



Bodhisattva's Crown with Birds Holding Ribbons in Dunhuang Caves

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Abstract. The Bodhisattva's crown, with birds holding ribbons in their beaks, was popular in Dunhuang caves' murals from the 5th to 7th centuries. It originated from Persian Sasanian, appeared in the murals of Qiuci Caves in Xinjiang during the 4th and 5th centuries, and spread to Dunhuang from Qiuci in the middle of the 5th century. It was in the mid-5th century that China gained control of the region from the Hexi Corridor to the Qiuci Kingdom, and Buddhism, which had been suppressed by Emperor Daowu of the Northern Wei Dynasty, was once again revived in China. The spreading of the crown is mainly in the form of images rather than entities. Compared with Qiuci, Bodhisattva's Crown with Birds holding ribbons in its beak in Dunhuang Caves is more casual in details and usage scenarios, indicating that it had transformed to pure decoration due to the loss of original cultural background during the propagation.

Keywords: Dunhuang Caves, Qiuci Caves, Crown with Bird holding Ribbon in its Beak, the Silk Road

1 Introduction

The costumes of murals in Dunhuang Caves have always been a hot topic in the academic field. Unlike ancient literature records, murals can provide much clearer details. Moreover, Dunhuang is an important transit station on the Silk Road, so the costume there reflects the historical facts of the communication between ancient Chinese and Western. The Bodhisattva's crown with birds holding ribbons in their beaks discussed in this article is a good example.

Scholars in the past rarely wrote articles specifically to discuss the Bodhisattva's crown with birds holding ribbons in Dunhuang; instead, they studied it with other crowns together. For example, Zhao Shengliang claimed that Bodhisattva's crown with birds holding ribbons was a variant of the three-faced crown frequently used by Bodhisattvas in Dunhuang grottoes, while Guo Fang regards it as the same type as the crown with bird wings and calls them bird-patterned crown[1-2]. For another example, You Yudan divided the Bodhisattva crown into cylindrical crown, triangular beam crown, circular beam crown and flower crown according to the structure of the

crown, and did not discuss the bodhisattva's crown with bird holding ribbons in its beak separately. Yang Xiaohui separately discussed the three-pearl crown of the Bodhisattva statue of the Northern Dynasty, and Wang Yan divided the bird-held ribbon Bodhisattva crown into the circular jewel crown[3-5]. These studies neither thoroughly examined the images of the bodhisattva's crown with birds holding ribbons nor discussed carefully the basic image details, as well as the usage and spread of the crown.

In fact, in the murals of Dunhuang caves between the 5th and 7th centuries, the Bodhisattva's crown with birds holding ribbons was a very popular and unique style of crown, and it should be investigated separately. As a consequence, this article attempts to collect all the images of Bodhisattva's crown with a bird holding a ribbon in the Dunhuang caves, summarizes their image characteristics, and compares it with the similar crown in Qiuci Caves in Xinjiang.

2 Bodhisattva's Crown with Birds Holding Ribbons in Dunhuang Caves

The relatively clear and definite Bodhisattva's crown with bird-holding ribbon appeared in the murals of Dunhuang Grottoes in the Northern Wei Dynasty and lasted to the Tang dynasty. This style of crown was rarely seen after the Tang dynasty or deformed so severely that it is hard to identify. Thus, the prevalence of such crown in Dunhuang grottoes dates back to approximately the mid-5th century to the early 7th century.

The typical style of the Bodhisattva's crown with bird-holding ribbon during this period is shown in Figure 1. The base of the crown seems to be soft ribbons, which are wrapped around the Bodhisattva's head, and the ribbons are tied into bowknots on both sides of the head. There are streamers or shawls behind the head. There are three disc-shaped ornaments erect in the upper of the crown. The three discs cannot be wholly presented and usually present one or two since bodhisattvas often have their heads turned sideways. A bird extends from the center of the disc, holding ribbon in its beak. The ribbon is usually triangular in shape, sometimes decorated with circles or dots to represent pearls or gemstones. There is often another ribbon connecting the base and the disc in the middle. Moreover, some of these crowns are decorated with bird wings, lotus flowers, and the rising moon (Figure 2).

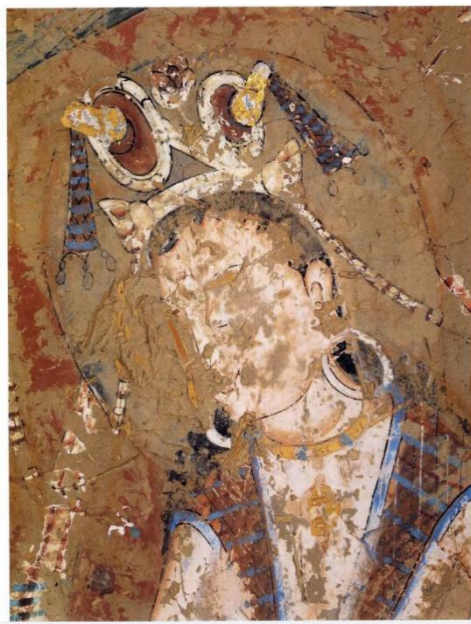


Fig. 1. Bodhisattva, South wall of Dunhuang Mogao Caves 263, Northern Wei Dynasty (picture taken from "The Complete Collection of Chinese Dunhuang Murals" 1, edited by Duan Wenjie, Tianjin People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2006, page 58, Figure 58)



Fig. 2. Bodhisattva, Cave 254, Dunhuang Mogao Caves, Northern Wei Dynasty (picture taken from "Complete Collection of Chinese Dunhuang Murals" 03, page 38, Figure 16)

Although the crown with birds holding ribbons is commonly seen on the heads of bodhisattvas in the murals of Dunhuang grottoes, it is sometimes worn by flying Apsaras, Devas, kings, queens, and even ordinary people in Buddhist stories. The

mural on the south wall of Cave 257 in the Mogao Grottoes of Dunhuang is based on the Sutra of Virtue and Fool, describing a young novice monk who was ordered by his master to go to a believer's house to receive alms. The daughter of the believer fell in love with him, while the novice monk committed suicide in order to observe the Buddhist precepts. The believer's daughter in the mural is wearing a crown with a bird holding a ribbon in its beak. The base of this crown is made of a white ribbon, with a green square in the center representing a green gemstone. The ribbons are tied into bowknots on both sides of the head, and there is a green shawl behind the head. A disc is erected above the base of the crown, and a bird extends from the center of the disk. The bird holds a green triangular ribbon in its beak, and the ribbon is decorated with white dots to represent pearls. Moreover, there is a simple lotus next to the disc (Figure 3).



Fig. 3. The novice commits suicide by observing the precepts. The south wall of Cave 257 of Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes, Northern Wei Dynasty (picture taken from "Complete Collection of Dunhuang Murals in China" 03, page 58, Figure 39)

The costumes depicted in the murals of Dunhuang are typically not fictitious but grounded in real-world attire. Bodhisattvas occupy the second position, just beneath Buddhas, in the Buddhist hierarchy. Hence, the costumes of Bodhisattvas often copy those of the kings and nobles of the real world. However, during the one century when the crown with birds carrying ribbons was prevalent in Dunhuang caves, the wearers of such a crown were mainly figures in Buddhist settings, and the secular figures in the real world depicted in murals did not wear it. Moreover, in the Central Plains region east of Dunhuang, this style of crown is only occasionally seen in Buddhist art, and the wearers are also figures in Buddhist scenes. Thus, it can be inferred that this style of crown did not originate from Dunhuang or further east. By contrast, on the west of Dunhuang, the crown with birds holding ribbons in its beak was once very popular in the Qiuci caves of Xinjiang, which provides important information for this paper's further discussion.

3 Bodhisattva's Crown with Birds Holding Pearls in Qiuci Caves

Qiuci is located on the northern edge of the Tarim Basin, and it is the old site of the ancient Oasis kingdom of Qiuci. The south of this place is Taklamakan, the biggest desert in China, and the north is the Tianshan Mountains. The special geographical conditions allowed Qiuci to become an important stronghold in the Silk Road, and it is also one of the transfer stations for Buddhism and Buddhist art to enter China. Qiuci started to establish Buddhist caves around the 3rd and 4th centuries AD and continued until the Tang Dynasty. Some of the most important Buddhist caves, such as the Kizil Grottoes, Kumutula Grottoes, Senmusaimu Grottoes, etc., were mainly built in this period (4th to 8th centuries). After the 11th century, the area was Islamicized, and the Buddhist grottoes were abandoned and destroyed.

In the murals of Qiuci caves, the crown with birds holding ribbons in its beak is one of the common crown ornaments. Its appearance can be traced back to the earliest batch of caves, such as Kumutula Cave 118 and Cave 92, and the age of the caves is generally believed to be no later than the 5th century and perhaps as early as the 4th century. This style of crown lasted in the Qiuci caves until the 7th century and then gradually disappeared.

The Bodhisattva's crown with a bird holding a ribbon in Qiuci caves is usually as shown in Figure 4. The base of the crown is a bead chain, which is made by pearls and gemstones strung together with ribbons. The ribbons are tied into bows on both sides of the head, and the remaining ribbons fall to the shoulders. There are disc-shaped ornaments erect in the upper of the crown, and the number is usually one to three. There are some differences in details of the discs: some of them seem to be made out of metal; some are decorated with pearls and gems; some are shaped like circular flowers. A bird protrudes from the center of the disk, holding a ribbon in its beak, which is always composed of pearls. There is usually another bead chain connecting the base and the central disc.



Fig. 4. Bodhisattva The dome of the main chamber of Cave 21 in the right area of the Kumutula Grottoes Valley 5th-6th century (picture taken from "Mural Art of Xinjiang, China Volume 4 Kumutula Grottoes", page 15, Figure 13)

The crown with a bird holding a ribbon in its beak is also mainly worn by Bodhisattva in Qiuci caves. It is also occasionally seen on the heads of Vajra, Buddha, and king in

Buddhist stories. Although the royal patrons of Qiuci, including the kings and queens, appear many times in the murals (Figure 5), they do not wear such a crown. Most of the male nobles in the murals are short-haired, with ribbons or hats on their heads, but rarely wearing crowns. They are all dressed in magnificent robes with lapels and narrow sleeves, known as "Hu costumes" in historical documents. In the context of Chinese language from the 5th to the 7th century, "Hu" mostly referred to people from the Western Regions, which roughly covered the area from West Asia to Xinjiang. The "Hu" people are ethnically or culturally deeply influenced by Persia.

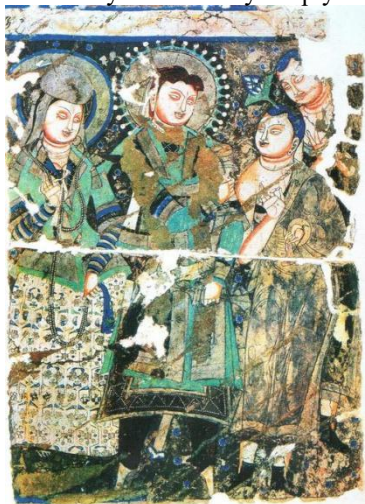


Fig. 5. Statues of King Totika and Queen of Qiuci, front wall of the main chamber of Kizil Cave 205, 7th century (picture taken from "China Xinjiang Mural Art Volume 2 Kizil Grottoes" page 139, Figure 126)

The costumes of the donors in the murals of Qiuci caves basically match the records in Chinese documents. According to the *Weishu*, which records the history of the Northern Wei Dynasty (386–534 AD), the king of Qiuci wears a colored ribbon on his head, and the ribbon falls behind him, sitting on a golden seat shaped like a lion, and other men in Qiuci, just like those in the neighboring Yanqi Kingdom, all cut their hair short[6]. The same record can also be found in the *Suishu* and *Tangshu* about the history of the Sui Dynasty (518-618 AD) and Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD). According to the latter's record, the people of Qiuci, except for the king, all cut their hair short; the king covers his head with brocade and wears a brocade robe and a gold belt, sitting on a lion-shaped golden seat[7]. It indicates that from the 4th to the 10th century, the nobles of Qiuci, represented by the king, mainly decorated their heads with silk and brocade and did not use bird-shaped ribbons or crowns. Thus, the crown with a bird holding a ribbon in its beak in the mural of Qiuci is not an imitation of the real crown ornaments of Qiuci Kingdom.

The combination of crown and bird was once popular in the Sasanian Persians, Hephthalites, and Turks[8-10]. Qiuci was geographically closer to Hephthalites and Turks, but Hephthalites and Turks became powerful in the mid-5th century and the

mid-6th century, respectively, which was later than the appearance of the crown with a bird holding a ribbon in the Qiuci caves. On the contrary, the appearance of bird elements in the Sasanian crown was obviously earlier and can be traced back to the 3rd century. At that time, Sasanian coins were stamped with the king's portrait, and the crown of the portrait had bird wings. On the coins issued during the reign of Hormizd II (303–309 AD), the pattern of a bird holding a pearl ribbon clearly and completely appeared on the king's crown (Figure 6). This pattern is the embodiment of the Zoroastrian god Xvarnah believed in by the Sasanian dynasty. Xvarnah is a god related to good luck and glory, which perches on the crown, indicating the legality and sanctity of the royal power



Fig. 6. Coin of Hormizd II

However, the crown with birds holding ribbons can only be seen in Buddhist scenes in Dunhuang and Qiuci, and it was very rare in the real world. It seems to imply that such a crown was not directly introduced to Dunhuang and Qiuci in physical form under the political influence of Persia or other powerful regimes, or at least the physical form was not the only or even the most important way of spreading. Instead, this kind of crown may disseminate in the form of images with the help of religious art. Therefore, we should not only examine the crowns in the ancient real world in future research but also pay attention to the images of crowns in religious art.

4 The Background of The Crown With Birds Holding Ribbons From Qiuci to Dunhuang

The crowns with birds holding ribbons in the murals of Dunhuang and Qiuci are very similar, especially in the key details, such as the base made of ribbons, the bows on both sides of the head, the discs with a bird protruding from the center, and the ribbons in the bird's beak. It is then safe to assume that such a crown was introduced to Dunhuang from Qiuci around the middle of the 5th century.

Since the opening of the Silk Road from the Han dynasty, the small oasis kingdoms in the Tarim Basin have often been indecisive on whether to seek refuge

with the nomadic regimes in the north or the Central Plains Dynasty. Although the Han Dynasty made great efforts to manage the Western Regions, the Kingdom of Qiuci did not fully submit, and rebellions occurred from time to time. Due to the continuous wars in the Central Plains region from the 3rd to the 5th century, most of the Central Plains dynasties were unable to conquer the West Region and had little connection with Qiuci. The only exception occurred in 382 AD, when the emperor of the Former Qin Dynasty sent Lv Guang to conquer Qiuci and brought the famous monk Kumarajiva to the capital Chang'an. However, the Former Qin Dynasty had already fallen before Lv Guang returned to Chang'an. The situation did not change until the reign of Emperor Taiwu of Northern Wei. In 439, Emperor Taiwu ended the wars and unified northern China, thus controlling the Hexi Corridor leading to the Tarim Basin. In 448 AD, he sent troops to conquer Qiuci; since then, Qiuci has sent envoys and paid tribute to Northern Wei multiple times.

When Emperor Taiwu was in power, he severely exterminated Buddhism. However, when Emperor Wencheng came to the throne in 452, Buddhism was immediately revived. Buddhists across the country fervently made Buddha statues and built grottoes, and many famous Buddhist works, including the Yungang Grottoes, were founded during this period. At the same time, Buddhism had been thriving in Qiuci Kingdom, and the excavation of Qiuci Caves is also getting better. In the murals of the Qiuci caves during this period, the crown with birds holding ribbons in their beaks is the most popular crown for Bodhisattvas. In this kind of situation, the appearance of the crown with birds holding ribbons in its beak in the murals of Dunhuang was the result of the communication of politics, religions, and art between the central plain and Qiuci.

The spreading of such a crown from Qiuci to Dunhuang may also be primarily in the form of images rather than physical objects. Thus, although having the same basic style as the crown in Qiuci murals, some details of the crown in Dunhuang murals are painted much rougher, resulting in the loss of its key image features. For example, the base of the Qiuci crown is a pearl and gemstone chain strung by ribbons, and the ribbon held in the bird's beak is also a pearl chain, while they are all simplified as cloth on the Dunhuang Crown. In the religious art of the ancient Western Regions, pearls and gems were not only the simple decoration but also had special religious significance. The pearl in the bird's beak is the symbol of the God of Xvarnah, and it is a key feature when we identify images. Ancient Dunhuang painters used cloth to replace pearls and gems, indicating that they had probably never seen the crown with birds holding pearl ribbons in the real world and did not know the special significance of the pearls on such a crown.

Some Dunhuang painters tried hard to imitate the detail of the Qiuci picture. In the mural depicting the story of a novice monk's suicide, the girl wears a crown with a bird carrying a ribbon, and there is a green rectangle on the base of the crown, obviously imitating the green gemstone that often appears on the base of the Qiuci crown; the ribbon in the bird's beak is decorated with white dots to imitate the pearl ribbon of the Qiuci crown. However, the painter ignored a key problem: such a crown holds sacred and auspicious significance, making it inappropriate for an ordinary girl to wear it in a tragic story. It indicates that when the crown was introduced to

Dunhuang through Buddhist art, it gradually lost the original cultural significance and transformed into a purely decorative pattern. That's why the use of the crown with birds holding ribbons in Dunhuang is more widespread than in Qiuci.

Integrate lotus, crescent moon, bird wings, and other elements into the crown was also the innovation of the Dunhuang painter. The lotus is the sacred flower of Buddhism, endowed with various meanings such as purity and auspiciousness, and frequently appears in Buddhist art. In Dunhuang murals, lotus flowers of various shapes can often be found on crowns. The appearance of crescent moon and bird wings on the crown is related to the triple-crescent crown and the winged crown, which were prevalent along the Silk Road from the 6th to the 8th century. According to the research of some scholars, the Hephthalites ruled Central Asia during this period, and the triple-crescent crown and the winged crown were popular among Hephthalites, Sogdians, and other "Hu" people. This was also the era when "Hu" people entered China in large numbers. Especially in the Hexi Corridor, where Dunhuang is located, many Hu people gathered and even formed settlements. The Central Plains Dynasty specifically established an official position called "Sabao" to manage these immigrants, and the position was usually held by wealthy and prestigious Hu men. Thus, images of the triple-crescent crown and the winged crown have been repeatedly found in the murals of Dunhuang caves and the tombs of the Hu people who entered China. In Ningxia, where the Hu people gathered at that time, a golden triple-crescent crown was unearthed.[6] In this context, Dunhuang painters were easily influenced.

5 Conclusion

The origin of the crown with birds holding ribbons can be traced back to the early 4th century in Sassanid Persia, where people believed in Zoroastrianism, and such a crown is believed to be related to the Xvarnah of this religion. Due to the strong influence of Persia on the western region along the Silk Road, the crown was accepted by many regimes and religions in Central Asia. In the 4th or 5th century, it began to appear in Buddhist paintings in Qiuci caves. In the mid-5th century, Northern Wei controlled the Hexi Corridor, conquered the Kingdom of Qiuci, and revived Buddhism. As a result, the crown was introduced from Qiuci to Dunhuang. The crown was popular in Qiuci and Dunhuang until the 7th century, and it is usually found on the heads of Buddhist figures represented by Bodhisattvas, while kings, queens, or nobles in the real world do not wear it. Some evidence suggests that the spread of the crown in Qiuci and Dunhuang is mainly through images. Especially in Dunhuang, painters may have never seen the real crown or understood its original religious significance, so they often distort it when painting it.

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