

# Appreciation and market collecting of ethnic-minority- Themed oil paintings

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**Abstract:** This paper traces the creative trajectory and market evolution of ethnic-minority-themed oil paintings in China since 1949—from the revolutionary hymns of the red era, through the 1980s "native-soil" boom, to the regional surge of the 1990s—highlighting canonical cases by Jin Shangyi, Chen Danqing, Ai Xuan, and Tuo Musi. Auction data show consistently strong prices for classical realist and "Tibet–steppe" segments, with landmark works fetching hundreds of millions or tens of millions of RMB. The study proposes a rational collecting framework of "five driving factors + consumer mindset + 15-year circulation rule," arguing that academic quality, ethnic-aesthetic resonance, and regional authenticity are the keys to value retention and appreciation, and predicts the genre will continue to gain momentum as the market matures.

**Keywords:** ethnic-minority-themed oil painting, sinicization of oil painting, art market, collecting and value appreciation, Tibet Series, steppe school

## 1. Introduction

Chinese civilization is rooted in deep cultural sediment and broad inclusiveness. When confronted with heterogeneous cultures, it habitually maintains its own footing while adopting and blending them with an open attitude. During the century since the imported medium of oil painting took root, sprouted, and blossomed in China, its history has also been one of gradual sinicization. This "nationalization" of oil painting is not narrow nationalism; rather, it is a personalized artistic quest undertaken by Chinese painters who, already well-versed in Western oil techniques, consciously pursue their own pictorial language.

The cultures of China's fifty-five ethnic minorities have flourished across this tolerant land, and oil works stamped with regional minority traits constitute the most vivid evidence of this sinicizing process. Their emergence is an inevitable outcome of Chinese oil painting's evolution. Painters of true originality place great weight on the cultural nourishment found in minority traditions, making ethnic-themed oils a bright hue in today's art-collecting market.

## 2. The development of ethnic-minority oil painting since 1949

### 2.1. Margin to spotlight: 20th-century westward shift

Every epoch in Chinese civilization has produced notable artworks depicting ethnic minorities, yet, owing to the Confucian ideal of "grand unity" since the Qin-Han era, such images remained peripheral, seldom entering the "official" art-historical record. When they did appear, they were usually filtered through a Han cultural lens that diluted their ethnic specificity.

In the mid-20th century, war drove large numbers of cultural elites to China's vast west. Their creative work there refocused public attention on minority peoples. The founding of New China then radically altered both social institutions and daily life in the borderlands, and many painters traveled to these regions with cultural troupes or consolation delegations, weaving their art closely with local folk life.

### 2.2. Visual hymns of the new regime (1949–1976)

From 1949 to 1976, ethnic-minority oil painting chiefly celebrated the social transformations brought by the new government: the joys of a "new life" and the ideal of national unity. Representative works include

The Golden Season (Zhu Naizheng), Spring Arrives in Tibet (Dong Xiwen), We Walk on the Broad Road (Pan Shixun, 1962), Six Hundred Million Divine Men (Hou Yimin, Deng Shu, Zhou Lingzhao), Uygur Girl (Chang Shuhong, 1953), Ashima (Wu Zuoren, 1957) and A Menba Girl Herding Cattle (Pan Shixun, 1964).

Throughout the early PRC period and up to the Cultural Revolution, production in this genre was vigorous. While iconographic similarity and overt ideological colouring later drew criticism, the pictures nevertheless introduced a welcome breeze of ethnic diversity into the visual culture of the time.

### **2.3. Airport mural shock: A humanist breakthrough at the dawn of reform and opening**

China's first post-Cultural-Revolution art to gain worldwide attention was linked to ethnic themes—most famously the large murals installed in the departure hall of Beijing Capital Airport. Water-Splashing Festival—Hymn to Life shattered the taboos of Cultural-Revolution art and triggered nationwide controversy. Although the mural's fate was stormy, the theoretical debate it inspired propelled Chinese art into a new, diversified era devoted to the expression of human beauty.

### **2.4. The 1980s classic wave: Rustic realism and steppe romanticism**

After 1980, influential ethnic-minority oils proliferated: Chen Danqing's Tibet Series (1980), Tuo Musi's Women Stacking Hay (1984), Wei Ershen's Auspicious Mongolia (1988), Guan Bu's Little Sisters on the Grassland, Zhan Jianjun's Lads on the Prairie (1977), Liu Bingjiang's Plateau Knight (1978), Zhou Rongsheng's Offering to Aobao, Jin Shangyi's Tibetan Girl from Gannan (1994) and Ai Xuan's Tibetan Girl, among others.

### **2.5. The 1990s regional surge: Western-region style versus steppe style**

From the 1990s onward, ethnic-themed oils became markedly more regional. In Xinjiang, a "Western-Region" school—represented by Wang Guangxin, Zhao Peizhi, Mohedel, and Yasen—burst onto the scene. Blending realist, decorative, expressive and xieyi manners, these painters employ bold colour, daring formats and fresh content, turning their unmistakable ethnic identity into a highlight of contemporary Chinese oil painting. On the Inner-Mongolian steppe, artists led by Tuo Musi continue to cultivate a plain, robust grassland idiom.

At every National Art Exhibition, minority-themed oils claim a large share of the honours; in recent editions they have shone especially brightly. Straightforward content, varied handling and pronounced individuality win attention from both peers and collectors. In short, contemporary creation in this field now concentrates on concrete ways to "Sinicize" oil language, and has reaped a rich harvest in a remarkably short time.

## **3. Appreciating classic ethnic-minority oil paintings**

### **3.1. Soaring hymns of the red era**

Classic minority-themed oils are numerous; only a few can be singled out here. In 1962 Pan Shixun painted *We Walk on the Broad Road*, a work brimming with period spirit. Depicting young Tibetan road-builders, it conveys their high morale in constructing a new Tibet, offering viewers a sense of strength, hope and the resolve of national unity.

Equally emblematic of the early PRC is Dong Xiwen's *Spring Arrives in Tibet*. Instead of the clichéd festival scene, Dong cleverly weaves the treacherous Kang-Tibet Highway into the plateau landscape. His colour scheme and formal beauty delight the eye while imprinting themselves on the memory. "Spring" functions as a double entendre—both the season and the liberation of Tibet—demonstrating the painter's political acuity and inventive artistry.



Figure 1 Chen Danqing Tibet Series: The Shepherd 80 × 52 cm, 1980



Figure 2 Ai Xuan Holy Mountain 190 × 220 cm, 2009

### 3.2. Tibet fever and rustic realism

In 1976 Chen Danqing was seconded to Tibet for artistic creation. Already under the spell of Surikov-style realism, he found in the mysterious plateau's rugged folk customs and devout beliefs a source of visual shock. Abandoning the "red, bright and shining" formula of the Cultural Revolution, he shifted to large areas of brown and ochre, as seen in *Tears of Sorrow Soak the Harvest Fields*, which depicts Tibetans mourning Chairman Mao.

In 1980 he produced the seven-canvas Tibet Series, later hailed as a milestone in contemporary Chinese art. The figures are so lifelike that their joys, sorrows and passions seem tangible, their rough, sturdy skin almost within reach. The instant success of the series turned Tibet into a magnet for artists, triggering the "rustic-realist" trend and spawning regional schools such as the Yunnan School. Works like Liu Bingjiang's Tajik Girl, Zhan Jianjun's Song of the Plateau, Jin Shangyi's Tajik Bride and Sun Jingbo's A Wa Mother appeared at the same time.

### **3.3. The eastern bride in Neo-Classical style**

A leading advocate of neo-classicism, Jin Shangyi has significantly promoted minority-themed oils. His 1983 Tajik Bride—a signature piece that opened his golden period—is regarded as a landmark of Chinese classical realism. European academic technique is fused with a Tajik sitter; subtle light falls across her face, while the folds of her veil are rendered with concise, daring brushwork. Her shy, sweet smile conveys refined, reserved aesthetic pleasure.

### **3.4. Prairie lyricism: Founding of the inner-mongolian school**

Renowned Mongolian painter Tuo Musi, creator of the Inner-Mongolian school, is best known for Women Stacking Hay (1984, Silver Medal, 6th National Art Exhibition). The picture's carefully orchestrated contrasts of black and white, density and sparseness, and its rhythmic pulse, are matched by concise colour and summary brushwork. With a few broad, xieyi-like strokes he captures the robust grace of Mongolian women, a touch of pink on their cheeks bringing subtle vitality to life. Tuo's Mongolian oils distill the essence of traditional folk art, seeking the simplest natural beauty in daily life, emphasising purity and restraint of composition and colour, and pursuing lyrical atmosphere and artistic conception, thereby expressing his love for the grasslands and his understanding of Mongolian culture.

### **3.5. Snowfield ethereality: Ai Xuan's Grey-Cold World**

Ai Xuan's Tibetan oils are suffused with quiet ethereality, their backgrounds mostly snowy slopes or white horizons. His palette is extremely grey and cold, for he discovered through practice that fidelity to Tibet's blue sky, white clouds and crimson prayer flags could not create the sense of emptiness he sought. Only beneath the stark white of deep winter could his soul find release.

## **4. The art-market perspective: Collecting ethnic-minority oil paintings**

### **4.1. A hundred-million hammer-blow: Classical realism as market hard-core**

Within the broader oil-painting market, classical or realist idioms command the largest and most stable collector base. Jin Shangyi's Tajik Bride, discussed earlier, carried a pre-sale estimate of RMB 16–20 million at China Guardian's autumn auction of 16 November 2013; the gavel finally fell at RMB 85.1 million—four to five times the high estimate. The price not only set a new personal record for the artist but also became the highest result ever recorded in Guardian's twenty-year oil-and-sculpture sales history, underlining the fervour with which collectors embrace top-tier ethnic-minority imagery.

Realist painters such as Chen Danqing, Ai Xuan, Yang Feiyun, Long Liyou and Zhang Li remain on the watch-lists of every major auction house, institutional collector and private connoisseur. Thanks to early economic maturity, Hong Kong and Taiwanese collectors began commercialising art as early as 1990, quickly training their acute antennae on the above names.

Ai Xuan—one of the bell-wethers of the Chinese oil market—has seen a steady, upward price curve for his minority-themed works. His canvases radiate an intense personal lyricism: the pure yet melancholic eyes that stare out of his pictures magnetise viewers in an instant, a phenomenon the artist himself calls "the power of eye-to-eye contact." Collectors, confronted by that gaze, examine their own inner longings—arguably the principal reason Ai's paintings are so avidly pursued.



Figure 3 Tuo Musi Women Stacking Hay 175 × 175 cm, 1984

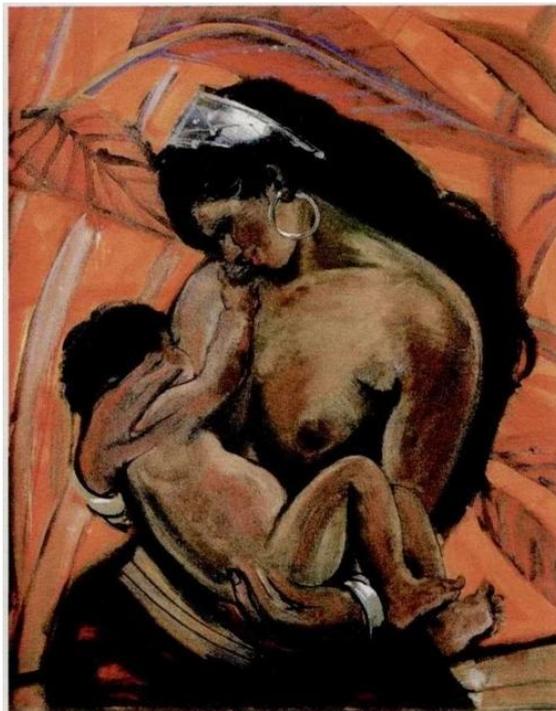


Figure 4 Sun Jingbo A Wa Mother

#### 4.2. "The Power of Eye-to-Eye Contact": Ai Xuan's steady upward price curve

Ai Xuan, a flagship of the "China Realist Painters," has long led the market's climb. His auction record offers a clear barometer of robust, sustained demand for minority-themed oils. Dubbed "China's Wyeth," Ai works almost exclusively with Tibetan subject matter, producing canvases of deep craft and lingering poetry.

His first auction appearance came in 1992, when Christie's Hong Kong sold *The Song Has Left Us* for HK330,000, placing him fifth in that Chinese-contemporary sale. Long Liyou, known for Mongolian

themes, claimed top slot in two 1995 Sotheby's Hong Kong sales. By May 2013, Ai's top lot was the 2009 canvas *Holy Mountain*, sold in late 2010 for RMB 20.72 million. His aggregate auction turnover had reached RMB 445 million, ranking 16th among Chinese oil painters. Of 290 recorded sales, 126 fetched between RMB 1 million and RMB 10 million.

#### **4.3. Halo of the Tibet series: Chen Danqing's Price "Leap-Frog"**

The spotlight created by Tibet Series has made Chen Danqing's Tibetan oils hot properties. *Two Men Entering Town* (1985), *Lovers* (1986) and *Khampa Men* (1988) all sit in his personal top-ten.

When his work first hit the block in 1994, *Suckling* sold at China Guardian for RMB 85,800. In 2003, *Tibet Series: Shepherd* (1980) broke the million-yuan mark at RMB 1.87 million. 2004: 6 works, total RMB 1.43 million. 2005: 23 works, total RMB 14.78 million. 2006: 35 works, total RMB 44.16 million. 2007: 28 works, total RMB 66.93 million; *Shepherd* sold at Beijing Council for RMB 35.84 million. 2009: *Khampa Men* (1988) fetched RMB 3.13 million. Chen describes the 2007 spurt as "no spring—straight into scorching midsummer." Today, 14 of his 20 highest-priced auction results are Tibetan-themed.

#### **4.4. Prairie pastoral as value-growth model: Long Liyou's RMB 9.2 million high**

Dedicated to Mongolian themes, Long Liyou first hit the auction block in 2004 with a canvas that fetched RMB 330,000 at Huachen. Eight years later, his 2011 *Pastoral Song of the Grassland* (130 × 194 cm) sold for RMB 9.2 million at Beijing Hanhai's spring sale. The hamlet of Haolibao on the Mongolian steppe—where herders maintain an age-old way of life—serves as the spiritual homeland that feeds Long's art. His love of the grassland saturates every picture with vigorous daily atmosphere and deep ethnic roots. The steep price curve of his works not only underlines his creative stature but also sharpens collectors' awareness of the investment potential within China's ethnic-minority oil genre.

### **5. Collecting & Value appreciation analysis of ethnic-minority oil paintings**

#### **5.1. Five engines driving the sector's heat**

China's sustained economic growth and rising demand for spiritual fulfillment have heated the entire art-collecting scene; oil paintings, in particular, have soared. Within that boom, ethnic-minority-themed oils have become a white-hot niche for five main reasons:

Persistent forgery and speculation in Chinese scroll painting have pushed substantial capital toward the safer oil-painting market. An expanding middle class now provides solid, enthusiastic support. Overseas collectors have long followed Chinese oil painting and welcome its ethnic and individualised turns. Galleries and auction houses have built robust trading platforms. Minority-themed works effectively mirror contemporary China's ethos.

Collectors generally fall into three groups: professional traders, amateurs with primary careers, and museums as end-game custodians. Buying purely for aesthetic pleasure—treating acquisition as leisure consumption—makes decisions easier; those who buy solely for quick profit are better labelled speculators. International data show marquee works change hands every 15–20 years or longer. A consumer mindset shields buyers from short-term volatility and psychological pressure. Irreplaceable by definition, top-quality minority oils will inevitably hold and increase their value if approached rationally.

Veteran collectors often assemble focused series or thematic sets. To build a coherent minority-oil collection, one must master the biographies, concepts, period styles and masterworks of key artists, plus maintain a macro view of the wider Chinese oil-painting landscape.

#### **5.2. Rational collecting: Consumer mindset & 15-year rule**

Economic cycles vary, yet auction data show that works priced above USD 5 million are least affected by downturns and boast the strongest resistance to depreciation—a direct reflection of collectors' financial muscle and liquidity. For newcomers with ample capital, acquiring high-priced, blue-chip minority-themed oils is an option. Those with limited disposable funds are advised to spot and buy early works by emerging or mid-career artists whose distinctive visual language is already taking shape; many young talents now

devote themselves exclusively to this genre. Their growth potential is considerable: once they rise to prominence, their earliest paintings can appreciate dramatically.

### 5.3. Avoid pitfalls: Shun technical poverty & capital hype

Collectors should be on guard against works that are technically thin or mass-produced. Particular caution is warranted for contemporary pieces that sever ties with ethnic cultural traditions and lack broad cultural recognition within China. Nor should one overrate the power of capital; hype can create short-term hotspots but rarely endures. Intrinsic academic quality and the artist's scholarly standing in the domestic oil-painting world offer far greater staying power. Rather than chasing an "international halo," collectors should ask whether a work resonates spiritually with Chinese aesthetic ideals and can secure cultural identity in the new era. Pronounced regional characteristics in minority-themed oils often signal the painter's sincere intent, making such works enduring vehicles of ethnic culture.

After a century of absorption and fusion, oil painting has merged seamlessly with contemporary Chinese life, humanistic values and aesthetic tastes. A native evaluation system—grounded in ethnicity, epoch, individuality and creativity—has taken shape. Generations of artists have pushed the sinicization of oil painting to new depths, while the rich reservoir of folk and ethnic cultures provides an inexhaustible source of motifs and inspiration for future minority-themed masterpieces.

## 6. Conclusion

As China's oil-painting collecting scene matures and becomes more rational, works that celebrate the weight of unadorned ethnic traditions and pursue sincere, exalted emotional realms will inevitably attract greater collector attention—evidence of a pragmatic and discerning approach to acquisition.



Figure 5 Dong Xiwen Spring Arrives in Tibet 153 × 234 cm, 1954