

From the Evolution of the “Flying Apsaras” Art in the Mogao Caves, the Influence of Taoism on Dunhuang Culture Observe

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Abstract

Dunhuang is located at the western end of the Hexi Corridor in Gansu, China. It is an important gateway on the ancient Silk Road and a treasure trove of cultural exchange. Among them, the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang are renowned for their large number of extant murals, which vividly illustrate the changes in Buddhist Flying Apsaras art after its introduction to China and the characteristics of Taoist elements. This article, through reviewing Dunhuang literature and referring to previous research, compares the changes in elements of flying apsaras across different periods, aiming to explore the process of Sinicization of flying apsaras and the influence of Taoism on Dunhuang culture from the existing flying apsaras murals in the Mogao Caves. The research results indicate that Taoism has had a profound impact on the artistic style of Dunhuang culture, enriching its connotation. It is suggested that future research should delve deeper into cultural heritage with Taoist elements in the extant Dunhuang art and enhance the understanding of Taoism's influence in the Dunhuang region.

Keywords

flying apsaras, Dunhuang, Taoism

1. Introduction

Since ancient times, Dunhuang has been an important hub for the eastward transmission of Buddhism, and the evolution of the flying apsaras art in the Mogao Caves has a profound historical background. Researchers, after comparing flying apsaras murals from different historical periods, pointed out that in the transformation of Dunhuang's flying apsaras art, the influence of Taoism gradually penetrated into it. The elegant and ethereal “flying apsaras” that are presented to the world today are a product of the combination of the original Buddhist concept with Taoist elements. What Taoist elements influenced the transition of the flying apsaras from a Western Region style to a Central Plains style? This article will briefly compare the depictions of early Buddhist flying apsaras and Taoist immortals, exploring the manifestation of Taoist concepts in Dunhuang art through the various styles exhibited by flying apsaras murals across different dynasties.

2. The Initial Flying Apsaras of Ancient India

Flying apsaras in ancient Indian Buddhism usually refer to the two guardian deities, Gandharva and Kinnara, who are the gods of music and dance, respectively. They can fly and scatter flowers in the sky. The art of the flying apsaras originated in India and entered China along with Buddhism and rock caves. The early representations of flying apsaras were purely religious architectural decorations, often appearing as sculptures and murals in temples. The flying apsaras in the paintings typically do not have ordinary human appearances; their movements are stiff, and they hold various musical instruments, sometimes even featuring wings. For instance, in the narrative paintings of Buddhist stories in the Sanchi Stupa, images of flying apsaras with human heads and bird bodies frequently appear: above the stupa and the Bodhi tree, there are usually two winged flying deities with human upper bodies and bird tails, holding flower garlands and scattering flowers (Yin, 2012).

In other words, the early representations of flying apsaras were purely religious in nature, with their depictions centered around two deities. Their postures were not dynamic, and there were few types of decorations, giving an overall impression of lifelessness and solemnity. However, the image of these flying apsaras was not static. As Buddhism spread from ancient India to various regions, these deities absorbed various cultural elements. For instance, after the development of Hinduism, flying apsaras came to represent both male and female forms, with their images displaying distinct Indian features. In Central Asia during the Hellenistic period, the flying apsaras resembled Western mythological “angels,” with reliefs emphasizing the musculature of their figures. In China, the concept of flying apsaras merged with the Taoist idea of “Xian,” using traditional fine brush techniques to highlight the dynamism of their expressions, ultimately creating the celestial and ethereal Dunhuang flying apsaras.

3. The Concept of “Xian” in Ancient Chinese Taoism

Ancient Chinese people believed in a round sky and a square earth, and the dome above their heads was filled with many mysterious enigmas. People longed to be unrestrained and to roam freely in the universe. “Vastly, as if riding the wind through the sky, not knowing where to stop; floating in a detached manner, transcending the world, becoming an immortal.” Xian is one of the important concepts in Taoism. It means “immortals”. Taoism emphasizes the harmonious unity of nature and humans, pursuing inner spiritual freedom, achieving spiritual transcendence and physical ascension through cultivation, ultimately becoming an immortal. Traditional depictions of immortals often portray them wearing long robes, holding magical instruments, and exhibiting graceful postures, accompanied by celestial clouds, focusing more on the overall demeanor rather than individual details, making the figures appear light and free. In its early stages, the concept of Xian carried strong religious connotations. Taoism, which seeks spiritual exaltation and physical liberation, venerates those who have ascended through cultivation and become immortals from real historical figures. Therefore, the image of Xian is not that of a solemn “god”, but more of a free and unrestrained “human” figure.

4. The Changes in Taoist Elements of Flying Apsaras in the Dunhuang Region

4.1 The Flying Apsaras in Early Buddhism After It Spread to the Western Regions

The introduction of Buddhism to China can be traced back to the Han Dynasty (206B.C.-220A.D.), and it began to flourish around the Northern Wei period (386A.D.-534A.D.). The Xianbei rulers actively implemented policies of Sinicization while adopting a tolerant attitude towards religions, allowing both Buddhism and Taoism to have ample space to spread their doctrines. With the excavation of the Mogao Caves, the depiction of flying apsaras appeared in the murals of the Dunhuang. The flying apsaras of this period can be broadly divided into two categories: those of Western Regions style and those of Central Plains style. The flying apsaras Western Regions exhibit strong ethnic characteristics, retaining most of the traditional forms such as V-shaped figures and stiff postures, with their hands often in a prayer gesture. The Central Plains flying apsaras, on the other hand, have more traits of Central Plains people, with taller and slimmer figures, flowing around their bodies, and postures resembling dance movements, making them softer and more diverse in movement compared to their Western Regions counterparts. By the late Northern Wei period, Western Regions and Central Plains flying apsaras gradually began to integrate. Their clothing showed clear Central Plains characteristics, the halos behind the figures were removed, and Buddhist elements decreased. During this

period, Buddhism was interacting with indigenous Taoism, and the two styles of flying apsaras were gradually moving towards unification.

4.2 The Further Development of Flying Apsaras and The Integration of Numerous Taoist Elements

There are many Taoist scriptures hidden in Dunhuang caves, and most of them were built during the Sui and Tang dynasties or later. The Sui and Tang dynasties (581A.D-907A. D) were an important stage in the development of Dunhuang culture. At this time, with the deepening of the Sinicization of Buddhism, the images of flying apsaras murals also incorporated Taoist elements in various aspects, which were more in line with the cultural aesthetics of the Central Plains people Zhu (2011) argues that the Dunhuang manuscript of “Ye Jingneng Poetry” embodies prominent cultural characteristics of Taoism: it vigorously boasts of Taoism, promotes immortal techniques, depicts summoning gods to rob ghosts, and uses talismans to communicate with the underworld. Moreover, the references to Taishang Laojun, Yue Shen, and Zunshi in the text, such as Taiyi, Yuanshi, Daluo Palace, Tanchang, Fu, and Xuandu Temple, are commonly used religious terms in Taoism and are all related to Taoism” (pp. 100-105).

In the Sui and Tang dynasties, the unified state power provided opportunities for deep cultural exchanges between the North and South, as well as between the East and the West. The rulers generally intended to promote the spread of Buddhism, further integrating Buddhism and Taoism among the people. During this period, the majority of flying apsaras shifted from male to female, and their clothing was a typical style of the Central Plains: broad and elegant, incorporating more of the concept of flying immortals. From a hairstyle perspective, most of them were palace women. At the same time, the flying apsaras paintings of this time were influenced by the concept of “Tai Chi” in Taoist culture, and the figures were mostly round or S-shaped, making them more vivid and flexible overall, full of beauty and dance.(Zhao, 2019)

4.3 The Finalization of Flying Apsaras After the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms Period (907A.D.-960 A.D.)

After the prosperous period of the Sui and Tang dynasties, Dunhuang culture during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms gradually reached its final form, no longer demonstrating highly innovative development. At this time, Buddhism and Taoism had deeply integrated, with Buddhism essentially completing its process of sinicization under the influence of Taoist elements and becoming widely accepted by the public. (Lan & Zheng, 2023)The image of the flying apsaras was also established during this time, largely consistent with the image during the Sui and Tang dynasties: dressed in wide robes, accompanied by auspicious clouds, with graceful and light postures, and often holding decorations with auspicious meanings, such as lotus flowers, from Taoism. The establishment of the image of the apsaras during this period marked the completion of the integration of the Buddhist flying apsaras and the Taoist Xian concepts. The image of the flying apsaras no longer solely represented Buddhist doctrines but also embodied Taoist philosophical thoughts. The ethereal quality of the flying apsaras reflected Taoism's pursuit of spiritual transcendence and freedom.

5. Conclusion

According to Xie (2001), “the gods capable of flight in religion originate from mythology. Christianity and Catholicism, influenced by Greek mythology, feature winged angels capable of flight. Early Buddhism in India, influenced by Greek culture, features winged beings capable of flight known as Gandharvas and Kinnaras. Early Taoism in China, influenced by ancient Chinese mythology, features winged celestial beings known as feathered humans and immortals” (pp. 13-21). This demonstrates that the concept of flying beings is one form of the human desire to fly. In China, the evolution of flying apsaras across different historical periods can be seen as reflecting the ideologies of various social and historical contexts. The increasing inclusion of Taoist elements allows us to directly perceive the historical process of Buddhist and Taoist integration. Today, flying apsaras are not only a cultural symbol in Buddhism but also a concrete expression of the free spirit in Chinese culture. The profound influence of Taoism on Dunhuang culture also indirectly reflects the entire process of cultural exchange and integration, offering new perspectives for studying the inclusive nature of Chinese culture.

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Conflicts of Interest

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