heard from his friends about the greatness of the Dunhuang arts, so he finally decided to visit it by himself. In addition, he received Government funds that enabled his trip. Zhang's first step was to copy and learn the painting methods of the Dunhuang murals in order to capture their artistic characteristics. In his writings, he stated some of the Dunhuang mural features that would later influence modern Chinese art. First was the significance of portraits. Despite receiving the strong influence of landscape paintings, figure painting in murals has always been the focus of Dunhuang murals. The status of figure painting improved after Dunhuang Art became well-known in the modern art community. Secondly, Zhang valued the use and style of lines in Dunhuang murals. He stated that the lines drawing of Dunhuang figure paintings were 'beautiful and wonderful'¹². Iron-wire-line-drawing came from the west and it was integrated in Chinese art during the Tang dynasty. Originally, the artist used it to reveal the way of controlling the strength while holding the brush, which expressed the artistic

¹¹ Zeng Xi (曾熙): The master of poetry and prose in the late Qing Dynasty, a famous calligrapher and painter. Zeng was especially good at calligraphy on many kinds of fonts; Li Ruiqing(李瑞清): The poet and painter of the late Qing Dynasty. Li was especially good at painting landscapes. He was a collector of ancient cultural relics as well.

¹² Zhang Daqian, the Discussion on Dunhuang Murals.

charm that people pursued at that time period. Line drawing would be completed quickly, and a dynamic change imbued the line with depth and movement. Sometimes, the vibrant figure images that were completed with fluent curving lines used lighter color instead heavy layers of color to better reveal the effects of line drawing.¹³ Hence, Zhang believed that the emphasis on line in figure painting was a valuable source for artists. Thirdly, Zhang mentioned the coloring methods especially the thick pigment, which differed greatly from the restricted use of color on Chinese literati painting,¹⁴ could be considered more important by the artists. The use of heavy color could change the sense of grace and fragility of literati art. Fourthly, the scale of the murals is more expansive than in literati paintings, and the depiction of the spiritual realm was more impressive. In the aspect of size and vigor, Dunhuang could influence the art at Zhang's time. Additionally, Zhang also gave his opinion about freehand brushwork, a literati artistic technique. It was very popular as artists appreciated its simplicity. Such 'simplicity' could only be achieved with careful design and consideration, instead of drawing casually, but freehand artworks gradually evolved to include only visual simplicity with no ideological basis, and were excluded in modern times. Some modern artists even thought that they could achieve freehand by drawing several brushstrokes without considering how the 'simplicity' actually comes about. In contrast, the visual effect of Dunhuang murals was the opposite from "simplicity". They have delicate and meticulous details, which would replace the simple brushwork

¹³ Zhao Shengliang, *Ten Lectures on Dunhuang Art*, Cultural Relics Press. 2020. P.57.

¹⁴ Chen Zhidong, *Zhang Daqian's Discussion about Art*. Henan Art Press. 2007.

of the Chinese modern art community from Zhang's point of view¹⁵. In summary, the most influential characteristics of Dunhuang art, in Zhang's opinion, were the revival of portrait and figure painting, line drawings, color, large scale, and the relatively realistic style. His opinions have influenced contemporary artists as well.

Looking at Zhang's works, we can see the impact of the Dunhuang murals. Before Zhang went to Dunhuang, his artistic education with Zeng and Li focused on mastering literati painting by expressing his subjectivity while pursuing the brushstroke effects and the spirit of casualness. Some of Zhang's artistic pursuits in this time period were reflected by his *Lady on Spring Outing*¹⁶ (Figure 6) completed in 1929.



Figure 6. Zhang Daqian, *Lady on a Spring Outing*, 1929, ink and light colors on paper, 81.5 x38 cm

The first characteristic which Zhang learned from his literati art education is

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Lady in Spring Outgoing: 游春仕女 (picture source: Beijing Poly International Auction Co., LTD.)

revealed in the use of line. In Zhang's early years, he studied Ming dynasty commercial painters Tang Yin¹⁷ and Qiu Ying¹⁸'s style of brushstroke called 'willow-leaf-shaped stroke', meaning a brushstroke with a willow-leaf-like shape. The head and tail of the line is thinner than the middle part, giving the feeling of casualness and elegance. Using the willow-leaf stroke, Zhang depicted the clothes as mellifluous, graceful, and elegant, just as the feeling of the willow leaves on the right part of painting. After he went to Dunhuang, Zhang learned iron-line drawing, which gave Zhang's artworks made after 1941 a new look. Taking *the Drawing of Birthday Peento Peach Offering*¹⁹ completed in 1944 as an example, by using the center tip²⁰ of the brush, Zhang drew the lines longer and with no obvious variation of thickness or thinness. The center tip allowed lines to be more stable, giving them a sense of weightiness and smoothness. To look closer, the lines in *Peento Offering* are lines in equal width. There was no longer that much change in thickness and thinness that willow-leaf-line had. Zhang added the sense of dignity and serenity while depicting an ethereal fairy figure. Generally, using a different kind of line makes the female posture in this painting no longer as graceful but fragile as those in typical literati painting. Copying the female figures in the Dunhuang murals and studying the line drawing inevitably influenced him, freeing him from the stereotype of the literati painting female figures. Comparing *Lady on a Spring*

¹⁷ Yin Tang: 唐寅 (1470-1523), Artist in Ming Dynasty

¹⁸ Ying Qiu: 仇英 (1498-1552), Artist in Ming Dynasty

¹⁹ The Drawing of Birthday Peento Offering: 蟠桃献寿图; Peento: flat peach.

²⁰ Center Tip: Zong Fong 中锋: it means to centralize the tip of the brush, keeping the brush tip always in the middle of the stroke. In this way the strokes will be full of strength and vigor. (<http://www.art-virtue.com/principles/p4-operating.htm>)

Outing and *The Drawing of Birthday Peento Offering*, it is clear that Zhang chose to depict a more classical and healthier female image by utilizing new methods of drawing lines after his trip to Dunhuang.



Figure 7. Zhang Daqian *The Drawing of Birthday Peento Peach Offering*²¹, 1944. ink and color on paper

Zhang's choice of color changed as well. Previously, his colors were the light hues that were popular in the Ming and Qing dynasties, such as the colors in *Lady on a Spring Outing*. The garments are in light blue-ish green with a blue belt. The color of yellow-ish brown on the tree is nearly indistinct under the thick brushstrokes. A Buddhist subject, *Namo Avalokiteshvara* (Figure 8) done in 1945 is the opposite with the previous artwork by having such highly saturated hues like azurite for green and cinnabar for red inside. A simpler palette appears in *Peento Offering* as well. These are

²¹ The Drawing of Birthday Peento Offering: 蟠桃献寿图; Peento: flat peach.

colors commonly used in the Dunhuang murals. Compared with the colors of wood and clothes in *Spring Outgoing*, the colors in *Namo Avalokiteshvara*, such as the green on the rock, are not only bright, but also heavy. The same heavy color effect would be seen from the Dunhuang murals, where several layers of coloring could achieve such an effect. These unique colors of Dunhuang had a lifelong influence on his style, as seen in his ‘splashed color’ style that he later invented as *Lush Mountains in Misty Gleam* (Figure 9) done in 1967. Inside, Zhang boldly used heavy colors to depict a landscape: a typical literati art subject.



Figure 8. Zhang Daqian, *Namo Avalokiteshvara*, 1967. ink and colors on paper

The art of Dunhuang influenced Zhang spiritually, causing him to change the way he depicted figures by using new artistic techniques. Zhang has combined the features of Dunhuang murals with literati art, creating a new kind of art. As an artist who first received purely literati art education, Zhang’s art shows the merits that Dunhuang

murals offered to literati art.



Figure 9. Zhang Daqian, *Lush Mountains in Misty Gleam* 1967. Ink and color on paper.²²

Chang Shuhong

Dunhuang murals influenced the artists who had received western art education by offering a different use of color and composition. In the murals of Dunhuang, the high saturated bright colors are decorative in contrast to descriptive and naturalistic colors that appear in western classical oil painting. Meanwhile, different from the western painting's use of one point perspective for achieving realistic effects, Dunhuang artists adapt a changing perspective to give the audience a different visual experience, this results in presenting the space of the whole scene relatively as flat. Exposed to such

²²Lush Mountains in Misty Gleam: 灑霍瑞靄 Photo source:

<https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/lot.1453.html/2017/fine-chinese-paintings-hk0718?locale=zh-Hant>

differences, some Chinese artists who have learned the various skills of western classic art changed their art styles after contact with Dunhuang murals just like Zhang Daqian. As one of the most famous Chinese modern artists who received western art education but encountered Dunhuang, Shuhong Chang, felt the impact of Dunhuang, and this is seen in his artworks.

Shuhong Chang's change of art style is evident in his *Dunhuang April 8th Temple Fair* (Figure 10) and *Autumn Harvest in Dunhuang* (Figure 11). In the *Dunhuang April 8th Temple Fair* of 1954, we see the subject is a rendering of the cave site in the Gobi Desert with its architectural structures and local inhabitants. Here, the color choice is decorative. In this painting, Chang chose to depict the scene in a more subjective way, using decorative color instead of objective color. Decorative color is a relatively freer use of colors that reflects the personal feelings of the artist instead of the realistic portrayal of objects and illumination. It highlights the overall effect of the painting since it emphasizes the coordination of colors and tones while it ignores the limitation of the inherent color of the objects. Chang used highly saturated colors in the orange sand, the blue sky, and the red architecture. Meanwhile, the colors on the rock are decorative as well. In classic oil painting, highly saturated colors do not appear on the same object surface together, but Chang chose to put red, blue, yellow, and green all on the rocks in his painting. Although there is still the depiction of light and shadow as in classic oil painting, the overall visual effect is more subjective, expressing the emotion of happiness and delight. Just like the case of Zhang Daqian, the brilliant colors in the Dunhuang murals influenced him to use heavier colors in a

more decorative way after seeing the decorative color on murals.



Figure 10. Chang Shuhong, *Dunhuang April 8th temple Fair*, 1954, Oil Painting

Secondly, Chang noticed the composition and changing perspective of the Dunhuang murals. He soon adopted this technique, as it is evident in *Autumn Harvest in Dunhuang*, of 1956. Many murals in Dunhuang utilize changing perspective while depicting scenes. Using changing perspective, there is no definite vanishing point since the whole painting includes many angles of view, each scene has its own perspective. As a result, there are many perspectives in one painting. For the audiences who walk around the murals, they follow the changing vanishing points. Take *the Maitreya Buddha-Tonsure* (Figure 12) as an example, the mural includes different story parts. Each of them has its own perspective, and they combine together. Wherever the audience is in front of the mural, there is a vanishing point,

making the painting more realistic.²³ In addition, when using focus perspective, everything looks relatively small in the distance and big in the foreground, whereas in the Dunhuang murals the figures do not change in size depending on their position in the composition. Looking at *Paintings of the Amitāyurdhyāna Sutra* (Figure 13) as an example, we see the figures in the middle part are the largest, while the other figures become gradually smaller as they reach the edge of the mural. However, the size of the largest figure does not relate its near position rather its status. Also, the sizes of figures in the upper part and those in front are the same size. The only clue that suggests distance is the placement of the pavilion, which has a clear sense of perspective and is placed in the background. Different from the western perspective method, in this style, position, size, and status imply distance differently.

In Chang's *Autumn Harvest in Dunhuang*, the influence of this perspective method is evident. Chang did not choose to strictly follow the perspective rule that he learned in Europe. In fact, we could see that Chang presented the proportions of objects and people more casually, freeing himself from the limitation of single focus perspective. The wheat cart could be larger than the house, while the distance between them could be small to have such difference on size. Meanwhile, some people near us could be smaller than those who stand in the middle orange lane. Under the influence of Dunhuang changing perspective, Chang tried to not strictly follow the rule of focus perspective, leaving the distance relationship between objects to be depicted more

²³ Qin Chuan, An Qiu, *The Code of Perspective Hidden in the Dunhuang Grottoes*, 2020.
<https://www.douban.com/note/785900451/?type=rec>

casually.



Figure 11. Chang Shuhong, *Autumn Harvest in Dunhuang*, 1956, Oil Painting²⁴

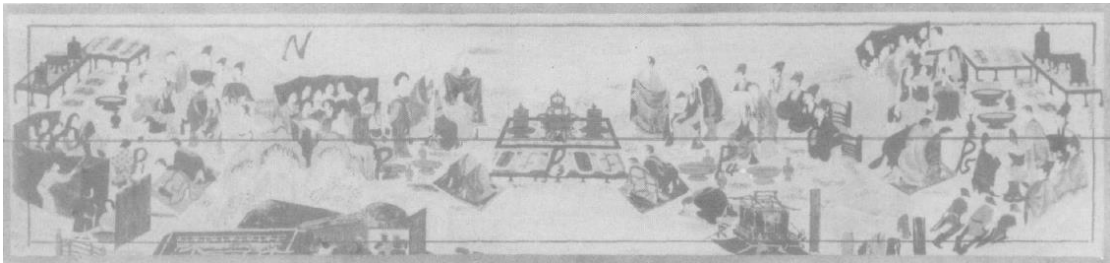


Figure 12. *The Maitreya Buddha-Tonsure*, cave 445²⁵

The story's plots start from the left of the mural.



Figure 13. *Paintings of the Amitāyurdhyāna Sutra*, Cave 271, Tang Dynasty²⁶

²⁴ Bi Baocheng, *Research on the artistic style of Chang Shuhong's oil painting*. 2020.

²⁵ Yang Xiong, "The perspective in Dunhuang Murals", *The study in Dunhuang*, 1992, No.2. p.8

²⁶ Photo Source: Digital Dunhuang

Chang's western art education in Europe has helped him to accept Dunhuang art.

Chang was born in Hangzhou in 1904. Earlier in 1918, he entered an industrial school to study textile making and graduating with a degree in the arts, he became an art teacher. Then in 1927, Chang went to the Lyon Academy of Fine Arts in France at his own expense and began to study oil painting, receiving an education in the western academic style of classical painting, seen in his *Portrait of Madame G* from 1932 (Figure 14).

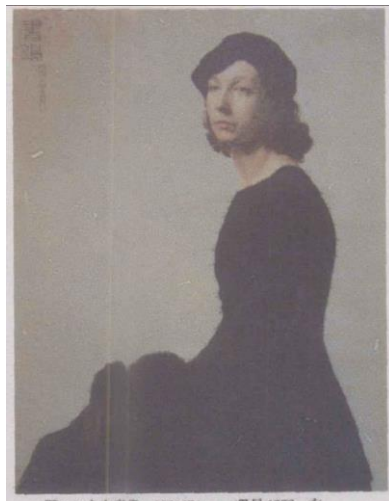


Figure 14. Shuhong Chang, *The Portrait of Madam G*, 1932, 100*81cm, oil painting²⁷

The artistic community in Paris during Chang's stay was on the eve of transformation, but Chang himself rejected the avant-garde practices such as Cubism, Surrealism, and Post Impressionism that, in his opinion, abandoned the formal rules of painting. He suggested that the series of art movements in the 1930s "negate the law of composition and make art become not only replaceable by symbols, but also a

²⁷ Xiaoyi Liu, *Research on Chang Shuhong's artistic thought and creation*, 2005.

thing of idealism”²⁸. In Chang’s opinion, there was no reason for the modernist to abandon the old artistic norms for it was only in these works that people could realize the necessary conditions to show art that represented the era, thus enlightening the artists. This thought later would relate to his ideas towards the renewal of Chinese art.

At that time in China, a considerable number of people who also studied in Europe believed that the combination of Chinese art and western art, such as what Xu Beihong²⁹ did, and the direct copying of the existing genres of art, was the best solution for a new representative art. But Chang did not agree with them due to his opinion of art that was formed in Europe. Although Chang’s painting skills and artistic ideas were basically formed in Europe, he came into contact with the twentieth century influence of Asian arts that had a great influence on the European art community. The colonial expansion of the west and international trade brought exotic art styles into Europe, thus giving the western artists new sources of inspiration. Some western painters even left Paris to study art in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, etc. The fresh air inside the art community led to the idea that artists should treat different national painting traditions with a pluralistic attitude. Concurrent with this movement, Chang’s professor in Lyon suggested that people should not use western painting skills to create Chinese style painting because of their different cultural and historical backgrounds. Artists need to maintain the exoticism of artistic style instead of

²⁸ *Chang Shuhong’s 90 Spring and Autumn Period-50 Years of Dunhuang*, Gansu Cultural Publishing House, 1999, p20

²⁹ Beihong Xu: 徐悲鸿(1895-1953): He advocated realism, emphasizing the reform of traditional Chinese painting with western painting techniques.

assimilating it. Chang approved of this idea as reflected in his writings³⁰. Based on this viewpoint, Chang did not advocate to combine traditional Chinese painting with western classical painting as Xu Beihong did. At the same time, he believed that when China was looking for a representative national art, it should look for ‘art as the manifestation of modern Chinese people’s spirits’³¹. In China at that time, there were many artists who shared similar ideas with Chang. They all thought that the sophistication and meticulousness of literati art could no longer qualify as the great nation’s representative. The representative art should be found in such people’s art as the national monuments like Yungang Grottoes and Dunhuang Grottoes³². In the year of 1933, Chang had already written several articles that discussed the future of Chinese art, such as “the Paris Exhibition and Future of Chinese Painting” and “the Past Mistakes and Future Prospects of the Chinese New Art Movement”.

In 1936, Chang, having received an invitation, returned to China to be an art professor. In 1940, he became a member of the fine arts education committee of the Ministry of education. In 1942, the government of the Republic of China began to investigate the Dunhuang Grottoes for both its preservation and ethnic issues. Then, in 1944, appointed by the government, Chang visited Dunhuang for the protection and research of Dunhuang art and also as a ‘Frontier Institute of National Culture’ which had its purpose in solving problems of national culture.

³⁰ *Collected Works of Chang Shuhong*, Research Academy of Dunhuang, 2004

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Fu Baoshi, *Prospects for the construction of Chinese national aesthetics*, Cultural Construction, Vol.1, No.8, 1935

The study in Europe had made up Chang's opinion about the discovery of a new national art. Then, in Dunhuang, he was influenced by the artistic elements. As every other artist who came to Dunhuang, Chang began to copy the murals on a large scale for the purpose of study and later exhibitions while carrying out the Institute's plan for the protection of Cultural Relics. The process of copying allowed Chang to learn a lot about the artistic characteristics of Dunhuang mural art. Like Zhang Daqian, he was impressed by the use of line in the murals. Among the works that Chang has copied, the painting of the *Prince Saki Sacrificing His Life to Feed a Tiger* (Figure 14) became his favorite due to the use of lines. When describing this mural, Chang said: "the (standing figure's) concave and convex effect of light and dark and the relaxing brushstrokes really transmit the senses of domination and ambition. The use of Chinese style lines for representing figures is unbelievably successful."³³ Chang thought that line drawing was a unique feature of Chinese painting³⁴, and he regarded lines and brush strokes as the most basic unit of forming an artwork. In Chang's opinion, artists were able to illustrate their own spirits through the use of line in artworks. From the use of lines, Chang noticed the spatial flatness of the Dunhuang murals when compared with the western paintings.

In the process of copying, Chang was also fascinated by the emotion of the murals conveyed through the use of changing perspective and the rhythms created by the lines. Meanwhile, he noticed that colors were decorative instead of realistic,

³³ *The Dunhuang Murals and Future Development*, Dunhuang Research Institute, 2004

³⁴ *Learning Skills from Masters - Records of Lectures on the 20th Century Master of Traditional Chinese Painting*

Chang started to try using decorative colors in his artworks. It is with these features that Chang gradually changed his painting style.



Figure 14. *the Prince Saki Sacrificing His Life to Feed a Tiger*, 88*80cm, Cave 254, Year 439-534³⁵

In summation, looking at two representative modern Chinese artists who were searching for a new style to represent the increasingly modern China, Dunhuang provided a source of inspiration for some of those who were educated in western art. They rejected much of the foreign style in preference for a more native form of expression. In the Dunhuang murals, they found a new use of line, alternative forms of perspective, that is the changing point of perspective, a flatter presentation of space, the bright and subjective use of colors, with broad areas of a single color, and

³⁵ <https://www.zsbeike.com/tp/6286982.html>

national imagery. They created a hybrid art that combines the native artistic traditions, western art and the distinctive style of Dunhuang.

Chapter 2. Dunhuang Murals and Contemporary Chinese Art

In chapter 1, we saw that Chinese modern art sought a new representative art style for modern China, and that the Dunhuang murals played an important role in Chinese art at that time. Zhang Daqian and Chang Shuhing's artworks are the primary examples. Either literati artists or western art-focus artists copied the Dunhuang murals while maintaining the goal of finding new forms of expression.

The development of Chinese art after the 1950s was somehow chaotic due to the Communist party's criticism of most genres of art. After the 1950s, there was a conflict between Chinese traditional art and western art. As a popular art style Guohua (or national art) which is related by theme and technique to literati art, but stresses more popular imagery, was considered as the artistic product of the bourgeois instead of the proletariat, thus its status among people was diminished. Some artists, including literati art masters such as Fu Baoshi³⁶, insisted on preserving its essential qualities, but then encountered criticism. Meanwhile, western art transmitted to China through Soviet socialist artists, some of whom came to China to teach but were regarded as alien³⁷. Then, from 1973 to 1976, the era of the Cultural Revolution, the artists had an even harsher time under the reign of Jiang Qing and the Gang of Four until 1977. At the end of their rule, art was free to develop again.

³⁶ Fu Baoshi (傅抱石): 1904-1965

³⁷ Michael Sullivan, "Art in China since 1949", *The China Quarterly*, (Sep., 1999), No. 159. P.713.

Among the new movements of the 80's was the Xingxing (Stars) exhibition³⁸, which brought new things into the art world, starting the development of contemporary Chinese art. Independent art groups began to emerge in society. Modern and contemporary western art, like the post-impressionism art, was available and influenced the Chinese artists. In the early 1980s, most artists explored western art's artistic features, including subject matter, techniques, and media, etc. After the 'reform and opening-up policy' and the release of "the policy of ideological emancipation" were announced by the leader Deng Xiaoping,³⁹ who encouraged the various exploration of arts, more and more contemporary foreign artworks came into China, and their main theme of personal expression instead of politicized art had brought up the "85 New Trend". As a cultural movement, "85 New Trend" symbolized the rebellion towards the politicization, instrumentalization, and practicalization of art. The new artistic concept and form that it advocated had established contemporary Chinese art. The very first independent art magazine 'Art News of China' appeared during this period, proof of the individual, rather than communal creation of art.

When time came to the 1990s, the free market allowed some individual artists to support themselves with their art, further encouraging the development. Open to the

³⁸ Xingxing Exhibition (1979): usually recognized as the starting point of Chinese contemporary art. A group of self-taught Chinese artists launched the exhibition outside the fences of China National Museum of Fine Arts after their formal application was rejected. They presented the artworks that focused on 'self-expression' mainly.

³⁹ Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997): He was one of the leaders of the Communist Party of China and the PRC.

west, many artists became part of an international market, like Xu Bing⁴⁰.

Additionally, the official needs of foreign currency triggered the art market between China and the western galleries. (There were above 250 galleries in Beijing at that time for trading arts). Various art genres such as political pop and abstract art appeared. Art in this time period was critical of social problems such as burgeoning consumerism or urban society. In the mid-1990s, the magazine *Meishu*⁴¹ set up, symbolized for the government's recognition of contemporary art development. In the year 2000, the exhibition of Shanghai Art Biannual further marked the development of contemporary Chinese art. The artists no longer created art according to the needs of government, and the motifs and significance of art became more personalized.

There are several features of the emergent contemporary Chinese art. The first one is contemporaneity of aesthetics, which means that judgement about art no longer refers to an authority's opinion. Instead, it now accords with the artwork's artistic concept and forms. Secondly, there is the contemporaneity of politics, which means that there will be a tension that comes from the negotiation and confrontation between art and mass power⁴². Basing upon these features, according to the Chinese artists yearbooks, contemporary artists are mainly doing three kinds of works: the first is to criticize problems in reality; the second one, basically accomplished by new media

⁴⁰ Xu Bing (徐冰): Contemporary Chinese artist. Since his series of famous work "Book from the Sky" in the 1980s, in which he designed and engraved thousands of 'new Chinese characters', he has become a highlight character in the history of Chinese contemporary art due to his discussion on Chinese culture and thinking mode.

⁴¹ *Meishu: A fine art journal*, first published in 1951.

⁴² Zhu Qingsheng, *13 Chinese Contemporary Art Introductory Theories*. The commercial Press, 2020. P.134.

art, seeking to provide a vision of human development; the third one is the modernization the traditional elements, which makes traditional arts a motif in artworks, in order to see the relationship between now and history⁴³. The utilization of tradition actually originates from the idea of tradition. Aside from the most basic way, which is learning traditional arts, it is another way of preserving the past.

This purpose constantly exists but in a different way in the context of contemporary art. Regarding the past, instead of preservation, contemporary art emphasizes “anti-tradition”, which means to criticize and reflect on the past, in order to obtain and ‘preserve’ more of it . Traditional art, meaning the art forms before the 1950s, unavoidably includes Dunhuang murals. As the nation no longer needs the visual and spiritual differences of Dunhuang art for a representative art, the elements in Dunhuang have been regarded less important than before. Hence, people started to feel differently about Dunhuang according to their diverse personal experiences, and its influence on people has become more individualized. Thus, Dunhuang art is both being preserved and still influencing contemporary artists. One aspect of the idea of preservation is that while the artists reflect on the traditions, not only the artistic features but also the related modern historical events of such art are involved, meaning that the Dunhuang murals are considered for their symbolic meanings.

In Chapter 2, I will investigate the further influence of Dunhuang murals on contemporary art through two artists: Yu Hong and Shi Jinsong. Among the artists who relate to Dunhuang murals in their artworks, some work with its artistic features

⁴³ Ibid. P.165.

and visual effects in a more modernized way, using the Dunhuang symbols to represent new things. They use the visual language to express contemporary issues. Others consider the spirit of Dunhuang and utilize it to consider the issues they are facing. Dunhuang art influences contemporary artists both as a visual language and a spiritual one at the same time since they are not separable, but different artists would value one aspect more than the other.

In the modern time period, abandoning the nationalized purpose of using Dunhuang art as a representative art style, the artworks have a shared goal: reflecting on the problems of people today. Dunhuang, in the context of contemporary art, has again become an inspiration for art creation.

Yu Hong

Contemporary artists who are inspired by the art of Dunhuang employ different elements found in Dunhuang art --its motifs, styles, techniques, and spirit. Each of the artists try to their efforts while embedding and re-defining Dunhuang elements in their art. Among them, the famous figure painter Yu Hong (b. 1966) has depicted the “*Golden Horizon*” Series (Figure 15-18), where she employed the spiritual content and installation method of Dunhuang art, which she learned during her trip to Dunhuang.





Figure 15, 16, 17, 18. Yu Hong, *the Golden Canopy series*, 2010. Acrylic on Canvas⁴⁴
 (from the beginning: Figure 15. *Tian Wen (Question to Heaven)*; Figure 16. *Atrium*; Figure 17. *Sky Curtain*; Figure 18. *Natural Selection*)

⁴⁴ <https://ucca.org.cn/en/exhibition/yu-hong-golden-sky/>

In Yu Hong's "Golden Canopy", there are four paintings included: *Tian Wen* (2010), *Atrium* (2009), *Sky Curtain* (2010), and *Natural Selection* (2010). The four paintings are inspired by four classical famous paintings which come from both Chinese and foreign cultures. The Dunhuang paintings were used as the blueprints for her compositions. Among them, *Tian Wen* is created based on the inspiration from the Dunhuang mural "*Gathering of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas*" (Figure 19).



Figure 19. *Gathering of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas*. Mogao Caves 321. Early Tang dynasty (618–712)

The mural from the ceiling of a niche on the west wall of the main chamber in Mogao Cave 321.⁴⁵

The feature of Dunhuang that Yu chose, was the installation method of the murals on the ceiling. In Dunhuang Grottoes, in addition to being painted on the side walls, murals, like "*Gathering of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas*", cover the ceiling. The religious murals in Dunhuang served to spread the teachings of Buddhism, while the celestial figures were worshipped and revered by believers. These divine figures float

⁴⁵ Photo by Li Bo, courtesy of the Dunhuang Academy

in a heavenly sky. By painting murals oriented to the celestial sphere which is directly above the observer, such effect could be achieved. When Yu adapted this strategy, so different from the normal viewing style, she introduced an unusual viewing method of the painting (Figure 20). The series of “*Golden Canopy*” is installed on the ceiling, making the audience look up to the paintings. In this case, Yu has borrowed the positioning of Dunhuang murals and their religious content, adding the sense of worship to the behavior of the audience. However, while looking above, the audience sees the figures of ordinary people instead of the revered religious figures.



Figure 20. The installation of the painting

In '*Tian Wen*', the characters who are seated, standing, and sprawled out in space are all individuals that we would encounter in daily life, including females, males, and also babies, representing every type of person in current society. In her portraits of them, Yu captured their emotions as well -- nihilism, fickleness, depression and dissociation seen in people from modern life. Removing them from reality, she installed them in a classical artwork. By doing this, Yu hoped to create a contrast: the audience would expect to see figures of adoration above, but they only saw the reflection of themselves in the painting. Additionally, in order to highlight the fickle lives of contemporary people, each of Yu's works in this series has gold color as background. The ancient meaning of gold, which was to honor and identify divinity, was removed by Yu. As the background of painting, gold color now symbolized people's insanely greedy pursuit of wealth in this material world. Yu hopes to lead people to question the current status of life through such contrasts, just like the title of this work "*Tian Wen*", which is quoted from the ancient Chinese poem "*Question to Heaven*", refers to people's questions of unknown and uncertain spiritual issues of the world and life--where do we come from, etc.

The source of Yu's display of such doubts may come from the huge transformation she experienced in her life. In 1966, Yu was born at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. In her childhood, there were revolutionary artworks (or 'red art') everywhere, which deeply affected her ideal -- to paint revolutionary posters as she grew up. Once, Yu Hong got to be a model for her mother's painting "Red Army Flower", which made her really excited. Later, Yu Hong stated that: "Maybe this

excitement was because I grew up yearning for being a hero in war.” Then, in the 80s, Yu Hong once dreamed of being an educated youth (Zhi Qing) which was still taking place in the ‘Red’ time period. However, with the rapid changes of Chinese society from the 1980s to the 21st century, Yu Hong’s thoughts about life changed as well. In 1980, she entered the affiliated middle school of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, and graduated from CAFA in 1988. During this period, she was influenced by the incoming western popular culture, like Disco dancing of her generation. In the 90s, with the rise of capitalism, young people began to pursue getting rich, and people started to show a kind of psychological urgency and impetuosity. With the development of the economy, the competition among the population became more intense as Chinese society entered a period of transformation into a consumption society. This was a huge transformation from the red age to the age of a consumer society, and the changing life styles and attitudes, made Yu start to think about related questions, triggering her to create the artworks such as “the *Purple Portrait* (Figure 21). In Yu Hong’s 40 years of growing up, issues about personal values, society, and gender occupied her thinking, and such thoughts were reflected in her art works. A confused and helpless mood is what Yu wished to represent in this painting.



Figure 21. Yu Hong, *The Purple Portrait*, 1989. Oil Painting.
Presenting a sense of confusion.

Posing questions about life experiences has constantly been the goal of Yu's work. Adapting the installation method of Dunhuang's ceiling frescoes was such a choice. While Yu was studying in the art academy in China, she took a trip to Dunhuang in her junior year. In Dunhuang, Yu was inspired by the spirit of Dunhuang, an attitude towards life. First time traveling to Dunhuang, Yu was shocked at first sight by both the installation of the caves and the people who worked there. She was touched not only by the art in Dunhuang, but also by the hardworking spirits of the senior artists who worked under such tough living conditions. The art in Dunhuang and the people there combined together, together influenced Yu with its

“mental aura”⁴⁶. In contrast, when she compared to the art she had learned before, it seemed “absurd”, that was the word that she used to describe her past artistic learning and practice since she realized the difference and power of Dunhuang art. Meanwhile, Yu noticed traces of history left in the murals. The murals in grottoes usually have undergone repainting, were covered over, pigments peeling off and being repaired, and the process constantly repeated itself. In this way, in time each layer of repair added strength to the art. Yu thought that the effects of the changes that took place in the murals over time made the art alive⁴⁷. For Yu, Dunhuang art is a kind of art with verve while having the “mental aura” which comes not only from installation of artworks but also the history and people of Dunhuang. Such “aura” could hardly be seen in contemporary life. Hence, placing such “aura” into *Tian Wen* helped her achieve her goals of making the contradictions of daily life apparent, leading the audience to think. Reflecting on *Tian Wen*, it would be fair to say that what Dunhuang brought more to Yu was its spiritual quality.

Shi Jinsong

It is impossible for an artist to be influenced by the spirit of Dunhuang without being influenced by the visual features of Dunhuang at the same time, but different painters emphasize more on one or the other of the artworks. Yu Hong completed her work mainly through using the installation and “aura” of Dunhuang murals, while some

⁴⁶ Sue Wang, “Shirazeh Houshiary in Dialogue with Yu Hong: The Enlightenment of Contemporary Art in Dunhuang”, *CAFA Art News*, 2018.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

others may appropriate visual elements for presenting the main idea. For example, the artist Shi Jinsong has completed his work “*the Jingbian Figure*” (Figure 22) with the inspiration from “*Buddha of Medicine Bhaishajyaguru*” (Figure 23) -- they visually look alike.

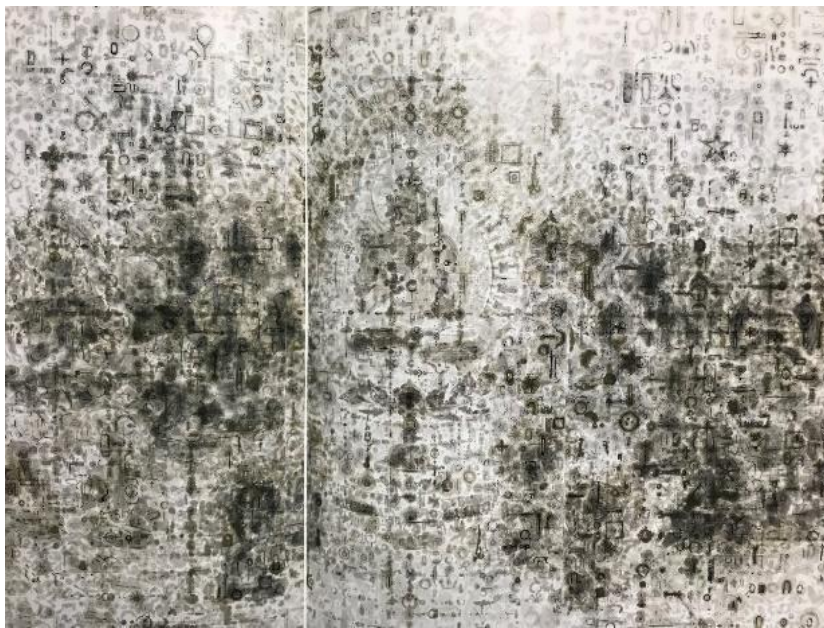


Figure 22. Shi Jinsong, *Jingbian Figure*, 2016, 368*146cm*3, Ink on Paper, Everyday objects

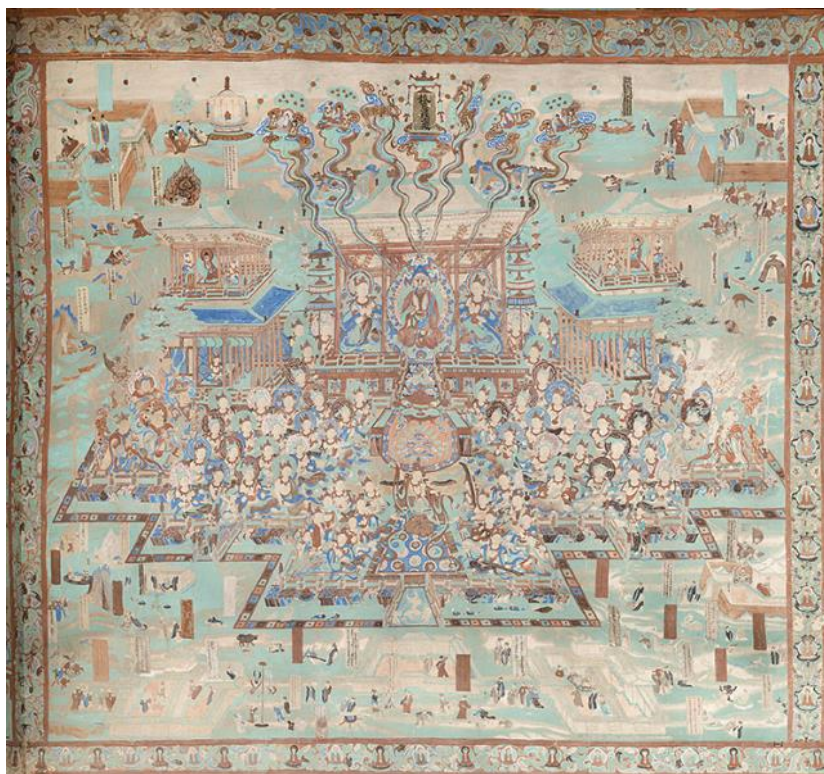


Figure 23. *Buddha of Medicine Bhaishajyaguru*, Dunhuang Mogao Cave 85, Tang Dynasty

The artwork *Jingbian Figure* was created in 2016, using ink as the main material. In this painting, Shi used tea as ink to dip the shapes of daily used objects on calligraphy paper, creating a vague image of the Buddha. By simulating the visual appearance of the mural, Shi conveyed the sense of deconstructed solemnity and sacredness. If zooming in on the painting, we can see the marks of many daily objects (Figure 24), such as wrenches, hand mirrors, or plastic hair bands. Some other marks may be not easy to recognize, but their shapes imply everyday objects as well. For instance, a simple circular trace might be related to the bottom of a wet cup. Overall, Shi has surrounded the center of painting with darker ink to highlight the floating image of Buddha. Meanwhile, the other religious figures in the mural were replaced with denser and deeper marks of ink. Shi has simplified the details of the mural, but still presents a similar visual composed of ink marks.



Figure 24. detail

Everyday objects are one of the most important elements in this artwork, as a metaphor of the mundane world. Its underlying meaning has created a conflict when it comes to the contents of the mural, which is a formal icon. For Shi, everyday objects imply our existence. As we live, we leave marks on the objects we use, thus the mark is the proof of our existence. The marks would reflect the ideals, temperament, and habits of the viewer, and point to the significance of one's existence, in fact they describe a way of existence⁴⁸. However, such traces are not completely formed by people's subjective will of use since people's way of utilizing objects is determined by the culture behind⁴⁹. After the environment has endowed an object with certain cultural significance, people use the object differently, thus making the marks different. The marks therefore become the witness of people's lives under the definition of their culture, and furtherly symbolize the daily existence of people. In society today, many things that relate to culture, such as beliefs, rights, ideals, etc. are rapidly changing, and the way of using objects is changing as well, thus the way of existence of individuals change together. Regarding such facts, Shi has given his own opinion in one of his exhibitions "All that is Solid Melts into Air" (2018):

The internet, neoconservatism, post-capitalism, and artificial intelligence...
are all coming together as a rapid tidal wave, changing the nowadays' power

⁴⁸ Liao liao, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, 2018.

<http://shijinsong.net/index.php?c=content&a=show&id=476>

⁴⁹ Ibid.

structure, knowledge systems, modes of communication, and ways of living fundamentally, and the belief, power, culture, even social system that we used to believe to be solid gradually diminished. This change is not in a form of violent revolution, but has adapted a subtle but overwhelming way.⁵⁰

In such an era, Shi wishes to remind us to think about what kind of power could define significance, and how it would influence people's lives. In this "*Jingbian Figure*", Shi has symbolized the living status of people and the mundane world through using the marks of everyday objects to compose a Buddhist mural, suggesting a relationship between the spirit of Buddhism and the current world.

In Buddhism, one of the ideas is that when an individual is confused by the reality or the secular world, meditation helps excavate the deepest things in his heart, which could solve his problems. That everyday objects' conflict with the idea of Buddhism is Shi's idea of this painting. On the one hand, Shi implies that the quick change in reality makes people lose their chance to meditate. On the other hand, pursuing such a state of tranquil mind, seeking for the thoughts deep inside one's heart, could solve the contradiction. In this painting, since the figure of Buddha is composed by the huge amount of ink marks, Shi could imply that Buddhism exists among the changing world, while the ever-changing significance of existence could achieve unity if people want to solve the problem.

⁵⁰ Chen Yaojie, *Shi Jinsong Taipei Solo Exhibition: All that is Solid Melts into Air*, 2018.
<https://news.artron.net/20180409/n995667.html>

Every element in this painting has its origin from Shi's previous life experience, including the use of Buddhist elements. Shi once said that "My works are basically a direct response to the realistic situation and problems. Sometimes I will even abandon metaphors and symbols in order to express my feeling more directly, just like a fighter or boxer."⁵¹ He regards his artworks come from his own life that continuously provides sources for creation. As part of his life, Buddhism appeared in Shi's life when he was still a child. Although Shi has never been to Dunhuang, he has derived inspiration from the site and other Buddhist temples. Together with his father, he went on a trip to Yuquan Temple in Hubei Province⁵² during the cultural revolution when all the monks were secularized except one called Dageng. He taught some simple pieces of Buddhist literature and stories in the Buddhist classics to Shi. In Shi's self-narration, Dageng once told him the story about how "the sixth patriarch of Zen was granted the title of national advisor", which turned out to be an inspiration that made him seek out the historical facts and logic of Zen. Still now, there are many ideas of Buddhism used in Shi's creative thinking. After 2015, Shi has focused his sight on artistic traditions, including Dunhuang art, seeking for the spirit and art style of it. This is evident in another painting *Unitled and Disordered 3.2* (Figure 25). Here he has copied the ceiling design of a Dunhuang cave, kind of mandala or cosmic diagram of the ethereal world conveyed by nesting rectangles that alternate with circular forms, and angelic beings (Figure 26).

⁵¹ Li Tianqi, *How to face the traditions of yesterday? We Talked with Seventeen Artists*. 2020.
<http://www.artspy.cn/activity/view/11569>

⁵² Yuquan Temple: A temple in Hubei.

Traditional culture has an indelible trace in Shi's works. Born in Chang Ban Po in Hubei Province⁵³, a famous location in the famous Chinese novel "Three Kingdoms", he grew up hearing Chinese style tales and experienced traditional Chinese culture. Now, everything about tradition, including Dunhuang, has become the tool of Shi for viewing the present life, while he keeps paying attention to how it is constructed or changed by our contemporary public consciousness.



Figure 25. Shi Jinsong, *Untitled and Disorder 3.2*, 2015, 66*66cm,
Daily objects, midnight black ink, brewed tea on rice paper
In *Untitled and Disorder*, he simulated the ceiling of Dunhuang murals, again making the marks by using everyday objects.

⁵³ Changbanpo (长坂坡): the ancient battlefield of the three Kingdoms, now located in Hubei Province.



Figure 26. Dunhuang ceiling mural, Cave 407. late Tang Dynasty.

Conclusion

The development of art is always associated with the changes of the times and the cultural background. Dunhuang art, originated from Indian art, developed in sync with the history of China. Now, it plays the role of cultural heritage and inspires the development of modern and contemporary art. The artists, as many individuals within the trend of modernization, integrated Dunhuang art into their artworks due to the influence they received from Dunhuang. These painters gazed at Dunhuang art with their own eyes due to different living experiences and ideas, 're-creating' aspects of Dunhuang art depending on their own specific artistic ideas in the era of their time.

At the beginning of the 20th century, all aspects of Chinese society, including art, were facing a violent revolution. The introduction of western classical and modern painting undoubtedly accelerated the innovation of Chinese art. Under the stimulation of western painting, the breakthrough of two artistic concepts, subjectivity and objectivity, have brought the changes. On the one hand, at the beginning of the 20th century artists underwent dramatic living experiences. Using art to depict the objective image that reflected the social circumstances led to the adoption of western classical art. On the other hand, traditional arts carried the weight of the culture, and it gradually diminished during the process of adapting western art. The need of a national cultural identity triggered retrospection of the tradition. Hence, people started to re-examine Dunhuang art and its value to China. As an art style from a heterogeneous culture, its assimilation of Chinese culture made it understandable

providing a possible inspiration for the Chinese art to develop further. In this essay, the life and works of Zhang Daqian and Chang Shuhong, who here represent Chinese modern artists, helps explain the adoption of Dunhuang style of art. Having different art experiences, they turned their sights to Dunhuang, then appropriated various visual elements from it. During this process, the aura of Dunhuang influenced them as well, making them pay attention to the spiritual aspects of Dunhuang art. Hence, when facing the artistic languages such as composition or colors, the artists who were captured by the spirit of Dunhuang would notice the Dunhuang ways of expressing emotions. Thus, during Modern times, the artists revised their own art styles according to their study on the art of Dunhuang, presenting a change of art based on the deep relationship between art and the era of time.

Foreign cultural input from the west appeared again in the end of the 20th century, influencing the development of Chinese contemporary art. As it now exists in the process of internationalization, contemporary Chinese art encountered a lot of different kinds of foreign art forms that transmitted new ideas. Hence, in the context of internationalized contemporary art, the development of art learned from both the foreign art and the essence of traditional art. Meanwhile, due to the liberation of minds after the 'reforming and opening-up principle', the sights of artists have become more personal and creative. Dunhuang, as part of the artistic tradition, was utilized differently. The examples of Yu Hong and Shi Jinsong represent some of the contemporary artists' ideas about their encounters with Dunhuang and their ways of re-creating Dunhuang art while generating their new kinds of art. In addition to

studying its visual elements, the artists sought for the spiritual values, while standing on the achievements of the previous Dunhuang-influenced artists. Dunhuang art, among all the traditional arts, presents a unique style that led artists to reconsider social problems and use the past to make contradictions evident.

Each part of the Dunhuang Grottoes is inseparable. The Grottoes themselves, together with the Gobi Desert, and history a huge art installation. When people feel something from the murals of Dunhuang, the feeling could come from the appreciation of different aspects beyond the murals. While reading the articles about Dunhuang, I could imagine various ways of appropriating Dunhuang elements. Could we recreate art based on the huge overall ‘installation’? Or could we use the attitude that history had towards Dunhuang as the motif of our artworks? Dunhuang art has a great weight in the development of Chinese modern and contemporary art, and I believe that its influence on artists could never be completely explained through this essay. As contemporary Chinese art is developing, new inspirations from Dunhuang may appear again and again.

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