




Internal and External Influences on Shaping Chinese Flying Apsara Images

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Abstract. Apsaras arrived in China with the spread of Indian Buddhist culture and art, eventually transforming into a localized image of flying apsaras in China. Its localization was influenced by a combination of internal and external factors in China, which reflects the integration of different cultures and the change of aesthetic notions in the times. The essay concludes these factors affecting the formation of Chinese flying apsaras imagery. Firstly, the essay explains how the image changed during the spreading process, from its original appearance to the Serindian art style, then to the Central Plains style influenced by the Han culture, and finally to the distinct and unique image. Then, the essay discusses the two major dynasties that critically impacted the development of the image of flying apsaras, the Northern Wei Dynasty and the Tang Dynasty, taking the statues of flying apsaras in the Longmen Grottoes as an example. Finally, the final evidence-based conclusion states that the traditional Chinese culture of music and dance, as well as the traditional Chinese belief in immortals, as the internal factors, significantly influenced the localized image of the flying apsaras. In addition, among the external social environmental factors affecting the localized image of flying apsaras, the political environment of the Northern Wei Dynasty dominated the tendency to sinicize the image of flying apsaras, while the external environmental factors of the Tang Dynasty were complex and diverse.

Keywords: flying apsara, Buddhist art, Chinese art.

1 Introduction

As Buddhism journeyed eastward from India to China, its celestial envoys—the apsaras also crossed the mountains and deserts, gradually remade on Chinese soil. Drawing on the visual and textual evidence preserved in the Longmen Grottoes, this paper examines how the flying apsara (“Feitian”) was transformed from Indian celestial deities into the icon that embodies indigenous Chinese ideals of beauty, movement and transcendence. By situating this metamorphosis within the two critical watershed periods of the Northern Wei (386-534 CE) and the Tang (618-907 CE), the study disentangles the intertwined forces that shaped the sinicized image: the internal logic of China’s music-and-dance tradition, its deep quest for immortality. And the external pressures come from the court-sponsored sinicization policies, southern aesthetic fashions, and Tang cosmopolitanism. The result is a uniquely Chinese

Feitian—wingless, plump, riding clouds and holding local instruments—whose hybrid body testifies to the visual dialogue between Buddhism and native culture.

2 From Apsaras to Flying Apsaras: From India to China

The apsaras came from the two celestial beings of Indian mythology, Gandharva and Kipnara. Gandharva are divine musicians introduced by *The Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom*.^[1] Kipnara are also divine performers, such as singers and dancers. The male Kipnara can sing, and the female can dance, according to *Yiqiejing Yinyi*.^[2] The account in *The White Lotus of the Good Dharma*,^[3] which depicts millions of apsaras playing music and dancing in the void dedicated to the Buddha, proves that the apsaras are plural rather than one. Images of apsaras originating from Gandharva and Kipnara appeared early in Indian Buddhist art because the sutras list these celestial deities as two of the eight Dharmapal that guard the Buddha.

India's earliest statues were from Gandhara. Gandhara's Buddhist statues have a strong sense of Greek sculpture because of the influence of Greek culture (see Fig. 1), and the image of apsara statues inherited the Greek mythological modeling of angels.^[4] As Buddhist art in India continued to evolve in practice, a style of Buddhist art that fully conformed to Indian aesthetic ideals and localized culture emerged, known as the Mathura art, that took shape during the Gupta dynasty (320-540 CE). It is characterized by figurative figures, semi-nude, robust, and voluptuous, with light and close-fitting clothing. Didarganj Yakshi highlights this stylization, which laid down the basic image pattern of the later Indian apsaras.^{[4]27} These apsaras are moderately proportioned, emphasizing the beauty of the body curves, but have a low sense of flight (see Fig. 2). Their styling clearly incorporates localized cultures, as far as the semi-naked image, and probably comes from the sutra.^{[4]12} In India, there are a large number of apsaras images adapted from this model in the sculptures of caves and temples, which can be seen in the Great Stupa of Sanchi, the Bharhut Stupa, the Ajanta Caves, and the Great Shrine of Amaravati.



Fig. 1. Unknown, *Standing Bodhisattva Maitreya (Buddha of the Future)*. ca. 3rd century, Gray schist, 64 1/4 × 21 × 8 in., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/38474



Fig. 2. Unknown, *Celestial Beauty (Apsara)*. 701-800 CE, Buff sandstone, 33 1/4 × 11 1/4 × 6 in., Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, www.artic.edu/artworks/148372/celestial-beauty-apsara

In 65 CE, Buddhist art with Buddhism was imported from India to China through Chinese Turkestan (Xinjiang region).^[5] Thus, the apsaras came to China and gradually became “flying apsaras”. Flying apsaras have a long history in China. The ancient record of flying apsaras refers to “Tianren”, which can be traced back to the Lalitavistara Sutra,^[6] which Dharmaraksha translated during the Western Jin Dynasty (265-317 CE). The earliest Chinese word, *Feitian*, appeared in the Eastern Wei Dynasty in A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luo-Yang in 547 CE.^[7] It refers to Buddhist celestial beings who sing, dance, or hold flower trays or incense burners dedicated to the Buddha. At this time, the image of the flying apsaras had already appeared in China and gradually spread to different regions in China with the development of Buddhist art. A large number of flying apsara images exists widely in China throughout the grottoes and temples at present, such as the Kizil Grottoes in Xinjiang region, the Mogao Grottoes in Gansu province, the Yungang Grottoes in Shanxi province, the Longmen Grottoes in Henan province, the Longxing Temple in Shandong province, and the Dazu Grottoes in Sichuan province.

Early flying apsara representations in China were influenced by Mathura and Gandhara art in India, and they still featured muscular and robust figures and exotic faces, much like Indian apsaras.^[8] In the Kizil Grottoes, murals from the Jin period (266-420 CE), for example, the flying apsaras are primarily embodied as male figures with powerful, indigenous faces, semi-naked torsos, with shoulder scarves, ribbons, and long skirts. Their wings are flying, but their bodies are more stiff and rigid. This kind of image directly influenced the shaping of the flying apsaras in the caves in Dunhuang and contributed to creating the Serindian art style^[9]—flying apsaras that combine Indian, Chinese Turkestan and local cultures. The image of flying apsaras underwent a significant change as the beginning of the sinicization by Han culture from the Central Plains that occurred throughout the Northern and Southern dynasties (420-589 CE).^[10] The proportions of the face and body were slender, the clothing became localized, and the flight seemed lighter, gradually resulting in flying apsaras images referred to as Central Plains style. After the Sui (581-618 CE) and Tang dyn-

asties (618-907 CE), flying apsaras finished sinicization and developed entirely localized features.

This concept undoubtedly refers to their distinct and unique qualities that are different from India.^[11] Most of these flying apsaras hold musical instruments and can fly/ride the cloud pattern despite leaving their wings and feathers. Furthermore, they lose the halo behind the head and appear to be natives, with the majority of them being a Chinese feminine image. The formation of Chinese localized flying apsara images has undergone a long process, in which the Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534 CE) and the Tang Dynasty before the An Shi Rebellion (755 CE) are two essential stages in the localization. They facilitate a better understanding of the shifts in flying apsara imagery.

3 Two Critical Periods: the Northern Wei and the Tang Dynasties

The Longmen Grottoes date back 1500 years. The construction period began when the Northern Wei Dynasty transferred the capital to Luoyang (494 CE) and ended around the time of the Song dynasties. The main large-scale construction activities occurred during the Northern Wei Dynasty and the Tang Dynasty, when the statues accounted for 30% and 60% (respectively) of the total.^[12] Moreover, in terms of construction location, the Longmen Grottoes were built in the Central Plains in Luoyang, which served as the capital of the Northern Wei and Tang dynasties. Therefore, numerous Chinese localized flying apsara statues in the Longmen Grottoes are representative and demonstrate the localized process of flying apsara images.

The Northern Wei Dynasty marks the beginning of the localization of flying apsaras in China under the main impact of Han culture, and the critical representation is the creation of flying apsaras in the Central Plain art style. Around 494 CE, when Emperor Xiaowen of the Northern Wei Dynasty transferred the capital, the image of flying apsaras showed the collision of Han, nomadic, and Serindian cultures. As figure 3 illustrates, their gender is not clearly defined, and they have a halo behind their heads. Their short, powerful torsos, clothing, and halos convey a vigorous embodiment of Serindian art, yet the thick, heavy belt and feeble flying dynamic demonstrate the change. Subsequently, the prevalent Han culture dominated the image styling of flying apsaras, and the Central Plains style flying apsaras emerged during Emperor Xuanwu's rule (483-515 CE) through the end of the Northern Wei Dynasty, such as several stone-carving flying apsara images at the Su Huren niche frieze in the Lotus Cave (see Fig. 4). These artistic images are flying without halos and playing traditional Chinese musical instruments like the *Sheng* and *Yu* in the void. The features of thin and slender figures, long skirts, oversized sleeves, and overlapping flowing ribbons highlight the Han culture's preferences. Nonetheless, Serindian art is reflected in the flaming pattern of ribbons. However, the Central Plains style of flying apsara represents a significant image shift that occurred in the localization of Chinese flying apsaras.

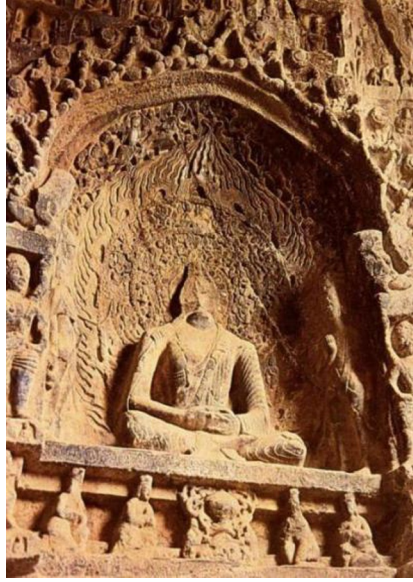


Fig. 3. Unknown, *Biqiu Huicheng niche in Guyang Cave*, 498 CE, Longmen Grottoes, in *Series of Musical Relics in the Central Plains: Henan*, Zhengzhou: Elephant Press, 1996, p. 244, cat. no. 2·6·5a.



Fig. 4. Unknown, *Lintel of Su Huren niche in Longmen Grottoes*. 525 CE, in *Series of Musical Relics in the Central Plains: Henan*, Zhengzhou: Elephant Press, 1996, p. 245, cat. no. 2·6·6a. and 2·6·6b.

Another critical period was in the Tang Dynasty when flying apsaras completely achieved the transition to their localized image and fully expressed the features of Chinese culture. At this time, they appeared the same as the locals, flying over the cloudy pattern without wings or feathers while holding a variety of instruments in different gestures. For instance, the eleven extant female flying apsaras at the halo of Buddha Locana in Fengxian Temple have full-figured bodies and rounded faces that convey vivid secular traits (see Fig. 5). At this point, the image of Chinese localized flying apsaras with indigenous culture and national style was finally formed. It raises the question of what factors shape their image in the localization process.



Fig. 5. Unknown, *Longmen Grottoes, Fengxian Tempel, Vairocana backlight musicianapsara*. early Tang Dynasty, in *Series of Musical Relics in the Central Plains: Henan, Zhengzhou*: Elephant Press, 1996, p. 250, cat. no. 2·6·8c. and 2·6·8d.

4 Internal Factors: Influences of Traditional Culture

In contrast to the characteristics of most apsaras in India, most flying apsaras in China hold instruments that are probably associated with the Chinese cultural tradition of music and dance. It is derived from primitive religious rites and offers sacrifices related to the deep belief and faith of the ancient ancestors.^[13] In ancient times, the ancestors frequently sang, danced and played music to pray for achieving supernatural power or ideal purposes. Based on archaeological findings, the Jiahu Bone Flute, which was made of crane bones between 8,000 and 9,000 years ago, symbolizes the worship of Totemism among the ancestors, who aspired to acquire the ability to communicate with heaven and earth via song, dance and music. In addition, a Neolithic dance-patterned colored pottery basin from more than 5,000 years ago portrays the exemption of pre-history people who celebrated the joy of a good harvest or performed witchcraft rites through song and dance. These are some strong examples of prehistoric ancestors' music and dance practices.

The act of flying apsaras playing music and dancing refers to the concept of *Jiyue*. It has become a common practice since the Han dynasty (202 BC-220 CE) that the

noble and wealthy set special singing and dancing groups of musicians and dancers in their homes.^{[14]1648} According to *The Book of Latter Han*,^{[14]3573} among the hundred officials, there existed a unique position called *Dayu Yue Ling* in charge of playing music and dancing activities, the scope of which included not only national sacrificial ceremonies but also banquets, festivities, and other events. By the time of the Northern Wei Dynasty, song and dance continued to play an essential role in the lives of the wealthy and aristocratic. Song and dance continued to play a significant role in the lives of people during the Northern Wei Dynasty, and many skilled players and dancers seemed to make a living from them; besides, it was customary to arrange female ensembles to play music, sing, and dance at Buddhist temples during the main Buddhist festival of Ramadan.^[15] It may suggest a trend towards a feminized image of the flying apsaras and an inspiration for the creation of the Northern Wei flying apsaras who hold the instruments. The Tang Dynasty primarily maintained the government administration known as Taishang Temple to control diverse music organizations. Among them was not only the institution that mainly managed folk, foreign, and loose music but also one that took part in ceremonial and court events. Emperor Xuanzong (685-762 CE) reformed the institutions that hosted song and dance events during the *Kaiyuan* in the Tang Dynasty, and the institutions grew increasingly specialized and diverse, with tens of thousands of players, singers, and dancers participating. They demonstrate how significant musical and dancing practices were in ancient Chinese society. Music and dance activities have been a Chinese cultural tradition throughout China's long history, so it is not difficult to comprehend how craftsmen in different periods of antiquity associated flying apsaras with it by fusing their understanding of Buddhist sutras and local culture to create a variety of images of flying apsaras accompanied by dances and musical instruments.

On the other hand, the internal core force that directly determines the localized image of flying apsaras comes from the idea of celestial immortals in traditional Chinese culture.^[16] Firstly, long before Buddhism, the consciousness of the flying, feathered immortals had already been developed. They came to China, and the earliest recording of "feathered immortals" is found in Chinese poetry from Qu Yuan^[17] in the Warring States period (480-222 BC). The silk painting (see Fig. 6) from the Warring States period, discovered in 1973 at the Zidanku Tomb No.1 in Changsha, depicts the fantasy of a man riding a dragon in the void, demonstrating how the ancient people imagined themselves ascending to immortality. The ancient Chinese concept of feathered immortals implied that the immortals had feathers or wings. *Fantastic Creatures of the Mountains and Seas: A Chinese Classic*^[18] mentioned the fantasy that the immortals had lengthy heads and faces and feathery bodies. Further, the changing descriptions of feathered immortals in traditional Chinese Taoist culture eventually prompted this image into a localized image of a featherless, wingless flying immortal during cultural communication.



Fig. 6. Unknown. *A Man Riding a Dragon*. Warring States period, silk painting, the Zidanku Tomb No.1 in Changsha, www.hnmuseum.com

Initially, the rise of Taoist culture caused a craze for immortal ascension in the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220 CE). Many theories and images of feathered individuals ascending to immortality appeared, such as the illusion fantasy of a feathered immortal depicted in the pictorial stone (see Fig. 7). Later, Taoism, a Chinese indigenous religion, blended with Buddhist culture in order to satisfy its development needs because of Buddhism's widespread flourishing in the mainland. Thus, the belief of immortality evolved from "becoming immortal in the body" to "the soul ascends to heaven and becomes immortal in the next life," claiming that one's soul does not need to be "feathered." In other words, the act of "feathering" and the presence of feathers or wings are unnecessary to immortalize the soul. Then, a new perspective on immortals is stated in the Taoist canon: "Immortals flying easily without feathers or wings" because "Immortals with feather wings have lost their human essence".^[19] This viewpoint was accepted by the people of the time because the localized images of the flying apsaras in the Central Plains style lost their feathers or wings in the late Northern dynasties. It also explains why the halo behind the head of flying apsaras vanished during the same period. The shifting representation of flying apsaras projects the profound influence of the traditional Taoist culture in China.



Fig. 7. Unknown. *Pictorial Stone of Phoenix, Feathered Immortals, and Entertainment in Eastern Han Dynasty*. Eastern Han Dynasty, stone, the East Yishui County Cultural Relics Management Station, Shandong Province, peopleart.tv/201889_2.shtml

Additionally, the creative flight mode that rides the clouds probably arose from the romantic imagination of the flight of immortals in traditional Chinese culture. Such imaginings are reflected in various literatures, such as the article written by Zhuang Zi, which imagines that immortals should “ride on clouds”,^[20] or the magnificent scene, created by poet Li Bai,^[21] described in his poetry about how the immortals in the clouds traveled by riding the wind like their horses. Furthermore, the flight mode that rides the clouds also appeared in various archaeological physical evidence, manifested through the cloud pattern around the central figure. For example, the Han Dynasty portrait stone (see Fig. 8.) unearthed in Beizhai village, Yinan county, and the Northern Wei period portrait stones unearthed in Xiaohengshan, Yuhang district, both portray the wavy cloud pattern surrounding the immortal figure (see Fig. 9). These bases may allow us to understand why ultimately China’s localized flying gods flew with the help of clouds. These foundations contributed to explaining the image of localized flying apsaras riding the cloud pattern in China.

To summarize, the inherent factor of Chinese traditional culture explains the majority of flying apsaras holding their instruments and the distinctive features of flying apsara images, such as the absence of a halo, wing, or feather, and cloud pattern to fly. As for other concrete changes in the essential sinicized process, it is necessary to consider the external social environment elements.



Fig. 8. Unknown. *Pictorial Stone on the West Wall of the Front Room in Yinan Han Tomb.* Eastern Han Dynasty, stone, Beizhai village, Yinan Beizhai Han Pictorial Stone Tomb Museum, Shandong Province, www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_7408149



Fig. 9. Unknown. *Pictorial Stone of Immortals Riding Dragons on the West Wall of M109 Tomb.* Eastern Han Dynasty, stone, Yuhang district, kaogu.cssn.cn/zwb/xsyj/yjxl/qt/201610/t20161021_3939228.shtml

5 External Factors: Social Environment Factors

In considering the impact of social factors in shaping the localized image of flying apsaras, we focus on two main periods previously mentioned, the Northern Wei Dynasty and the Tang Dynasty, which emphasize two essential changes of flying apsara images in the Chinese localization process.

The significant social environment that shaped the localized image of flying apsaras during the Northern Wei Dynasty was the political promotion of Han culture by Emperor Xiaowen of the Northern Wei Dynasty. The active policy of sinicization significantly shifted the image from being full of Serindian artistic features to that of Han culture. In 484 CE, the Northern Wei regime's political center, Grand Empress Dowager Feng, presided over the start of the sinicization policies. Because of Grand Empress Dowager Feng's severe illness, Emperor Xiaowen led reforms in 490 CE. Based on the Records of the Grand Historian, the emperor transferred the capital to encourage effective sinicization.^[22] He believed that the political center Pingcheng (currently Datong City, Shanxi province) was remote and close to the border, with a fierce folkway that could easily provoke conflicts between the Xianbei and Han people. It would make sinicization policies challenging to implement. Then, all the officials were relocated to Luoyang in 494 CE.^{[22]464-478} After the relocation of the capital, the emperor channeled great effort into the comprehensive sinicized reform of cultural and living aspects of the Xianbei people, such as customs and clothing. Subsequently, substantial effects appeared in Chinese sculpture, especially the appearance of Han cultural traits in Buddhist statues.

The period of the sinicization reform corresponds to the timeline of the beginning of the sinicization of Buddhist art and the sinicized features represented in the statues in the Yungang Grottoes in Pingcheng and the Longmen Grottoes in Luoyang. For instance, in Cave 7, excavated in the middle of the Yungang Grottoes, the halos and postures of flying apsaras show obvious characteristics of Serindian art. Moreover, they wear Xianbei clothes with tight sleeves. In the late period, the images of flying apsaras in Cave 31 are thinner, without a halo, with wide sleeves and flow ribbons reinforcing the flying sense—they highlighted the integration of Xianbei and Han culture (see Fig. 10). As mentioned earlier, the relocation of the capital shifted the focus of grotto construction from Pingcheng to Luoyang. Then, the traits of Serindian art gradually lost, and increasingly, elements reflecting Han culture appeared in the Buddhist statues in the Longmen Grottoes. The slim and thin figures with indigenous Han costumes of flying apsara images eventually evolved due to the development of the Central Plains model of statuary in the late Northern Wei Dynasty. Furthermore, it is notable that this trend toward sinicized features is affected by the sinicized policies and culture from Southern dynasties (420-589 CE), thus demonstrating an apparent Southern aesthetic.



Fig. 10. Comparison of *Flying Apsaras* in Cave 7 and Cave 31, Yungang Grottoes. 471-494 CE, Yungang Grottoes Cultural Relics Depository. *China's Grottoes: The Yungang Grottoes Volume 1*, Beijing: Cultural Relics Press, 1991, pp. 166-172, 206.

The Southern dynasties were a continuation of the Han nationality regime. It was situated in the Jiangnan region, far from the war compared to the north, and became the cultural center of the time. The thin and slender figure was the typical aesthetic of the Southern dynasties. On the one hand, the “Nine-rank system” of official selection in the Southern dynasties encouraged people to pursue virtuous evaluation.^[23] The Nine-rank system intended to weaken the influence of the nobles by selecting officials who were evaluated as possessing good personal qualities from less powerful families and commoners. It was well-intentioned but had the undesirable effect of creating a system in which people linked excellent morality with a slender appearance during that time. For example, in the prevalent literature, the deviation occurred when evaluating the character's quality in *A New Account of the Tales of the World*, compiled by Liu Yiqing of the Southern dynasties. A specific chapter^[24] focused on the appearance and manner of various figures, arguing that it is related to their attributes and even affected their behavior and deeds.

On the other hand, the slender appearance reflected popular Southern dynasties fashion in the upper class. Before the Liang Dynasty in the Southern dynasties (502-557 CE), the aristocrats held cultural dominance.^[25] As the upper class, they disdained manual labor, lived a decadent life, and constantly relished pleasures. The extreme decadence of their lives, combined with vanity pursuits, led to the fashion of the slender and skinny appearance that they regarded as ideal, the so-called “Southern dynasties fashion.” The slim and weak portrayal of Vimalakirti produced by Gu Kaizhi, a painter of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, expressed what people thought was the ideal image of a talented person in Jiangnan under this rising trend.

These factors explain the image shift in the sinicized trend of flying apsaras toward a slender and thin image. However, the image of flying apsaras almost reversed with the completion of the localization process in the Tang Dynasty. Most of them looked like female native images with plump and round figures. The social factors that led to such a significant change in the Tang Dynasty should be considered. In contrast to the political circumstances in the Northern Wei Dynasty that had a decisive influence on the images of flying apsaras, the social environment factors in the Tang Dynasty were likely more complicated.

The Tang Dynasty was one of the most flourishing periods in China, as historian Toynbee states.^[26] It was prosperous, open, and powerful. The favorable social envi-

ronment in the Tang Dynasty benefited from wise political operations, prosperous trade activities and economic development, and the cultural communication of nationalities.

Female consciousness and status had elevated under such a social environment in the Tang Dynasty. It explains many female images in completely localized Chinese flying apsaras. In the documentary *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era*, 602 examples of females covered all classes and aspects of life in the Tang Dynasty.^[27] They demonstrate the emancipation of female values at that time and are no longer limited by the framework woven by patriarchal discourse. For instance, twenty-six female knight-errants or *Wuxia* in the book are not being weighed down by the burdens of family and marital chores but instead are practicing chivalry in society, representing the ideals of social justice and fully embodying the independent personality of women.

Furthermore, females had a high political status for the first time in Chinese history. They were permitted to participate in social events and even take the political stage during the Tang Dynasty, such as Wu Zetian, the first and only female emperor in Chinese history, and female politician Shangguan Wan'er. Therefore, it is easy to conceive why female flying apsara figures were more common in Chinese localized flying apsaras. Therefore, we can make some reasonable speculation about the elements that directly influence female images of flying apsaras in such a social environment. The most crucial point is that the aesthetic of the flying apsaras' plump and rounded figure must be consistent with the Tang Dynasty's aesthetics equating plumpness with beauty.^[28] It is related to improving material conditions in the Tang Dynasty.

In addition, another speculation suggests people may have altered the aesthetic notions of beauty due to the cultural integration context of Xianbei and other nationalities in the Tang Dynasty. The poet Yuan Zhen summarized the influence of nomadic culture in the lives of Tang Dynasty people: nomadic food and drink could be found everywhere in Xianyang and Luoyang (both served as the capital of the Tang Dynasty; Xianyang is today's Xi'an, Shaanxi Province), and many ladies learned nomadic makeup and musical instruments, as well as how to dress in the nomadic style.^[29] The nomad's customs and culture had been integrated into the daily life of the Tang Dynasty people, as noted in the *Old Book of Tang* (1957-1958). Therefore, their aesthetic style of viewing strength as beauty also influenced the aesthetic concepts of the Tang Dynasty.^[30] On this basis, some argue that the emperors of the Tang Dynasty, although insisting on being Han Chinese, had nomadic descendants, which may explain the prevalence of nomadic aesthetic notions. Tolerant cultural policies and favor of the horse demonstrate this, but this viewpoint still lacks coherent and substantial evidence. In summary, the Tang Dynasty's plump images of flying apsaras appeared by combining complex and diverse social-environmental factors rather than a single, primary one. As a result, the entirely localized and unique images of Chinese flying apsaras were produced in the Tang Dynasty.

6 Summary

With the spread of Buddhism and Buddhist art from India to China, the images of flying apsaras gradually evolved into entirely localized Chinese flying apsaras. The Northern Wei and Tang dynasties played an essential role as two critical points during the sinicization process, and the Longmen Grottoes bear witness to the transformation of the images of flying apsaras. The internal factors were the traditional Chinese culture of music and dance and the notion of immortality. Furthermore, the external influence of the social environment from the Northern Wei and Tang dynasties also significantly impacted the localization process of flying apsara images. Finally, we see the appearance of unique Chinese localized flying apsaras shaped by both internal and external elements.

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