



Research on integration based on Dunhuang culture

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Abstract. As the vital node city in the ancient Silk Road, Dunhuang has long been the window for cultural exchange. Over centuries, the integration and evolution of cultures here have enriched the history of human civilization. Based on existing literature, Dunhuang was profoundly influenced by Central Plain culture and Western cultures particularly in calligraphy, painting, sculpture, and architecture, thanks to its position. These artistic works that are the visualization of the unique cultural integration that occurred once in Dunhuang have absorbed Chinese Han-Tang culture and incorporated the characteristics of Indian, Hellenic, and Islamic cultures to constitute Dunhuang culture.

Keywords: Dunhuang; Culture; Integration.

1 Introduction

Dunhuang, as one of the significant cities alongside the ancient Silk Road, is located in the western area of Gansu Province, China. As archaeologists and historians state, this city has come to a period of cultural prosperity as far back as the 4th century BC particularly since Buddhism was introduced, which mingled with Han Culture to jointly lay a foundation for the subsequent Dunhuang culture. In the 2nd century BC, the emperor of the Han Dynasty announced the establishment of Dunhuang County, making it a site of cultural exchange between the peripheral vassal states and the Western Regions, also called Xiyu which refers to the west of the Yumen and Yang Passes. From the 6th to 8th century, the intensified interactions between China and the Western Regions enabled Dunhuang to absorb bountiful exotic cultural elements, shrouding the city with a fascinating veil of exotica. Since the 9th century, the cultural mixture here has become more comprehensive for incorporating Chinese characteristics into a new form — Dunhuang culture. Ji Xianlin noted once, “Dunhuang culture is one of a kind among the world’s four majestic cultural systems. It stemmed from the time-honored Central Plain culture and is a cultural phenomenon exclusively belonging to China.” It is the meeting, integration, and communication of Chinese and exotic cultures in Dunhuang, one may say.^[1]

2 Cultures that Contribute to Dunhuang Culture

2.1 Han-Tang Culture

China, as one of the four great ancient civilizations, had a significant influence on Dunhuang culture [2-3]. During the Han and Tang dynasties, in particular, the bustling, prosperous ancient Silk Road was infusing Central Plain Culture into Dunhuang. As a result, Dunhuang culture was largely impacted by calligraphy, painting, music, clothing, and other aesthetic fields for implying vibrant features of Han-Tang culture.

In the 2nd century BC, the emperor of the Han Dynasty set up Dunhuang County, followed by the introduction of the system of prefectures and counties, land system, and imperial examination system. Dunhuang shared a similar political and social system with the Central Plain area in this period, and one crucial instance is that Buddhism, the official religion then, was introduced to Dunhuang via the ancient Silk Road. Evidence shows that the calligraphies, paintings, sculptures, and architecture from this period possess the aesthetic elements of Central Plain culture. As calligraphy schools in the Central Plain area, like the Regular Script of Jin and the Tablet Inscription of Wei, influenced Dunhuang calligraphy, cursive script and clerical script from the Northern and Southern Dynasties can also be found in Dunhuang literature [4]. In addition, it is proven that Dunhuang frescoes were painted partly with Han-Tang techniques, including flying apsaras and traditional genre painting found in Mogao Grottoes, beneath which it is the perfect inheritance of the essence of Han-Tang art of painting. Similarly, the statues in Dunhuang caves, like Longmen Grottoes and Mogao Grottoes, are based on Han people, and the carving technique applied is the inheritance and development of Han-Tang sculpture. Also, elements of Han-Tang culture can be found in Dunhuang ancient books, including Lushan Yao, a mature scenic poem, and Saishang Qu.

In the 45th Mogao cave, there are masterpieces from the time when Emperors Gaozong and Zhongzong of Tang were on the throne [5], such as flying apsaras, Buddhas and Buddhists, Dunhuang musicians, and banquets, and they are important examples of the profound integration between Han-Tang culture and Dunhuang culture. While the Han-Tang period is considered the golden age of Chinese literature, it significantly impacted Dunhuang thoughts and culture for Buddhist teachings, including some classical works (e.g., Diamond Sutra and Lotus Sutra) from Central Plain that have been translated, known as Pratyekabuddha. The interactions between Buddhist culture, Han-Tang culture, and various religious beliefs were profound and sophisticated, rendering Dunhuang culture unique and unparalleled.

2.2 Western Cultures

Ancient Indian, Persian, and Hellenic cultures were significant to Dunhuang culture in addition to Chinese culture. Thanks to the ancient Silk Road, long-standing Western religions like Buddhism and Zoroastrianism were transmitted to Dunhuang to be part of its culture in religious architecture and sculpture.

In the 6th century BC, ancient India suffered sharp conflicts, and Buddhism emerged as the times required. In 270 BC, Asoka ascended the throne of the Maurya Dynasty. In

235 BC, he dispatched a team of Buddhist monks to preach the religion in Bactria and Gandhara, planting the seed of Buddhism in this area. Later in 195 BC, Gandhara was conquered by the Greek. Until the Kushan Empire in the 1st century AD, Gandhara statues with Hellenic characteristics emerged in this area. Hence, it is safe to say that the Gandhara statue attests to the integration between Indian and Hellenic civilizations. Gandharan art was dominated by Buddha statuary with Hellenic characteristics — calm solemn facial expressions, stark European characteristics (e.g., prominent nose, big eye, curved forehead, naturally curly hair, and in most cases, wild topknot and beard), Hellenic robe with bared right shoulder, distinctive figure (e.g., tall, proportional, well-boned, and muscular). It was a unique and miraculous aesthetic form.

Historians believe that Gandhara had a profound influence on the development of Dunhuang culture. Specifically, Gandharan art emerged with the foundation of the Kushan Empire and became mature between the end of the 1st century and the middle of the 2nd century AD. After that, it took a long time to develop to reach its zenith and be highly influential, which contributed to its propagation to Dunhuang. On the other hand, the Western Han Dynasty, as part of Central Plain culture, was in its prime as well. It was unnecessary for Han to embrace any foreign civilizations as a supplement. The situation, however, changed until the Eastern Han Dynasty, especially its later stage. The Central Plain area was in the flames of the wars, and the people were feeling so insipid and tired that they turned to Gandhara culture on the most challenging days. The ancient Silk Road's opening, of course, provided a significantly favorable condition for this process. The introduction of Gandhara culture impacted Central Plain culture in many ways. Politically, Buddhism helped defend emperorship to govern the people although Buddhists themselves did not worship the emperor; socially, the people living in misery resonated with the spirit of charity of Buddhism, which allowed its wild spread. The influences of Buddhism were so significant that the enormously splendid grotto art in China was full of Buddhist elements. In Dunhuang, the original Buddhist statues with stark Gandhara characteristics incorporated more Chinese characteristics after years of transformation. Importantly, one may notice Hellenic characteristics in Dunhuang Buddhist statues, such as the topknot and the spiral pattern on the clothing.

3 Features of Dunhuang Culture

3.1 Religion

Dunhuang, as one of the most important sites where Buddhism was worshiped, possesses the Mogao Grottoes, the world-famous treasury of Buddhist art. In 67 AD, when Emperor Ming of Han was on the throne, Buddhism was officially introduced to China. Despite the impact of the religion's introduction on Confucianism, Confucianism remained its predominance in Central Plain. In turn, Buddhism was impacted by Confucianism to evolve into a religion with local characteristics. Dunhuang philosophy of life is the integration of Chinese traditional Confucian thoughts and the exotic Buddhist thought.^[6] As mentioned above, Hellenic Gandhara statues were designed to be apparently European for prominent noses and big eyes. In Buddhist statues, one may

read the dilution of European features, the emphasis on Han people in Central Plain, and the visualization of benevolence, etiquette, gentleness, kindness, and humility advocated by the Confucian school. Not only did the European facial features fade away, but also the feminine elements in Confucianism made Bodhisattva a popular figure. With Dunhuang as the pivot, Buddhist mythologies have widely propagated in multiple forms, including frescos and sculptures, in which there are Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese, and other textual materials that are invaluable references for the history of Buddhism.

3.2 Art of Painting

Undoubtedly, Dunhuang frescos are the treasure of this culture. These frescos feature a diverse array of content, encompassing not only religious themes but also various facets of ancient social life, including astronomy, geography, plants, and animals. These masterpieces are of great historical, aesthetic, and scientific value. In general, three major themes can be identified: Buddhist doctrine, classical story, and social life. Buddhist doctrine and classical stories make up the majority, including Jataka tales, biographies of Buddha, and Bodhisattva statues. Those concerning social life mainly describe charity activities and ordinary secular people. For instance, a study analyzes the cultural reconstruction of Dunhuang culture based on Dunhuang manuscripts.^[7] Dunhuang art of painting is the collection of features of the ages. From the Sixteen Kingdoms periods to the Five Dynasties, Dunhuang painting emulated the ancient works, followed Central Plain and Song-Tang skills, and eventually, turned to independent creation, fully presenting the historical and cultural features of each period. Laying stress on the application of lines, Flying Apsaras, as the typical type of Dunhuang fresco, “is a unique transcultural artistic symbol with multiple artistic implications.”^[8] Early Dunhuang paintings were influenced by the artistic styles of the Central Plain and the Western Regions, with line drawing as the primary means of expression. Then, more and more excellent techniques of brushwork emerged to realize different styles of line expression. Also, Dunhuang paintings are outstanding decorations. The massive and brilliant application of multiple motifs, patterns and colors render these works visually impactful and decorative.

Dunhuang art of painting reflects the fusion of Central Plain and Western cultures. Located at the crossroads of the ancient Silk Road, Dunhuang, as well as its art of painting, was significantly influenced by the Central Plain and the Western Regions, including India. Thus, a new artistic style with unique regional characteristics formed. As shown in Figure 1, in Mogao Grottoes, also known as the Thousand-Buddha Cave, Cave 285 has a side length of the niche that features Han, Indian, and Sogdian Buddhist sculpture. In addition, from the colored eaves boards, one may see the integration of different regional artistic styles, such as Chotscho, Turpan, and Silla. In Cave 220, the Xiliang Buddha reveals the integration between the Dunhuang art of painting and the Western Liang (also called Xiliang) Kingdom, especially the lines of the Buddha’s clothing and facial features. In Cave 61, one of the Western Thousand Buddha Caves, statues of Dharmapala (protector of dharma) are the typical illustration of Dunhuang

painting style during the Tang Dynasty. They are of excellent ornamental and aesthetic value for their vivid facial expressions and intricate design.



Fig. 1. Mogao Grottoes Cave 285, Western Wei Dynasty

4 Conclusion

Dunhuang Feitian is a complex of Indian culture, Buddhist culture, Western culture, and Central Plains culture.^[9] Dunhuang culture is the result of the cultural exchange and integration between Han-Tang culture and Western cultures in the ancient Silk Road. It is diverse and comprehensive. Such cultural integration is an essential part of the history of human civilization and demonstrates the incredible power of cultural exchange and mutual understanding, on which Ji Xianlin made a precise description, “There are only four cultures with a long history, a vast territory and an independent system on Earth that have profound influences: China, India, Greece, and Islam; no more. Among them, only Dunhuang in China is the point where the four cultures converged; no more.” Various distinctive cultures interacted and integrated on this ancient land we call Xiyu or the Western Regions. Since the opening of the ancient Silk Road, Indian Buddhism, Hellenic sculpture of Gandhara, Islamic culture, and Chinese culture have merged to create this grand miracle - Dunhuang.

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