

The Image of Women in Cross-cultural Perspective: The Case of Dunhuang Mural Paintings

Wei Guo*

College of TianPing, Suzhou University of Science and Technology, Suzhou, China

*Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the images of women in Dunhuang murals and their status and role in society in the context of Chinese history, culture and religion, and explores the phenomenon of cross-cultural intermingling in these murals and the influence of foreign cultures on these images in the context of foreign cultural elements and globalisation. To obtain background information about Dunhuang murals through the study of historical documents, Buddhist classics and Dunhuang research materials. Systematically analyses the murals of Guanyin Bodhisattva, the statue of the feeder, the flying nymphs and the legend of the deer maiden, and explores how these images of women incorporate elements of foreign cultures from India, Persia, and Central Asia, demonstrating the phenomenon of cross-cultural intermingling on the Silk Road. The study demonstrates that the images of women in Dunhuang murals demonstrate the status and important role of women in ancient societies, provide rich cultural and historical information for future generations, promote historical understanding and modern recognition of women's power, shed light on the rise of women in ancient societies as well as the fusion of Chinese and foreign cultures millennia ago, and provide invaluable historical experience and insights for women's empowerment and cross-cultural understanding in modern societies.

KEYWORDS

Cross-culture; Dunhuang Frescoes; Femininity.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Artistic Landscape and Social Mapping under the Intersection of Multiculturalism

Dunhuang is located on the main Silk Road. Since the Han Dynasty, Buddhism has been introduced to China via the Silk Road and flourished from the Wei, Jin, North and South Dynasties to the Tang Dynasty. The Mogao Caves in Dunhuang, as a centre of Buddhist cave art, are not only a treasure of China's ancient cultural heritage but also a magnificent chapter in the history of world art. The murals of the Mogao Caves not only show the development of Buddhism, but also reflect the social, economic and cultural conditions of ancient China. It was worshipped and supported by a large number of Buddhist believers, especially in the Tang Dynasty, when Buddhism was widely spread and the art of mural painting reached its peak. Especially the representation of female figures in the mural paintings shows the multiple roles and status of women in the ancient society, and reflects the aesthetic concepts of women and their importance in religion and social life in ancient China. From a cross-cultural perspective, Dunhuang is located in the core area of the Silk Road, which has become an important node of cultural exchange between the East and the West since the 4th century AD. With the deepening of trade and the spread of religion, the mural art of Dunhuang was influenced by a

variety of cultures, including India, Central Asia, Persia, and Greco-Roman. This multicultural fusion makes Dunhuang murals unique in artistic style and religious expression. Firstly, the influence of Indian Buddhist art on Dunhuang murals is particularly significant. Early Dunhuang murals were directly influenced by Indian art styles, including the modelling, posture and decorative details of the Buddha. The Persian art style in Central Asia also had a significant impact on Dunhuang murals. In addition to the influence of foreign cultures, the images of women in Dunhuang murals also incorporate elements of the native Han culture. The women in the murals often display the elegance and modesty of ancient China, and their hairstyles, dresses, and postures reflect Han aesthetic concepts. Thus, the image of women in Dunhuang murals is a product of the convergence of multiple cultures, and the artistic elements of different cultures are intermingled in the murals, forming a unique artistic style.

1.2. Literature Review

In the article "The Image of Women in Dunhuang Mural Paintings of the Tang Dynasty and Its Implications for Stage Styling ", scholar Ruan Ting combed through four types of women's images in Dunhuang mural paintings of the Tang Dynasty, including the image of the Bodhisattva, the image of the Bodhisattva in the Tang Dynasty, the image of the Flying Sky, the image of the Flying Sky, the image of the Flying Dancer in the Tang Dynasty, the image of the female supporter in the Tang Dynasty, etc.[1] She analysed in detail the characteristics of these images in terms of hair bun makeup, facial makeup, colour configuration and costume styling, and discussed their implications for stage styling. The characteristics of the female figures in Dunhuang murals of the Tang Dynasty are analysed in detail in terms of hair buns, facial make-up, colour schemes and costume modelling, and the implications of these images for stage modelling are explored. Although the article mentions the changes of women's images in different periods (the Early Tang and the Sheng Tang) and the influence of foreign cultures on women's images in Dunhuang murals of the Tang Dynasty, the discussion of the social, cultural and religious reasons behind these changes is rather brief, and the analysis of the process and mechanism of this influence is not detailed enough. In the future, more cross-cultural comparative studies can be conducted to explore how foreign cultures specifically influenced the image of women in Tang dynasty Dunhuang murals.

The article "On Translation and Overseas Communication of Chinese Dunhuang Culture: A Review of Key Concepts in Dunhuang Culture " by Zhang Yifan and Liang Yong, mentions Bodhisattva Images are prolific and diverse, whose postures and characteristics differ from those in India and Southeast Asia.[2] This statement clearly indicates that the bodhisattva statues in Dunhuang murals incorporate elements of many cultures and arts, demonstrating the exchange and fusion between different cultures. For example, in "The Feminisation of Guanyin Bodhisattva and its Aesthetic Implications", the scholar Zhijing mentions that, the Chinese rulers had always respected the idea of "ruling the world through filial piety". The newcomers to Buddhism were influenced by this, so they fully absorbed the traditional Chinese concept of filial piety and gave the Goddess of Mercy the image of a loving mother.[3] Although research on cross-cultural intermingling has revealed the influence of many foreign cultural elements, there is still a lack of in-depth research on how these elements specifically affect the image of women. For example, specific artistic styles, techniques and details of the localisation process have not yet been explored in depth. Existing studies have mainly focused on the influence of Indian culture on Dunhuang murals, but the potential influence of other foreign cultural elements such as Persia on the female figures in Dunhuang murals has not been sufficiently studied. In addition, the dating of specific murals, analysis of techniques and study of materials could have been studied in greater depth.

2. ORGANIZATION OF THE TEXT

2.1. Women in Early Dunhuang Murals

At present, the appearance of female figures in Dunhuang murals can be traced back as far as the Western Wei period. Prior to the Western Wei dynasty, there were few female figures in Dunhuang murals, mainly because early Buddhist art focused more on religious teachings and representations of the Buddha than on specific scenes of social life, coupled with the low level of participation by women in social and religious affairs at that time. However, during the Western Wei period, female supporters began to appear in Dunhuang murals. Firstly, the rule of the northern regime gradually stabilised and social order was restored. During this period, minority rulers such as the Xianbei gradually accepted Han culture, promoting cultural integration and development. Political stability provided the basis for socio-economic development and created the conditions for the prosperity of culture and art; secondly, the widespread spread of Buddhism during this period led to more aristocratic and wealthy families patronising Buddhist art, and women, as important members of these families, began to play a more important role in religious activities. The emergence and development of the female figure was the result of the fusion of Han and Xianbei cultures, and of the fusion of art and innovation with local cultures after the introduction of Indian Buddhism to the Central Plains. Cave 285 of the Mogao Grottoes, which was excavated between 538 and 539 AD, during the Western Wei Dynasty (535-557 AD). The frescoes on the north wall of the cave contain portraits of a number of supporters, both male and female. Female feeders in the mural paintings are wearing the Wei Jin and North and South Dynasties noble women popular 襜褕 clothes, layers upon layers, decorated with ribbons, walking like a swallow flying. Male feeder dress also contains the characteristics of the Xianbei tribe. This highlights the fusion of Han and Xianbei cultures. At the same time, the inscriptions and tablets record the identity and prayers of the donors, showing the importance of these feeders, including female feeders, in religious activities.



Figure 1. Hua Family Donors with inscription indicating construction of the cave around 539A.D

2.2. Evolution and Intermingling of the Sui and Tang Dynasties

After the Western Wei Dynasty, the portrayal of women in Dunhuang murals changed significantly. The Sui dynasty (518-618) ended a long period of division, and the Tang dynasty (618-907) established a strong, centralised state. Political unity and stability contributed to economic development and cultural prosperity, which allowed for better conditions for artistic creation. The open-door policy of the Tang Dynasty also brought a diversity of artistic styles and techniques. Dunhuang, as a major town on the Silk Road, was an important node where Eastern and Western cultures met. Cultures from Central Asia, India, and Persia mingled here and together influenced the artistic style of Dunhuang murals. The artists of the Sui and Tang dynasties continued to innovate on the basis of absorbing foreign cultures, creating works of art with unique styles. The female figures in Dunhuang murals not only increased in number, but also became richer and more delicate in their expression, demonstrating the high level of artistic creation during this period.

With the development of Tang Dynasty cave murals, under the open social climate of the Tang Dynasty, the figures' physiques were gradually plumped up, and the feeders began to be painted on both sides of the canopies, and their images became larger and larger. The identity of female feeders from princes and nobles to landlord women, commoners, slaves and maidservants, are depicted in the murals. As shown in the Figure 2, Cave 130 of Mogao Grottoes. Canal south wall of the Wang's mother 太原王氏 and daughter and servant feeder statue of the Tang dynasty feeder portraits in the largest one, a total of twelve people, the first three masters, the latter nine people are slaves and maidservants. The first three people have list title, the first body image is the largest, leaching powder stacked gold list entitled "Governor Mrs. Wang's heart for support"; the second body image is smaller, ink list entitled "female eleven mother for support"; the third body image is even smaller, ink list title "The third body image is even smaller, the ink inscription "female thirteen daughter support". According to the list of titles can be known after two body feeder is the governor's wife's daughter. This feeder portrait character modelling rich Tang Dynasty weather, whether master or slave, have "curved eyebrows and a half cheeks", "half-muscle greasy body" of the characteristics. However, each person's face is different: the masters are elegant, holding incense burners or flowers, palm salute, revealing the mood of respect and piety; slave girls are holding the piano, some end of the bottle of water, some hold a fan and half cover their faces, leisurely, some look back, whispering, and the master's mood is quite different. This mural depicts a group of aristocratic women collective ritual scene, the feeder image of real and rich in life. The characters are full-bodied, demonstrating the confidence and dignity of Tang Dynasty women. Their gorgeous costumes reflect the importance of aristocratic women in religious activities.



Figure 2. Statue of the Governor's Lady

In addition to images of aristocratic women, a large number of ordinary working women also appear in Dunhuang murals. As shown in the Fig 3, Cave 431 of the Mogao Grottoes. The female feeder in this mural wears everyday clothes and shows the image of commoner women. This shows that not only the nobility, but also the common people and slave girls had a place in the religious murals. From the Western Wei Dynasty to the Tang Dynasty, the frequency of female figures in Dunhuang murals increased. In the Western Wei Dynasty, female feeders initially appeared, and these feeders were mostly aristocrats or well-to-do people; in the Tang Dynasty, women were represented in a richer variety of roles, including aristocratic female feeders in splendid costumes, plainly dressed commoners, and even servant girls, demonstrating the broad participation of women from all social classes. In this process, the social status of women was more fully demonstrated, and the important role they played in religion and society was also fully reflected.

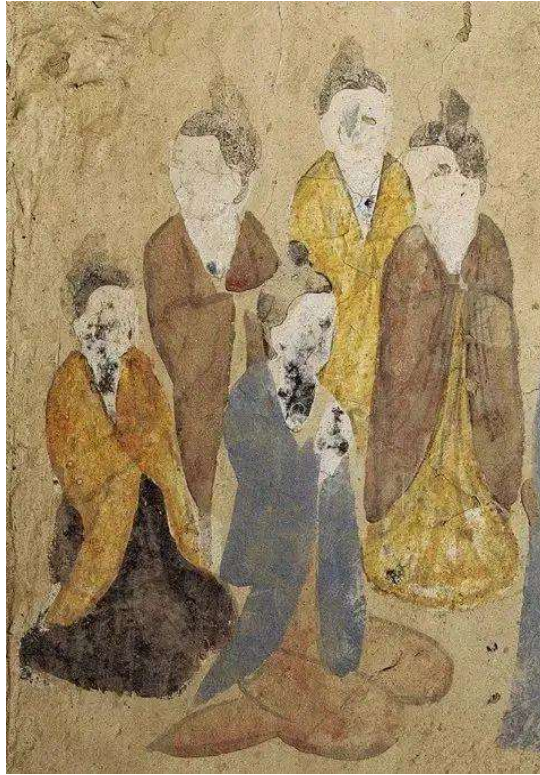


Figure 3. Female feeders in plain clothes

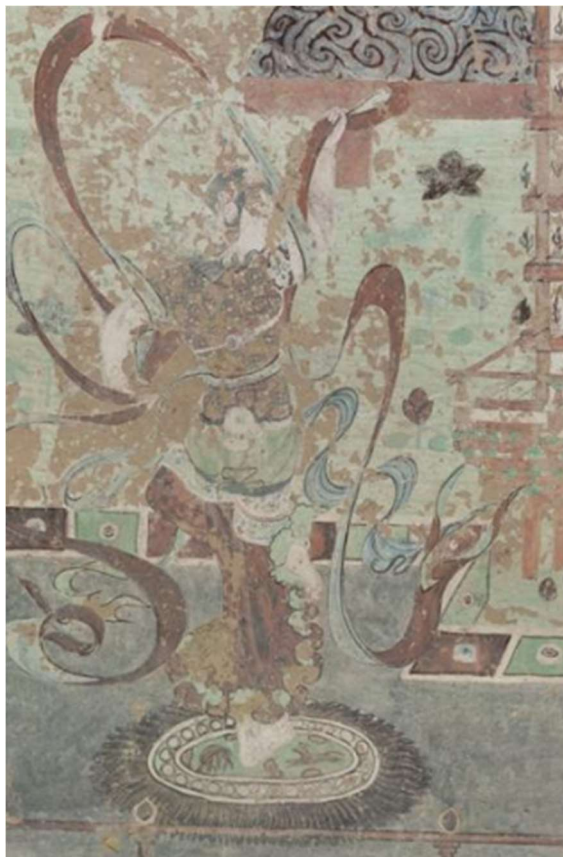


Figure 4. Hu Spin Dance



Figure 5. Metal Wine Bottles

In the Mogao Grottoes, Cave 220, the north wall of the Yakushi Sutra Changes Figur, depicted four female dancers. According to the "new tangshu - music" in "hu spin dance, dancers stand on the carpet, spinning like the wind" can be assumed that the four dancers are dancing is "hu spin dance". As in Figure 4. According to historical records, Hu Xuan Dance originated in the western region of Kang and other places, that is, today's Uzbekistan Samarkand area. With the prosperity of the ancient Silk Road, the Central Plains and the Western region of the increasingly close contacts, Hu Xuan dance into the Central Plains, prevalent in the court of the Tang Dynasty, and gradually spread to the people. As shown in the picture, the dancer is wearing a green waist skirt underneath, with a jewelled celluloid encircling and fixing it around her waist; a short blue skirt on the periphery, with the hemline decorated with a scrolling grass pattern; and a pair of pomegranate-red wide-legged trousers underneath.[4] But Scroll motifs were introduced to China from Persia via the Silk Road and were widely used during the Tang dynasty. As shown here, metal wine bottles from the Sassanid period (224~651) were often decorated with intricate scroll motifs. As in Figure 5. Through the depiction of this female figure, we can see elements from different cultures, such as the scroll pattern on the clothing, which demonstrates the fruit of cross-cultural exchanges as well as the pursuit of beauty and expression of women in the Tang Dynasty.

2.3. Changes in the Sanskrit Avalokiteśvara and the Power of Women.

Dunhuang is located at the heart of the Silk Road, and Buddhism has been introduced to China since the Han Dynasty and flourished from the Wei, Jin, North and South Dynasties to the Tang Dynasty. As the centre of Buddhist cave art, the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang were worshipped and supported by many Buddhist believers. Especially in the Tang Dynasty, Buddhism was widely spread and the art of mural painting reached its peak. In Dunhuang murals, Guanyin usually appears as a female figure. However, Guanyin was originally depicted as male or genderless in Indian Buddhism. Later, when Buddhism was introduced to China, Guanyin was depicted as a bearded monk in the art of the time. As in Figure a. In the following centuries, Guanyin was widely portrayed as a female figure. It is widely believed that the feminisation of Guanyin took place in the early Tang Dynasty and that she became fully feminised in the late Tang Dynasty.[5] In particular, the rise of female rulers and her close relationship with Buddhism during the reign of Wu Zetian played an important role in changing

the image of Guanyin. By supporting Buddhism, Wu Zetian elevated the status of women in the religion, which contributed to the transformation of Guanyin from a male to a female figure. The figure b of Guanyin on the south wall of Cave 276 in the Mogao Caves during the Sui Dynasty. At this time, Guanyin retained some male features, including two moustaches on her lips. Until the Sheng Tang period, the aesthetic concept of fat as beautiful, Guanyin's femininity is more prominent, rounded and full-bodied, facial features such as goose-egg face, willow-leaf eyebrows, cherry mouth and Danfeng eyes, all in line with the aesthetic standards of the time. At the same time, Guanyin's clothing also broke away from Western and Indian influences, going from bare-breasted to elegant. As shown in the picture, the Guanyin Bodhisattva in the south wall of Cave 57 of Mogao Caves is already a beautiful woman.



Figure 6. Comparison of the male statue of Guanyin in Fig. a and the feminised Guanyin in Fig. b

By associating beautiful qualities such as compassion, wisdom, and gentleness with femininity, the Goddess of Mercy has become a symbol of female strength. The Goddess of Mercy is known for her endless compassion and salvation of all living beings, qualities that are often associated with female motherhood and compassion in many cultures. The feminisation of Guanyin not only reinforces the expression of these qualities, but also makes her image culturally compatible with traditional female virtues. In this context, Kwun Yum serves as a symbol of female strength not only because of her gender identity, but also because of the virtues of compassion, tolerance, and patience that she embodies, all of which can be seen as a manifestation of female strength. This process of exaltation has helped to elevate the status of women in society, so that female virtues are no longer confined to the home alone, but are widely recognised as important values in society and religion.

From a cross-cultural perspective, the feminisation of Guanyin can be seen as an act of cultural adaptation by the Han culture in the process of absorbing and transforming Indian religious images. Guanyin originally appeared mainly as a male figure in Indian Buddhism, and in India, the status of women is lower. However, the gradual evolution of the image into a female figure in China actually challenges traditional gender roles and power structures. Historically, men have tended to be seen as the dominant force in religion and society, with women taking a secondary role. By feminising the

Goddess of Mercy, traditional gender roles are redefined, a shift that not only breaks down the male-dominated religious image, but also lays the foundation for women to strive for more voice and participation in society. And through cross-cultural comparisons, it can be found that the Goddess of Mercy is unanimously respected in East Asian societies, and in other cultures, similar female deities often carry society's recognition of female power. For example, in Western culture, the Virgin Mary is also seen as a symbol of compassion and motherhood.[6] Therefore, this process not only reflects cross-cultural fusion and the process of local culture's recreation of the image of Guanyin, but also promotes to a certain extent the popularity and recognition of the female image in religion, proving that the status of women has risen.

3. SUMMARY

This study has highlighted the significant role that women played in ancient societies, as depicted in the Dunhuang murals. Through an analysis of these images, it becomes evident that women were not only integral to religious and social life but also served as a canvas for the amalgamation of diverse cultural influences along the Silk Road. The findings underscore the murals' depiction of women as multifaceted figures, embodying both local Han traditions and foreign cultural elements from India, Persia, and Central Asia. This fusion of artistic styles and religious symbolism reflects the broader intercultural dynamics of the period. The importance of this study lies in its ability to provide a deeper understanding of how ancient cultural exchanges shaped the representation of women and their societal roles. By examining the cross-cultural influences on the portrayal of women in Dunhuang murals, this research contributes to a richer historical understanding of gender dynamics and the global cultural interconnections that have influenced both ancient and modern societies. In contemporary contexts, these findings offer valuable insights for women's empowerment and cross-cultural interactions. The historical examples of female figures in Dunhuang murals—who embody a blend of strength, grace, and religious significance—can inspire modern efforts to promote gender equality and cultural understanding. The recognition of women's power and influence, as reflected in these ancient artworks, serves as a reminder of the potential for intercultural dialogue to enhance the status of women and foster more inclusive societies.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ruan Ting. (2021). Female figures in Dunhuang murals of Tang Dynasty and their stage modelling revelation. *Journal of Shaanxi University of Science and Technology (Social Science Edition)* (04), 61-64. (in Chinese).
- [2] Zhang, Y., & Liang, Y. (2022, December). On Translation and Overseas Communication of Chinese Dunhuang Culture: A Review of Key Concepts in Dunhuang Culture. In *2022 International Conference on Diversified Education and Social Development (DESD 2022)* (pp. 171-176). Atlantis Press.
- [3] ZhiJing. (2018). Feminisation of Guanyin Bodhisattva and its Aesthetic Implications. *Journal of the College of Arts and Letters, Nanjing Normal University* (02), 114-120. (in Chinese).
- [4] Wang, Ziyue & Li, Nan. (2021). A study on the costumes of kabuki dancers in the sutra change paintings of the early Tang Dynasty: The Yakushi sutra change painting on the south wall of Cave 220 in Mogao Cave, for example. *Costume Guide* (03), 38-44. (Online Sources style). (in Chinese).
- [5] Huang, Y. , Chen, D. , Wang, H. , & Wang, L. . (2022). Gender recognition of guanyin in china based on vggnet. *Heritage Science*, 10(1), 1-17.
- [6] Liu, Gao Yang. (2015). Analysing the aesthetic characteristics of female feeder images in Dunhuang murals of Tang Dynasty. *Journal of Suzhou College*, 30(9), 4. (in Chinese).