



The Influence of Dunhuang Frescoes on Chinese-Style Animation, from the Representation of Plastic Art, Cultural Core to Digital Transmission—A Case Study of ‘Nine-Coloured Deer’

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Abstract. The development of Chinese-inspired animation cannot be achieved without drawing on outstanding traditional art, and Dunhuang frescoes are a representative example of outstanding traditional Chinese painting. In this article, we take the classic Chinese animation film ‘The Nine-Coloured Deer’, which is based on a Dunhuang mural, as the main subject, and analyse and extend it through a desktop study. The essay is based on three core points: the outer artistic representation, the inner cultural core, and the future development of the subject of analysis. These are: the inheritance and innovation of the fresco modeling art by the Nine-Coloured Deer; The unique oriental flavour of the religious image of the deer in the comparative perspective of East and West; In the midst of the digitalisation and consumerism boom the ‘Nine-Coloured Deer’ has broken away from the traditional fresco entity to become a visual symbol that is rapidly spreading and circulating in the economic and cultural spheres after the halo has faded.

Keywords: Dunhuang Frescoes · Plastic Art · Digital Transmission

1 Introduction

As a jewel in the history of Chinese art, the Dunhuang frescoes have profoundly influenced the creation of other art disciplines, not least Chinese-inspired animation. In its early stages, Chinese-inspired animation was already aware of the need to ‘draw on the elements of Dunhuang murals’, not only by incorporating flying celestial beings, animals, musical instruments and decorative motifs from the murals into animation, but also by bringing episodes of ‘The Deer King’s Life’ and ‘The Clip Saves the Deer’ to the big screen, resulting in such popular works as ‘The Nine Coloured Deer’.

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In the 21st century, after the failure of 3D transformation, the failure of the subject matter and the onslaught of foreign animation, Chinese animation has regained its springtime focus on traditional cultural themes, and this has led to the study of the redesign of Dunhuang fresco elements coming back to the forefront of animators' minds. This paper explores the influence of Dunhuang frescoes on national animation through a desktop study of the Chinese-style animation *The Nine-Coloured Deer*, from the plastic art to the cultural core, and how, under the influence of digitalisation, traditional art entities become visual symbols that gain value under the torrent of consumerism. This analysis could play an indispensable role in revitalising the preservation of Dunhuang's traditional frescoes and the revival of China's animation industry.

2 Appreciation of Plastic Arts and Redesign of Animation

The animated image and plot of *Nine-Coloured Deer* are based on the fresco 'The Deer King's life' in the middle of the west wall of Cave 257 in Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes. It was drawn in the Northern Wei Dynasty in the form of horizontal scrolls. With flowing lines and gorgeous colour schemes, it tells a Buddhist story about a nine-colour sacred deer. It can be roughly divided into five plots: the sacred deer rescues drowning people; The drowning man gave thanks; The queen asked the king to catch the deer, and the drowning man told him; The king led his army to hunt deer; The deer spoke to the king. The composition of the whole story is advanced from both ends of the picture to the middle, and the climax of the dialogue between the king and the sacred deer is drawn in the center of the picture, creating a novel composition form. Its unique painting method and narrative technique are permeated with rich aesthetic taste, reflecting the cultural characteristics of the fresco art of the Northern Wei Dynasty. It reflects the objective reality of the society at that time and promotes the religious thought of cause and effect of good and evil, which has high aesthetic value. The following will try to analyze the artistic characteristics of 'Nine-Coloured Deer' from three aspects of character modeling, movement presentation, composition aesthetics, and the application path of Dunhuang fresco plastic arts in modern animation.

2.1 Redesign of Character Figure

① Traditional and innovative line drawing

After thousands of years of evolution and development, Dunhuang frescoes have always taken line drawing as the basis of creation, despite the variety of themes and styles. Apsaras, the Buddhist god of music, was introduced into China from ancient India. It is depicted as a wingless deity flying through the air with the aid of clothing and is found in cave paintings from almost all periods at Dunhuang. The apsaras in Dunhuang frescoes are full of grace and rhythm. Moreover, influenced by the 'gossamer drawing' in the outline method of ancient Chinese figure painting, most of them show a dynamic 'S' shape, with a plump abdomen and hips, and make movements such as twisting the waist and pulling out the hips. The main body contour uses solid line, and the fancy pattern uses dashed line, so that the picture 'virtual and real' 'weight', more dynamic.

As a classic work animated with the help of modern media means, the Nine-Coloured Deer draws on the modeling methods and styles of Dunhuang frescoes in terms of characters and sceneries, and its line language is mostly drawn from the features of fresco lines in the Northern Wei Dynasty. Different from the extensive lines in the Northern Liang period, Dunhuang frescoes in the Northern Wei Dynasty were influenced by the painting style of ‘beautiful and clear statues’, with softer and longer lines. Although the Nine-Coloured Deer mostly follows the style of flying apsaras in the Northern Wei Dynasty, it still draws on the Tang Dynasty flying apsaras fresco in some details, especially in the hairstyle and accessories. This makes the rugged skirts and streamers of the Northern Wei Dynasty more ethereal and dreamy. It can be seen that the integration of Dunhuang frescoes of different dynasties and learning from each other is one of the characteristics of Dunhuang frescoes redesign.

When the fresco image is transformed into an animated image, it will be appropriately exaggerated and deformed according to the character characteristics of the characters. However, excessive exaggeration will make the characters lose their original charm, and even cause comical effects. The exaggeration of nine-coloured deer not only conforms to the character design, but also perfectly inherits the ethereal and elegant aesthetic temperament of the apsaras. For example, the fairy in the queen’s dream is a dynamic representation of flying apsaras, but it is more exaggerated than the original version. The curve of the figure is more smooth and graceful, and the dress band is more elegant, which greatly shows the fairy spirit of the character. And mortal women’s image in the palace is borrowed from the ‘Jiyue Performers in Heaven’ figure, but compared to the apsaras, the curve of the body and dress luxuriant degree is fairly, is only the details of the line processing, will be human with the image of fairy significantly distinguish, but the fairy and a mortal retain their unique aesthetic role. It can be seen that proper exaggeration is also one of the characteristics of Dunhuang fresco redesign.

② Subtle and symbolic colour palette

In terms of colour language, “Nine-Coloured Deer” selects the common colours such as stone green, stone blue and white in Dunhuang frescoes of the Northern Wei Dynasty, presenting a fresco-like texture. In the background design, the red earth colour is used to show the earth after the melting of snow and ice in spring, which is also borrowed from the characteristics of the Northern Wei Dynasty frescoes with the red earth background. From the beginning of the Northern Wei Dynasty, the white background of Dunhuang frescoes in the previous dynasties changed to earth red background, which can produce a bright effect in the dark caves.

The colour of “Nine-Coloured Deer” also follows the characteristics of random colour in Buddhist art, and the colour is conformal. The combination of subjective and objective colours highlights the primary and secondary while maintaining the aesthetic feeling of the picture.

The colour collocation of animation has strong symbolic characteristics. In the image colour of the main character nine-coloured deer, the animation uses the same white as the fresco. In the performance of the nine-coloured deer residence, it is the ancient trees highlight its immortality and mystery. The designer Mr. Feng Jiannan changed the colour of the tree trunk from olive green to white consistent with the nine-coloured deer, which is very bright and dazzling against the overall background of earth red. In the animation,

the drowning victim representing the 'evil' side is also visualized on the basis of the original fresco. When the snake catcher first appeared, his dark skin, fast-moving eyes, and sneaky movements all hinted at the character's state of mind. Especially when he saw the notice that the emperor offered a reward to capture the nine-coloured deer, his skin turned from brown to gray, indicating the evil thoughts rising in his heart and the evil consequences of treachery behind with colour language. This is in sharp contrast to the white deer, which enables the audience to more clearly understand the confrontation between goodness and ugliness.

2.2 Redesign of Movement Presentation

① The specificity of Dunhuang frescoes

There is always a difficult way to reconcile the static frescoes with the dynamic animations. These differences are due to the fact that they belong to two completely different ways of conveying movement in art, which leads to the differences in the creative process. The production process of traditional animation is 'static to dynamic', that is, through the retention of human visual cells, the continuous rapid projection of pictures, so as to give people an illusion of moving. However, Dunhuang frescoes are very special, which is characterized by 'static copying movement'. The Dunhuang frescoes are forward-looking in the shooting of later animation pictures, capturing the most representative poses in the whole movement process, combined with the extreme figure curve of 'S' shape and difficult soft dance, combined with the expression of the characters, giving the audience a continuous impact from the original vision to the deep imagination.

② The potential temporality contained in the plane

As a two-dimensional plane, Dunhuang frescoes contain a potential time line. As mentioned above, Dunhuang frescoes select the most representative or connecting movements and expressions to imply dynamic feelings. Both painting and video are artistic recreations of real life. As the propaganda tool of Buddhism, Dunhuang frescoes played the propaganda and indoctrination role of today's mass media at that time. Because of the progress OF animation technology, we should not ignore the artistic quality of Dunhuang FRESco itself, which is changed from static to dynamic. Instead, we should strengthen this obvious characteristic which is different from the West, so that the recreation of Dunhuang fresco in animation can continue the consistent Oriental aesthetics. And 'Nine-Coloured deer' is a good interpretation of this point. As the earliest horizontal scroll comic strip of the Northern Wei Dynasty, the 'The Deer King's life' cleverly puts the thrilling climax in the most prominent position, which attracts the attention and arouses the interest of the viewer at the same time, and creates dynamic communication between the static fresco and the viewer. This process completes the unique montage function of animation.

③ Significant differences from Western animated thinking

Dunhuang frescoes are traditional ancient Chinese painting art, while animation originated from the West in the 19th century. Therefore, Chinese animators had to copy the western deconstruction mode of thinking and action at the beginning of learning animation, which caused great difficulties in the integration of the two. First of all, the original painting design in the West (such as Disney) emphasizes three-dimensional thinking,

the perspective of three-dimensional geometry and the planning of its movement route, together with the lighthearted and funny plot and the extremely exaggerated action performance of characters. Such a combination has almost become the learning template for all cartoon artists.

Dunhuang, on the other hand, is plane thinking, which is obviously different from Disney's three-dimensional thinking. It relies on lines rather than light and shadow to interpret the sense of movement: from the clouds and streamers of decorative patterns, to the movements of figures – talking monks, strumming musicians... A large number of movement elements in the transfer of dynamic while retaining the Oriental quiet and elegant aesthetic. It can be seen that the distinct rhythms of the two painting styles serve the context of their respective subjects.

2.3 Redesign of Composition Aesthetics

① Key design features and application in animation

Symmetrical composition: Symmetry is the most commonly used design of human beings. Although this kind of design is most in line with the public aesthetic, it is hard to avoid visual fatigue due to its rigid structure. This requires the designer to break the balance of the space, in order to make the picture smart and lively. With the fusion of two artistic techniques 'seeking asymmetry in symmetry' realm. A close look at the decorative patterns of Dunhuang frescoes shows that most of them are symmetrical, but there are a few details that break the balance. Centering on the Buddha, the poses and decorative patterns of the left and right Bodhisattvas are different. This ingenious composition method not only maintains the overall aesthetic feeling, but also creates a sense of rhythm in the picture.

Continuous, long volume composition: similar to modern comic strips, relatively complete narrative of the plot of the story. This requires the order to be rigorous, area contrast to be obvious, so as to highlight the primary and secondary.

Multi-view distributed composition: This belongs to the innovation category of Dunhuang frescoes in Tang Dynasty. Dunhuang frescoes are religious paintings with strong subjectivity and weak objective narrative ability. Multi-viewpoint distributed composition is derived from this feature. It breaks the restriction of one viewpoint and gathers the things seen in multiple pilots together. This multi-view composition can visualize time and space, and you can feel everything in the world from the first perspective, and feel space and time with your own emotional rhythm.

② The setting of white space

On the design of composition, the nine-coloured deer cleverly used the white space. The composition of frescoes needs to explain the relationship between the subject and the environment, which needs the help of natural scenery, buildings and other objects. In traditional Chinese paintings, the palace where the emperor lives should be a complex and beautiful image, but it is sketched by a few strokes in the frescoes and does not occupy too many pictures. The decoration of the palace was also simplified in the animation.

The way the river is represented, it cuts up the picture of different plots. This should be the creator's intention to avoid distracting the guests. From the perspective of visual art, the trend changes of all objects outside the main body in the picture will focus the

audience's eyes on the main body of the sacred deer, thus forming the visual center point, highlighting the key image of the story, so that the audience can understand the story plot more intuitively.

3 The Cultural Core Behind the Animation

Film art because of its wide spread, the audience is more complex and diverse. This requires the film creators to analyze the original material in a more comprehensive and in-depth way, so that the film can meet the spiritual needs of the society while integrating literature, painting and other art forms, and finally be presented on the screen in a way that is popular with the public, such as audio-visual audio table, so as to provide audiences with spiritual aesthetic and emotional experience while realizing the entertainment function. As an animation work of special significance in the history of Chinese animation, *Nine-Coloured deer* not only realizes the redesign of Dunhuang frescoes in plastic arts, but also has extremely special innovative value in the spiritual level. The cultural core behind *Nine-Colour deer*, an excellent national style animation work, is presented from two aspects: reinvention of content and heterogeneity of meaning.

3.1 'Religious Implications, Localised Forms'-The Re-creation of Content

'The Deer King's life' is one of the most famous of 547 Buddhist stories in the *Bunshen Sutra*, a Buddhist sutra based on *Bunshen's* stories. The original story of the nine-coloured deer sacrificing himself to save others was recorded in the third volume of *Tazheng Zang*. According to the story, it was drawn as the *Deer King Picture*. After being introduced to the Central Plains, it was reproduced in the form of frescoes in the *Mogao Grottoes* and other areas. The frescoes vividly recreate the plot, emphasizing the causality theory advocated by Indian Buddhism in the original work, and giving full play to its original religious function. And any foreign culture will carry on the localization transformation, so as to better adapt to the national conditions, play the role of education. Compared with the original, *dunhuang* frescoes in the figure of emperor's this life 'was a fusion of native Indian Buddhism and Confucianism, it will emphasize' nothingness "originally buddhist story gives the Confucian ethics of care, 'the traditional abstract ontology of Buddhism and the heart of Chinese Confucian doctrine together, as a result, it is the traditional abstract ontology of mind, the ethics of Buddhism'. And the nine coloured deer as many *dunhuang* enlightenment, not only inherited the *sui* and *tang* dynasties *mogao grottoes* 'Buddha body Confucianism heart' characteristics, especially in the intact plot at the same time, the jump out the limitations of the buddhist religious theme of *Bunshen* story, in the continuation of religion which is based on the fusion of culture system, in the form of fable fairy tale of the characterization of act as teenagers know the means and tools of *dunhuang*, At the same time, it eulogizes the Chinese excellent moral concepts in line with social values, such as honesty as beauty, gratitude and gratitude, and has far-reaching educational significance.

3.2 'Different from Disney, Unique Oriental Core'-The Heterogeneity of Meaning

The same deer as the main character of the animation, full of Oriental charm nine-coloured deer is easy to compare with the Disney classic animation 'Bambi'. Both of them show their respective colours of the two different cultures in narrative level and moral concept. In Kong Chaopeng's essay 'Conflict of Ethics and Salute to Life: A Comparison of the Chinese Cartoon "The Nine-Coloured Deer" and the American Cartoon "Bambi"', he has also argued the similarities and differences between the two cartoons, which also feature deer, in terms of storytelling and presentation of values. It also discusses the distinctive characteristics of each of the two art forms [1].

First of all, in the narrative level, 'Nine-Coloured Deer' is about a cause and effect of the event, from the deer king to the snake catcher to the snake catcher to see money, to the final retribution, the whole story is linked, complete plot and strong story. 'Bambi', on the other hand, is a narrative method similar to the character record. It mainly tells the growth experience of Bambi, but does not describe one thing in detail. It mainly shows the unforgettable experience in the protagonist's life. The fundamental reason for the difference in narrative modes is the difference in purpose. The former aims to explain the truth and convey values, while the latter focuses on shaping the image of the protagonist and showing the beauty of life.

The second difference is one of values. As mentioned earlier, the Nine-Coloured Deer is a Buddhist tale with Confucian overtones, and at its heart is a discussion of ethical conflicts in human society, whereas the animal image of the deer king is merely an externalisation of artistic distortion. As a widely used imagery, the deer is loved by all peoples for its spiritual, athletic and docile nature. The use of the deer as a substitute for man is more subtle than the use of a human figure in a straightforward interpretation of the story, and is in keeping with the 'psychological distance of art'. The Nine-Coloured Deer is a symbol of truth, goodness and beauty, a non-human divine creature that relies on a predestined power beyond man's own to punish evil and promote good, and is the embodiment of natural order. And karma was originally intended to be a force to bind the heart, not to bind the reality of human behaviour. And if the Nine-Coloured Deer is replaced by some figurative human deity, the audience's reverence for heaven and natural order will unconsciously be transformed into obedience to social authority, which in turn is a realistic force that emphasises oppression and obedience as opposed to the naturalness of restraining human nature, and too much didacticism will not only destroy the hazy beauty created by the sense of distance, but also result in "Too much didacticism would not only spoil the hazy beauty created by the distance, but would also result in the 'inversion of Buddhism and Confucianism', and karma would lose its original religious meaning. It is therefore necessary to use the deer as a substitute for man. The Nine-Coloured Deer is a representation of the animal story, but in fact it is an exploration of the ethical value of 'good and evil being rewarded' in human society.

Bambi, on the other hand, is about the value of life. Birth, growth, reproduction and death are all part of the inevitable journey of life in the natural world. The actions of the main characters and the storyline follow the laws of nature. The film portrays the animals in their true state of life, with little human judgement, and even the destruction of nature by humans is not overplayed, the focus is on the animals throughout, reflecting the greatness of life and the generosity of nature.

Both the eastern Deer King and the western Bambi show the deeper interpretation of the deer in their respective cultures: the Deer King shows a compassionate, loving motherhood, a representative of the gentle and generous eastern culture. Bambi, on the other hand, represents the brave, adventurous Western culture. The maternal nature of the Eastern culture leads to the deeper values of the film as a social philosophy that regulates human morality, while the paternal nature of the Western culture reflects the natural concept of survival of the fittest in the natural world. The former seeks the ‘goodness’ celebrated in Confucianism and the Buddhist ‘reincarnation of cause and effect’, while the latter reveres the “truth” of science and seeks the joy of life in the unshakeable laws of nature. The two deer reflect the essence of the East and the West. The two deer reflect the different orientations of Eastern and Western cultures in terms of their ultimate purpose.

The success of the Nine-Coloured Deer also marks the departure of Chinese-style animation from the traditional Disney cultural context and the creation of a unique oriental cultural core.

4 Digital Transformation and Future Outlook

At a time when information is highly digitised and cyber survival is a hot topic of conversation, a large number of visual elements are constantly filling our lives. With the impact of the digital revolution, people’s viewing and experience in an anthropomorphic world has become part of everyday life and aspirational pursuits. In line with the development of the visual consumer economy, Dunhuang’s cave culture has become the focus of national attention, and the Dunhuang Mogao Caves have become a major town for the digital transformation of cultural tourism and cultural innovation. But behind the scenes, we see the loss of the ancient caves and frescoes as cultural artefacts and the reinvention of the ‘Aura’ as a contemporary cultural consumer product.

‘Aura’ is an important concept in Benjamin’s philosophy of art. In Benjamin’s definition, ‘Aura’ is a distance that is inaccessible in both space and time, yet reacts invisibly with your surroundings, absorbing and caring for each other [2]. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin constructs the Aura as an important indicator of the unique ‘authenticity’ of artworks, with an irreplaceable, ritualistic significance. In the timeline of art development, ‘Aura’ emerged from the ritual function of witchcraft in pre-modern artworks, to the displacement of ‘Aura’ emanating from religious theology in Renaissance artworks into the realm of art theology [3]; and then in the age of industrial reproduction, the impact of mass consumer culture caused artworks to slip off the pedestal and the ‘Aura’ to fade, becoming part of mass culture.

Thus, we take the story of the ‘The Deer King’s life’ as an example, which has gone from the frescoed artefacts of Cave 257 in the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang to the “Nine Coloured Deer” animation of the 1980s and the Dunhuang-inspired or themed national costumes, animation and variety shows of recent years, which testify to the ‘Aura’. In other words, the Dunhuang Grottoes have gone from being a place of pilgrimage with religious significance that had to be worshipped, to a ‘consumer symbol’ whose actual function is no longer a religious ritual, but rather a vehicle and medium for cultural transmission. In this, we can see the transition of the ‘beauty’ of artworks from religious

frescoes to popular culture, from ‘worship value’ to ‘aesthetic value’. It is important to note, however, that in the case of religious frescoes, the ‘beauty’ of the artwork has moved away from ‘worship value’ to ‘aesthetic value’.

However, it is important to note that, given the high mobility of the consumer market, the quality and production of Dunhuang-themed cultural creations and derivative works is uneven, and driven by accelerism, it will be difficult to find a benchmark in the market for such exquisite animation as *The Nine-Coloured Deer*. At the same time, in the absence of a Dunhuang Mogao caves art entity, there has been a proliferation of unofficial ‘national’ cultural marketing products that rely on Dunhuang culture for attention, creating chaos in the market. This is why official access, authorisation and gate-keeping, such as by the Dunhuang Academy, is so important today.

In addition to the development of traditional cultural creation, the rise of the ‘cultural and museum fever’ and ‘digital collections’ shows another future path for cultural creation, which has not only given rise to the digital transformation of traditional museums and scenic spots, but is also closely linked to the parent cultural and museum industry, with official It is also closely linked to its parent industry, with official support and integration adding to the professionalism. For example, the *Dunhuang Fresco Painting Story of the Nine-Coloured Deer* virtual digital collection, also derived from the story of the Deer King, is a digital collection co-published by the Dunhuang Art Museum. This virtual digital collection is both artistic and collectible, with its artistic value derived from the digital welcome restoration techniques of traditional frescoes and the secondary artistry of great artisans, and its collectible value in that it is unique and uniquely coded, and can be collected or traded for circulation. In this, we see the regeneration of the ‘Aura’, which at the moment is not an artistic theology of worship, but rather a form of private consumer appropriation in the age of the commodity economy.

As Baudrillard says: ‘Myth is a fantastical idea because it is good at appropriating change and history, and in terms of people’s consumption activities, it is also the appropriation of history and entities in the symbols of change’ [4]. Thus we see the transformation of traditional fresco from religious art to popular culture in the context of historical development and change. In the fading and reconstruction of the halo, we have constructed a “myth” with economic consumption, which distinguishes itself from religious mythology and descends on culture in the form of a commodity, and it is in this consumption that we complete the cycle of cultural reproduction, which is inevitably and completely based on the economic system.

5 Conclusion

In this article, the three levels of the animation ‘*The Nine-Coloured Deer*’ have been developed. In the first stage, we describe in detail how the animated film ‘*The Nine-Coloured Deer*’ inherits the ancient fresco culture of the East, and analyse in artistic detail how the animation accomplishes its homage to the ancient frescoes. In the second stage, through the metaphor of the “deer” in the East and the West, we get a glimpse of the cultural differences between the East and the West: the East advocates a religious philosophy of compassion and love in the world, while the West expresses a naturalistic view of the race of nature, full of unknown adventures. In the third stage, as a result of

the impact of the current consumer market, we find the ‘Nine-Coloured Deer’ emerging as a visual symbol, gradually detached from the Mogao caves as a frescoed entity and reduced to a visual consumer product, already circulating in a cycle of economic and cultural intersection.

Annotation

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