

# The Artistic Path of Chang'an Painting School towards Life

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## **Abstract:**

The artistic path of the Chang'an Painting School towards life reflects the trend of "Pop" in the 20th century. Based on the new atmosphere and vividness of the time, its artistic creation is popularized with life as the core. Meanwhile, the Chang'an Painting School pays efforts to create literati painting with style of the current time for carrying forward the national tradition. The school has its own artistic proposition that is, "reaching out to tradition with one hand and reaching out to life with the other". The proposition advocates the creators to actively observe their life in an in-depth way and put their energy into diligent creation. The artistic path represented by Zhao Wangyun, Shi Lu and other predecessors calls for a return to simplicity and self-reliance in the tide of the times, achieving a transformation in the advancement of Chinese painting and artistic innovation. The artistic return of the Chang'an Painting School is a self-awareness of Chinese painting in the context of national culture.

**Keywords:** *Reaching for Tradition, Reaching for Life, Zhao Wangyun, Shi Lu, Chang'an Painting School.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Life not only provides material for artists, but also creates artists worthy of the name. The art of Chang'an Painting School lies in its creative expression of the regional characteristics of the northwest in the return to the ancient paradigm and in the aesthetics of the literati sages of the new era with the style of the times emerging from the practice of painting. The Chang'an Painting School presents a new atmosphere and a sense of vividness. Many cultural historians and art historians believe that art styles are a reflection of culture from various aspects, and that the creation of any style, development and evolution is a reflection of the changing spirit of the times. The art of the Chang'an Painting School "is a representative of the movement of Chinese painting from the scholarly and elite class to the common people ... it equals to the Vernacular Movement happened in classical Chinese painting".[1] The Chang'an Painting School expresses and reflects social reality and artistic life in traditional art forms. By studying the artistic practice and artistic path of the Chang'an School in the context of the broad national culture, we can better view the

contemporary issues of Chinese painting. It should be said that the Chang'an School begins with Zhao Wangyun's settlement in Xi'an, develops with Shi Lu's arrival in Xi'an with his Yan'an literary ideas, and formed by the 1961 Beijing exhibition and the subsequent great discussion on tradition and the new look of the times. The Chang'an Painting School forms the artistic path of liberating the brush and ink, liberating the subject matter, going to life, going to the times, returning to simplicity and returning to oneself. The artistic path toward life represented by predecessors such as Zhao Wangyun and Shi Lu is the direction of the development of Chinese painting in the 20th century and remains important and relevant in the new century.

## **II. ZHAO WANGYUN SETTLED IN XI'AN IN 1942**

During the War of Resistance against Japan, our mountains and rivers was occupied by the Japanese. Under this circumstance, some cultural figures came to the northwest areas in China. Predecessors like Wang Ziyun investigated the northwest cultural relics, Zhang Daqian led his disciples to copy Dunhuang wall painting, and Zhao Wangyun settled in Xi'an. All their efforts contribute to the forming of the Chang'an Painting School. The art of the Chang'an Painting School has a historical inevitability in its creation, development and growth.

Zhao Wangyun, formerly known as Zhao Xinguo (1906-1977), was born in Shulu County, Hebei Province. As a young artist, Zhao went to Beijing in 1925 to study painting. He studied art at the Jinghua Fine Arts College and the National College of Arts, and then changed his name to Zhao Wangyun. He was determined to advocate the innovation of Chinese painting, abandoning the old tradition of Chinese painting which regarded copying ancient works as fashion, and to express and reflect social reality and life in traditional art forms. With the real life of the Chinese peasants as subjects, he engaged in his painting creation in a very simple and natural way learned and created by him to express the state of ordinary people in the lower strata of society and show their joys and sorrows. The artistic path of Chinese painting of rural life hence started. Feng Yuxiang gave high praise to Zhao Wangyun's Xiesheng paintings: "He recognized this urgent artistic task and bravely opened up a new world by penetrating into the group of the toiling masses and depicting their actual lives." [2] Zhao Wangyun's paintings from life are of a strong local flavor. Lao She, a famous writer, thought that "Zhao's landscape paintings were originally very skillful, but he did not like the way of painting the old men in ancient costumes in the landscape, so he observed carefully in the countryside and deeply studied them, in order to put living people and events in the pictures so as to capture the real life of the people. By doing so, the art would not always be deposited in the vain". [2] As Zhao Wangyun traveled with Guan Shanyue and Zhang Zhenduo to the northwest to sketch and copy Dunhuang murals, the subject matter of Zhao Wangyun's paintings began to depict the natural mountains and rural scenery of the northwest. Zhang Daqian commented, "I am not as good at painting horses as Xu Beihong and Zhao Wangyun; Beihong's horses are racing horses, and Wangyun's horses are farming horses. [3]

After settling in Xi'an, Zhao Wangyun organized local painters to establish the Pingming Painting Association, founded the magazine *Yong Hua*, opened the Qingmen Art Society, held various exhibitions, and recruited students such as Huang Jun, Fang Jizhong, and Xu Shuzhi. Zhao Wangyun's artistic exploration and innovation on reflecting reality began to take root in the life of northwest art, laying the foundation for the emergence of the Chang'an Painting School. "Zhao Wangyun's discovery of art in the northwest was but a part of the overall concern of the entire cultural and intellectual community at the time for the history, geography, ethnicity, society, mineral deposits, and religion of the northwest. On this historical background and cultural context, we can get a correct understanding of Zhao Wangyun's pioneering status, and have a clearer understanding of the historical mission and cultural connotation of the Chang'an Painting School that gradually formed later"[4]. "It is this tradition of Mr. Zhao Wangyun that laid the foundation for the emergence of Chang'an Painting School after liberation. Therefore, Ye Qianyu regards Zhao Wangyun as the original founder of the Chang'an Painting School." [4] Zhao Wangyun's art is the natural flow of the heart's rhythm, accompanied by bitterness and simplicity, and with coolness and nobility. Shi Lu commented, "Looking at Wangyun's paintings, they are like a natural re-creation, with stylistic vigor and simple, generous temperament." [4]

Shi Lu (1919-1982), formerly known as Feng Yayan, was a native of Renshou County, Sichuan. At that time, "the whole country was plagued by the war, miscellaneous words were coming out and some people then emphasized skills rather than literature. Feng admired Shi Tao and Lu Xun's character so much that he took Shi Lu as his name. By bicycle he crossed the Bashan Mountains and the Qinling Mountains alone, passed Sichuan Province and arrived Shaanxi Province ". [5] In 1940, Shi Lu went to Yan'an and joined the military, pursuing the road to revolution. He was the Art team leader of the Northwest Art Troupe, and the creator of Literary Association in the Shaanxi-Gansu-ningxia Border Area, creating many wood-carving works at that time.

On July 2, 1949, the Chinese National Conference of Literary and Art Workers were held in Beijing. Shi Lu, who was teaching at Yan'an University, was a member of the Northwest delegation. He went directly from Yan'an to Beijing via Shanxi. This congress "was an unprecedented grand gathering of progressive revolutionary artists since the rise of the New Culture Movement and the left-wing literary campaign since "May Fourth". [6] It was a general mobilization for the exchange and merging of artists from the Liberated Areas and the National Unification Areas. The artists were to join in the construction of the New China. After the meeting, Shi Lu moved to Xi'an for his career (the date is ominous) and became the director of the Northwest Art Working Committee and the president of the Northwest Painting Press at the age of 32.

The formation of a school of painting always starts with the achievement of one or several outstanding artists who are infectious enough to naturally form a group of artists with them as the core, forging the

same style of painting. "The arrival of the artist Shi Lu in Xi'an to join Zhao Wangyun is the most significant event of the 20th century in Xi'an's painting world." [7] In October 1950, Shi Lu was in charge of preparing the establishment of the Chinese Painting Research Association and recommended Zhao Wangyun as its director. In 1953 the Xi'an Branch of China Art Association was established and in 1958, the Chinese Painting Creation and Research Institute of Xi'an Art Association was established. Shi Lu was a realist artist who attached importance to life, and his transcendence of life was often the result of the suffering and misfortune in life through the mind, producing sublimation into a pure personality. The name of Shi Lu came from Shi Tao and Lu Xun. Shi Lu created the Arts of Painting after reading the same name of the work created by Si Tao so it can be said that his way of painting was influenced by Si Tao. However, Shi Tao's aesthetic interest was 300 years apart since the contemporary life when the world was in Cold War. Shi Lu was along the tradition of such literati painting back to the individual self. "The literati and artists often liked to pretend to be the 'recluse' or 'raving litterateur' who were avoiding the world - with strange clothes and cynicism, imitating the monks of Taoism and Buddhism, sinking into wine and wild songs", [8] Shi Lu used his "cynical" "ink play" to write the spiritual connotation of the times.

### **III. THE 1961 BEIJING EXHIBITION AND THE GREAT DISCUSSION ON TRADITION AND THE NEW LOOK OF THE TIMES**

In 1956, Zhao Wangyun and Shi Lu transferred the Chinese painters including He Haixia, Kang Shiyao, Chen Yaosheng, Ye Fangqiao, Zheng Naiqiu and Zheng Naiguang to the Chinese Painting Research Institute of the Art Association, which not only enabled them to acquire the status of professional painters and concentrate on creation and research, but also built a Chinese painting creation center with Zhao Wangyun, Shi Lu, He Haixia, Fang Jizhong, Kang Shiyao, Chen Yaosheng, Ye Fangqiao, Zheng Naiguang, Yuan Baitao and other painters as the basic team. The Center for the Study and Creation of Chinese Painting was put on the right track and flourished. At the same time, they spent time with the printmaker Xiu Jun, Liu Kuang, Zhang Jianwen, the oil painter Cai Liang, the couple of Zhang Ziyi, and the critic Chen Jiayong. Zhao Wangyun was the deputy director of the Cultural Bureau and a deputy to the National People's Congress, and played an important role in the literary and artistic career of the Northwest. Shi Lu was an ambitious, theoretical and learned revolutionary cadre who became mature in Yan'an. They widely united the painters inside and outside the Art Association, and together they created a harmonious atmosphere in which all kinds of painting, mainly Chinese painting, developed simultaneously.

On October 1, 1961, the works of six members of the Xi'an Art Association Chinese Painting Creation and Research Institute, including Zhao Wangyun, Shi Lu, He Haixia, Li Zisheng, Kang Shiyao and Fang Jizhong, were exhibited at the National Art Museum of China. The exhibition then went on tour to

Shanghai, Nanjing, Hangzhou and Guangzhou, where it was so successful and caused such a strong reaction that "the name 'Chang'an Painting School' was added to this group of painters living and working in Xi'an". [7] The Chinese Artists Association held a symposium in Beijing on the "Xi'an Art Association Chinese Painting Creation and Research Institute Exercises Exhibition". Participants in the symposium included: Fang Jizhong, Wang Chaowen, Ye Qianyu, Shi Lu, Guan Songfang, Hua Junwu, Hua Xia, Wu Zuoren, Li Kuchan, Li Zisheng, Li Qi, He Haixia, Yu Feng, Qin Zhongwen, Kang Shiyao, Cai Ruohong and so on. The magazine *Fine Arts* launched a great discussion and a two-month-long debate on the central issue of inheriting and developing the tradition of Chinese painting. The Xinhua News Agency and the *People's Daily* published full-page reports on the magazine and related commentaries under the title "New Paintings of Chang'an".

During this great discussion, Chinese art authorities, famous painters and art critics all spoke highly of the Chang'an School's contribution to the development and innovation of Chinese painting. Regarding their new creative achievements, Yu Feng, an expert at the time, commented that they were "powerful like a bombshell in the development of new techniques in Chinese painting"[9]. Wu Zuoren gave full recognition to their new creative achievements, saying, "The exhibition was a great success. .... To have such a bold attempt as theirs and to have such an achievement was worthy of a big record in the history of exhibition activities in 1961"[9]. This represents the main theme of public opinion after the exhibition at that time. Wang Chaowen said: "This exhibition focuses on a new atmosphere of Chinese painting. In Chinese paintings, there is a simple yet important feature: the painter's creation is based on life, but does not stop at recording the phenomenon of life, and thus achieves a higher achievement than life. Specifically, there is a sharp difference between real creation and practice or imitation. When be viewed as a sign of gradual maturity, this feature has gradually become a widely dominant force"[9-11]. The rise of the Chang'an Painting School pointed the way to the Chinese art world, showing that art should not only show national character but also local one.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

We have become accustomed to regard the "May Fourth" movement as a node to view many issues. The fate of Chinese painting, like that of other traditional art forms, naturally undergoes a baptism of impact and transformation. The evolution of Chinese painting is interwoven with the survival and revitalization of the Chinese nation and the trend of the times featured democracy and science. The advancement of Chinese painting is accompanied by the development of art itself and the utilitarian purpose of art. Opposing the traditional obsolescence is the cultural ideal of the Chinese radicals in painting, who borrow methods from western in an attempt to recreate new methods for creation. The conservatives, who maintain the traditional spirit and style, still hold fast to the bottom line of traditional literati painting. They become distinguished artists, pushing forward new methods in a traditional way. The

art practice represented by the Chang'an Painting School is commonplace, consciously rooted in the traditional cultural soil, with the new atmosphere and vividness of the times as its foundation and with life as the core of artistic creation to experience the life. It is a new literati painting with the atmosphere of the times that carries forward the national tradition. If we take "lush mountains and rivers and flamboyant grasses and trees" as the main subject of landscape painting in the south, then "pristine ambience of vigorousness" is the spiritual feeling of the Chang'an Painting School. The discovery and the display of the northeast beauty featured by solid, vast, simple and wild is immediately contrasted with the southeast style of beauty featured by the light, delicate and sweet". What the painters of the Chang'an School faced is to express the millennial tradition, western style and Yan'an ideal with their brush and ink via paintings.

As art critic Lang Shaojun said, "'Chang'an Painting School' is a collective answer sheet submitted by Xi'an Chinese painters to the new era. Although it is not finished because of the 'Cultural Revolution', it has, after all, answered in a systematic way on how to concretely combine traditional art forms with the contemporary trend of life. It is a difficult yet important issue that remains to be solved. From this aspect, Chang'an Painting School provides their experience in both theory and practice. The Chang'an Painting School formed a path toward life by liberating the brush and ink, liberating the subject matter, moving toward life, moving toward the times, returning to simplicity, and returning to the self.

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