
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Changes of Women's Status from the Evolution of Dunhuang Murals—Taking Images of Donors and Feitian Legends as Examples

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| ABSTRACT

It is well-known that social phenomena can be reflected in art. In the past research time, there have been some research results about the Dunhuang murals and gender equality, respectively. However, there is no such one as combining the two meaningful topics together and applying them in modern society. The aim of this study is to analyze the trend of murals painted in Dunhuang by comparing the characteristics in a different time, from the Beiliang Dynasty to the Yuan Dynasty, and then compare the trend of feminization of the mural images with the changes in women's status during this 1000 years. After comparing and analyzing, the different, even contrary, results lead to deeper thoughts: from what perspective the women's status should be analyzed and described? Definitely, the four dimensions, including economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment, should not be ignored and must be treated seriously. That is meaningful for the research of Dunhuang Grottoes, the images painted in Dunhuang, the studies of ancient China, today's gender inequality, and many other areas. It is confident that this article will fill academic gaps and provide a new idea to other researchers.

| KEYWORDS

Women Status, Dunhuang Murals, Gender Equality, Feitian Legends, Female Donors

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

For a long time, Dunhuang, as an important part of China's Western Region, has played an important role in economic, political, and cultural communication. During the Sixteen Kingdoms period in AD 300, the first grottoes were excavated in the Dunhuang area. For more than a thousand years since then, the excavation of the Dunhuang has never stopped. With the change of dynasties, the murals in the Dunhuang have witnessed the fate and social atmosphere of each dynasty. These murals, painted with special pigments, still carry the most authentic history, although thousands of years have passed.

Donor paintings are paintings that can directly reflect human life. Unlike portraits of immortals such as Bodhisattvas and Buddhas, paintings of donors have a realistic basis in the real world. Therefore, studying donors' paintings plays an important role in understanding the customs of various dynasties. The images of Feitian legend are one of the most common image-type in Buddhist murals. It is significant to study the image of Feitian legends in order to learn more about the style of murals and the characteristics of the established times, and their transformations.

What is more, gender is an important and hot issue in today's society, especially in the situation of COVID-19. According to the research and analysis of McKinsey & Company (2015), if every country matched the progress toward gender parity of its fastest-moving neighbor, global GDP would increase by up to \$12 trillion in 2025, as shown in Chart 1 below. That is to say, eliminating gender inequality and improving women's status is beneficial to economic development and social prosperity.

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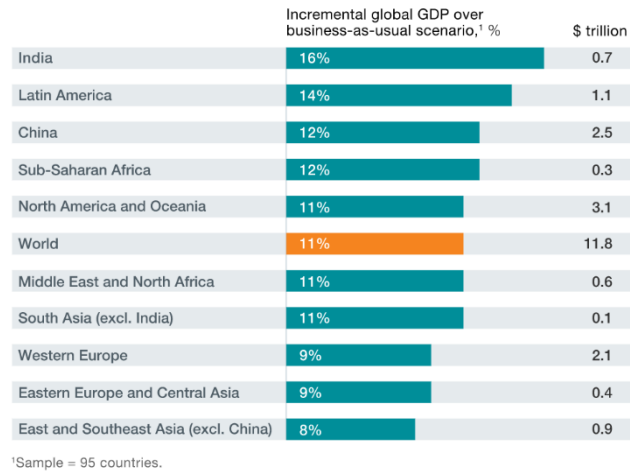


Chart 1: Gender inequality elimination rates in major countries and regions in the world

Source: IHS; ILO; Oxford Economics; World Input-Output Databases; national statistical agencies; McKinsey Global Institute analysis.

In the past decades, so many scholars have searched the murals of Dunhuang, Mogao in colors, modelling, different types of Bodhisattvas and Buddhas, and some others, such as *The Transformation of the Vimalakirti Sutra in a Mogao Cave Painting at Dunhuang* written by He Wenzhe (1982), and *The Complete Works of the Editorial Board of Chinese Dunhuang murals* (Dunhuang Academy, n.d.). All of these famous articles or books illustrated one dimension of Dunhuang murals. However, there is no such research on gender, especially on women’s status, through analyzing the changes in images in Dunhuang murals.

In this article, we hope to see how the images of females changed in Dunhuang murals by taking Feitian Legends and female donors as two classic examples and does the trend or transformation of the images painted on murals is in line with the changes in women’s status in ancient China, specifically during the period of Dunhuang Grottoes. Moreover, the article is also looking forward to knowing how to use the implications from the murals in today’s society, how to let females reach, and how to let them really achieve the status they should have gotten. It is an important and meaningful topic, the authors think, to promote the development and movement of the whole society to realize gender equality, and this article is also expected to fill academic gaps in this area.

2. Methodology

In this article, we will use the method of the case study, which means we will summarize the rules of each dynasty from the Sixteen Kingdoms to the Yuan Dynasty and then show readers some standardized murals to prove our rules. At the same time, as the topic we discuss is women’s status in the different periods proved by images on the murals, we will compare different trends between the rules we find in the mural and women’s status. This comparative approach can go beyond the norm and fill academic gaps.

3. Images of Women in Different Periods

3.1 Sixteen Kingdom

At that time, one of the sixteen kingdoms, Northern Liang, controlled parts of present-day western Gansu, Ningxia, Xinjiang, and Qinghai. The Mogao Grottoes began to be excavated in the Northern Liang Dynasty when Buddhism was introduced to the Central Plains. The style of murals in the caves was influenced by the Western style, using the Indian style as a model for creation, so the figures are mostly fully nude or semi-nude. The early Buddhist images of immortals were predominantly male.

The Dunhuang Feitian of this period were heavily affected by Indian and Western Feitian. The upper body is naked; the lower body is covered with a long skirt (Fig1). The head is bald, the face is round, the eyes are big, the body is stout, and the posture is awkward. They appear in groups, spread out over the main characters of the murals, or in the decoration at the top of the caves (Fig 2).

As shown in figure 3, the female donor portraits are small, usually in the lower part of the picture, and are dressed in simple and plain Chinese or mixed Hu-Chinese costumes (Hao, 2019).



Figure 1: Feitian Legend in Cave 268

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).



Figure 2: Feitian Legend in Cave 272

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).



Figure 3: Dunhuang Donors, Cave 268

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).

3.2 Northern Dynasties

The Northern Dynasties (386-581) is the general term for the five dynasties that existed in the north of China during the Northern and Southern Dynasties. The Northern Dynasties included the Northern Wei, Eastern Wei, Western Wei, Northern Qi, and Northern Zhou dynasties.

From the Northern Wei to Western Wei dynasties, the rulers promoted Buddhism, and Dunhuang murals developed rapidly. The body of Feitian is noticeably slender, avoiding the Indian style of large breasts and large hips, but rather a softer, slimmer look, similar to the depiction of women in Han paintings (Fig 4). The artist uses long skirts and curved ribbons to create a sense of movement and a sense of lightness. However, it is clear from the face and body parts that Feitian is still in a male form at this time (Fig 5).



Figure 4: Feitian Legend in Cave 260

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).



Figure 5: Feitian Legend in Cave 249

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).

The female donors of this period have slim bodies, smiling faces, flowing and graceful clothing, and a variety of hairstyles, as shown in the following figures 6 and 7. It is evident that the women were confident, displaying a different spirituality, and the number of female donors appearing on the wall paintings was greater than before.



Figure 6: Dunhuang Donors, Cave 285

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).



Figure 7: Dunhuang Donors, Cave 288

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).

In Northern Zhou, the development of Buddhism was limited by the massive campaign to exterminate the Buddha by the Emperor Wu of Northern Zhou, and the image of the Feitian being turned back into a serious, stereotypical, abstract one, with the fledgling trend of femininity disappearing again (Fig 8&9).

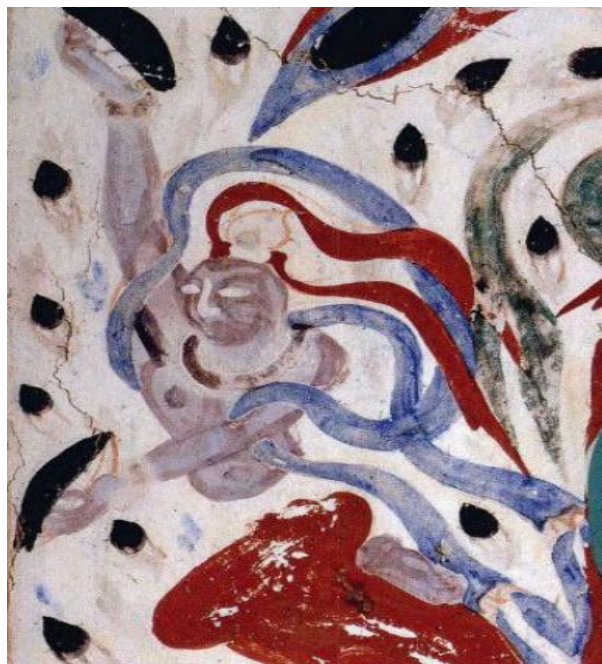


Figure 8: Feitian Legend in Cave 297

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).



Figure 9: Feitian Legend in Cave 301

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).

As for the female donors, the Dunhuang region has been gradually influenced by Confucianism since the Han and Jin dynasties, and the artistic aesthetic has changed as a result (Liu & Hou, 2017). Unlike the previous pursuit of lean and clean images, the murals of the Northern Zhou focus more on the temperament of the figures (Song & Sha, 2020), giving them a sense of placidity and calmness (Fig 10).



Figure 10: Dunhuang Donors, Cave 296

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).

3.3 Sui Dynasty

When it comes to Sui Dynasty, the face characters in Dunhuang murals began to be feminine gradually, some of which show the characteristics of women intuitively.

During the period of the Sui Dynasty, the Feitian legend in the Dunhuang murals had more obvious female characteristics (The Complete Works of the Editorial Board of Chinese Dunhuang murals, 2006a). Compared to before, they have more beautiful accessories on their heads, and their bodies are softer than before. As we can see in Fig 11., Feitian legend has a soft figure, elegant action, and wears luxurious headwear, necklace and bracelets. It is not difficult to recognize that she is a female, not a male. Similarly, in Fig 12., there are two heaven musicals playing music, which evolved from the characteristics of early court musicals.

One of them blows the sheng, the other scatters the flowers, and the background is a blue sky, which is harmonious and elegant as a whole (Ruan, 2010).

The image of the donors in the Sui Dynasty still maintained the previous realistic style. Most of the female donors in the portraits of the donors in the Sui Dynasty were brightly dressed and slender with square faces, shaved shoulders, narrow-sleeved shirts, and long skirts (Fig 13).

In general, the image of Feitian in the Sui Dynasty gradually became more feminine. Among the about 70 Mogao Grottoes built in the Sui Dynasty, there are about 17 caves decorated with images of Feitian legends, and 7 caves were painted with donors respectively (The Complete Works of the Editorial Board of Chinese Dunhuang murals, 2006). Although there are also male legends, for the most part, these legends are relatively thin and elegant than before.

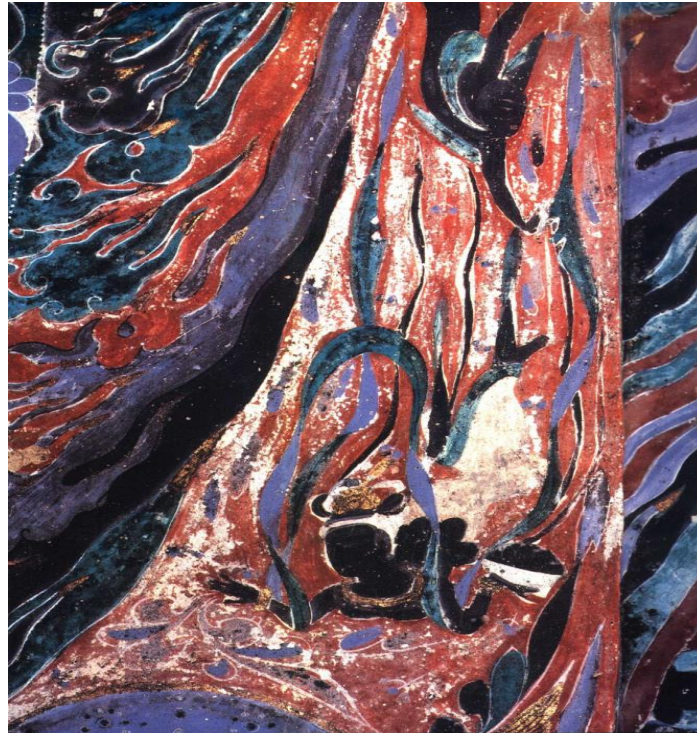


Figure 11: Feitian Legend in Cave 404

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).



Figure 12: Feitian Legend in Cave 404

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).



Figure 13: Dunhuang Donors, Cave 389

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).

3.4 Tang Dynasty

In AD 618, Tang Dynasty was established. When scholars discuss murals in the Tang Dynasty, they often divide them into four stages: Early Tang, Prosperous, Middle, and Late Tang. With the alternation of regimes, the images in Dunhuang frescoes, especially the images of female donors (Liu, 2015), also show their specific characteristics of different periods. In this article, we also divide the Tang Dynasty into these four stages and analyze the flying images in Dunhuang murals and the paintings of female donors in each stage separately.

Early Tang. In the Early Tang Period, the flying legends in Dunhuang murals were still influenced by the style of the Sui Dynasty, which are still slender, elegant, and agile. However, the faces of flying legends are rounder than that of the Sui Dynasty, chests are fuller, and limbs are soft, which are most of the shape of an "L." These features further reflect the unique characteristics of women and make the movement appear more leisure and comfortable, unlike the rapidly moving ones in Sui Dynasty. As we can see in Fig 14., this group of flying legends is concentrated on the top of the niche. Without the neat arrangement before, it is more free and lively.



Figure 14: Flying Legends, Cave 329

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).

Like the image of Feitian legends, the female donors of the early Tang Dynasty still continued the style of the Sui Dynasty (Liu, 2015), with slender bodies and uneven body proportions, as shown in Fig 15.



Figure 15: Female Donors, Cave 375

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).

Prosperous Tang. During the prosperous Tang Dynasty, Feitian legends were plumper on both face and body. From a dynamic point of view, these legends were more lively, with fairies chasing and fooling each other and shuttling through the palace pavilions. In terms of color, compared with the Sui Dynasty and the early Tang Dynasty, the portraits of Feitian legends in the prosperous Tang Dynasty were colorful, rich, and gorgeous. As Fig 16 shows, at the top of the altar, there are two Feitian legends, one had her head resting on her hands, and her body was straight and leisurely, and the other was head down, holding flowers in both hands, and floating down (Ruan, 2012). The whole picture is warm and has the meaning of natural relaxation. The image of both Feitian legends has broad faces and a natural and soft demeanor, which is a real reflection of the female face in the prosperous Tang Dynasty. In another cave 320 (Fig. 17), the two Feitian legends are playing and sparring. Unlike the images of Feitian in the Sui Dynasty that exposed their ankles, their skirts covered the ankles and naturally elongated the lower body, making the whole body smooth and natural.



Figure16: Flying Legends, Cave 172

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).



Figure 17: Flying Legends, Cave 320

Source: Digital Dunhuang. (n.d.).

The images of female donors in the Prosperous Tang Dynasty are the true portrayal of women in that period. The life of women from all classes is represented in these murals, such as bureaucrats, aristocratic families, and even ordinary people. Women in this period generally have plump bodies, wide eyebrows, and a peaceful demeanor. As shown in Fig 18., the picture is of an older woman leading the family to become Buddhist nuns. They wear colorful clothes and have plump bodies, long eyebrows, and calm faces. Compared with the images of the female donors in the Early Tang Dynasty, it can be seen that women lived very comfortably with better economic and material conditions.



Figure 18: Female Donors, Cave 445

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).

Middle Tang. In the mid-Tang Dynasty, the image of Feitian legends became mature, solemn, and steady, lacking the youthful vitality which came from previous dynasties. In this period, the image of Feitian legends was mostly "S-Shape" (Ruan, 2012). As Fig 19 shows, three Feitian legends were floating down slowly. Compared with murals in Prosperous Tang, the usage of colour in this period became simple, with more green and grey, and the image of female Feitian legends in this period was not as luxurious as that before.



Figure 19: Flying Legends, Cave 158

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).

The images of female donors in the Middle Tang have special characteristics. There were fewer portraits of donors during this period. In Cave 468, there were a few female donors, which were the real portrait of ladies and their followers, as shown in Fig 20. In this mural, the ladies dressed in very well fabrics, V-Shape necks like that in Prosperous Tang, and they were tall, with finely styled buns, but their servants who followed them were petite and dressed in a dark color, not so well dressed. This kind of thing indicates clear and strict classes.



Figure 20: Female Donors, Cave 468

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).

Late Tang Dynasty. During the Late Tang Dynasty, compared with the Prosperous and Middle Tang Dynasty, the style of flying legends had fixed forms. They always appeared in a fixed position and had fixed roles, such as appearing in a caisson and forming a circle. What is more, during the Late Tang period, when painters drew these Feitian legends, they always imitated that in Prosperous time, resulting in a lack of expressions and movement (Ruan, 2012). For example, as shown in Fig 21., in Cave 76, the bodies of Feitian legends are straight, and they flew horizontally. The long body with the backdrop of the streamers makes the bodies look lacking body proportions, which further highlights their slenderness. This kind of transformation is quite different from Feitian legend's images of the Prosperous and Mid-Tang Dynasties.



Figure 21: Feitian Legends, Cave 76

Source: Dunhuang Academy. (n.d.).

In the Late period of the Tang Dynasty, there were more images of female donors in the murals. The portraits of the donors are magnificent, and the purpose of the painting is more to show their achievements and contributions. Furthermore, the characteristics of elders of the aristocratic families could not be changed randomly when painters were drawing. In the late Tang Dynasty, the portraits of nobles were more uniform, with similar expressions and facial features because everyone wanted to show their luxurious life and high status, and they were respected by others. Contrarily, the portraits of common people are more interesting and lively. Some of them are plump, and others are gracile, and their actions are different (Ruan, 2012). Cave 156, demonstrated in Fig 22, is a good example. In the mural, they were beautifully dressed and stood according to their status. Compared with the Prosperous Tang Dynasty, although they still wore the V-neck, the V-neck is higher than before, showing a conservative and solemn temperament. This phenomenon is in line with the status of women living in high-status families, but it also lacks a certain vitality.



Figure 22: Female Donors, Cave 156

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).

3.5 Five Dynasties, Song, Xixia, and Yuan

From the Five Dynasties to the Yuan dynasty, the painting of Feitian gradually declined. The painting tends to be programmatic and basically follows the style of the late Tang dynasty. With plump, rounded faces and stony expressions, the figures are slender as maidens and dressed in a manner similar to that of a bodhisattva. Feitian was totally feminine. By the Yuan dynasty, the Buddhist poses of Feitian were rare, and at this time, Feitian was more like a boy flying on clouds. Gradually, Feitian disappeared from the murals. Figure 23 to 26, respectively, show the Feitian images in the Five Dynasties, Song, Xixia, and Yuan. They are similar and highly feminine.



Figure 23: Feitian Legend in Cave 309

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).



Figure 24: Feitian Legend in Yulin Cave 13

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).



Figure 25: Feitian Legend in Yulin Cave 4

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).



Figure 26: Feitian Legend in DongQian Cave 7

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).

Dunhuang was ruled by the Chinese, Uighur, Xixia, and Mongolian in successive periods, and the portraits of female donors from different periods have distinctive ethnic styles. However, they share common characteristics, with larger figures, ornate clothing, numerous accessories, and solemn expressions (Liu & Hou, 2017)

Figure 27 shows the picture of an Uyghur princess donor. She was a princess. She was dressed in the fashion of a noblewoman, wearing brightly colored clothing, head with a phoenix crown. Her body also implied she was a noble, with fair skin and a rounded face. Behind her, there is a maidservant.

Figure 28 is the figure of another Uyghur female donor. She was wearing an exaggerated hair crown. Although the paint has fallen off, we can still observe her beauty. She was smiling happily.



Figure 27: Dunhuang Donors, Cave 98

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).



Figure 28: Dunhuang Donors, Cave 409

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).



Figure 29: Dunhuang Donors, Cave 148

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).

Figure 29 describes the female donors in Song Dynasty, which can be told by their costumes. They have square faces, dressing in restrained, conservative patterns. They showed a preference for cool colors.

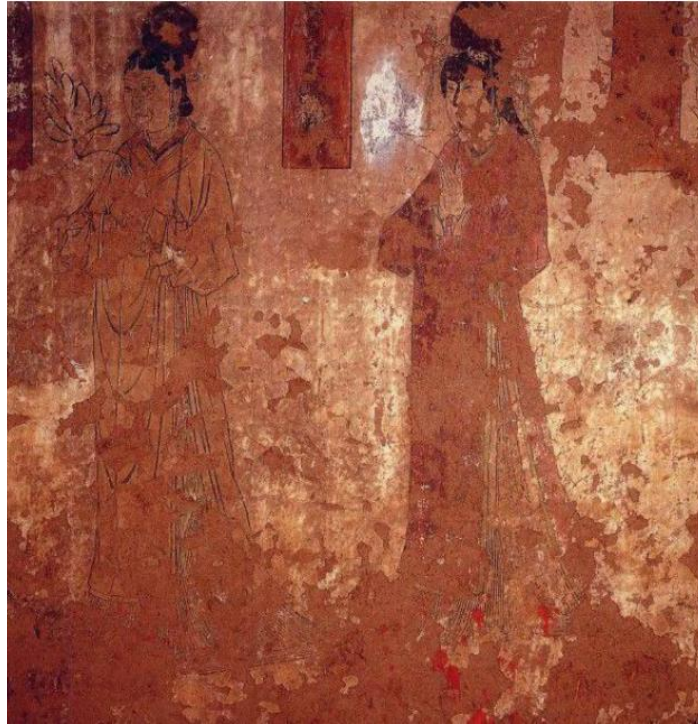


Figure 30: Dunhuang Donors, Yulin Cave 2

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).



Figure 31: Dunhuang Donors, Cave 332

Source: Editorial Committee of the Complete Works of Dunhuang Murals in China (2006).

Two wall paintings above are respectively presented by the female donors from Xixia (Fig 30) and Mongolian (Fig 31). Although somewhat blurred, it is still evident that the artist depicted them in great detail.

4. The Trend Women Images in Dunhuang Murals

From the previous demonstration, in the process of the development of Dunhuang murals over thousands of years, the images of donors and Feitian Legends in Dunhuang murals have gradually become feminine, as we can see in Chart 2.

In the Northern Liang Dynasty, the images of Dunhuang murals have obvious male characteristics. In the Northern Wei Dynasty, the feminization trend was more obvious, with slender bodies. But then, in the Northern Zhou Dynasty, the feminization trend weakened. Until the Sui Dynasty, the trend of feminization rose again, and there was obvious transformation later. After the Sui Dynasty, the trend continued. During the Tang Dynasty, although the theme styles of the four stages of the Tang Dynasty had a few differences, the Feitian legends images were an obviously female person, and among the images of donors, a female one occupied an important position. After the end of the Tang Dynasty, the style of the late Tang Dynasty continued until the end of the Yuan Dynasty. Due to the war during this period, Dunhuang murals had less innovation at this stage.

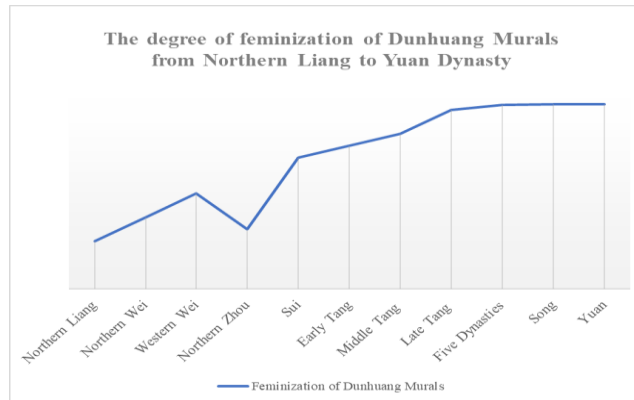


Chart 2: The degree of feminization of Dunhuang Murals from Northern Liang to Yuan Dynasty

Source: Made by Authors.

However, according to the research of Wang (2006), the trend of woman's status is not exactly the same as the trend of feminization. From chart 3, we can see that from the Northern Zhou Dynasty to Middle Tang Dynasty, the status of women was on the rise. From the late Tang Dynasty until the Yuan Dynasty, the degree of feminization of Dunhuang murals showed an upward trend, while the status of women in the same period showed a cliff-like decline.

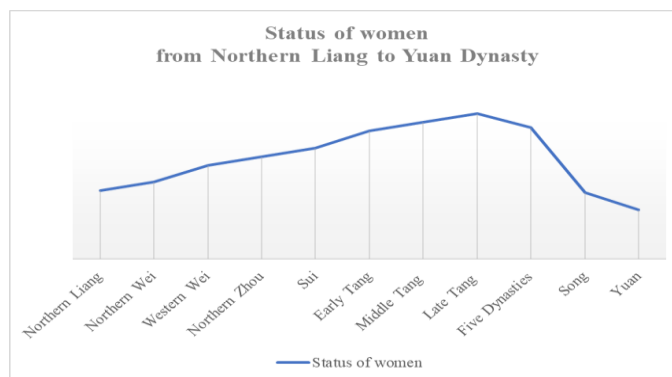


Chart 3: Status of Women from Northern Liang to Yuan Dynasty

Source: Made by Authors.

Therefore, as these two charts show, the strengthening of the feminization of Dunhuang murals, especially in the Feitian Legends and paintings of female donors, is not in line with the changes in women's status in ancient China. Even in some periods, the trends are contrary, such as during the Western Wei to Northern Zhou Dynasty and after the Late Tang Dynasty.

5. Reasons

As this article has discussed before, during the development of Dunhuang murals, the characters in the frescoes gradually became feminine, while the status of women in ancient China declined rapidly after the late Tang Dynasty. In this section, we will analyze the reasons one by one.

5.1 Reasons for Feminization

The art of one period is a comprehensive reaction to the economy, politics, and culture of that time. Therefore, the gradual feminization of the donation paintings and images of Feitian legends in Dunhuang murals must also be related to the background of the times (Du, 2018).

We can see that in the dynasties with high economic levels and developed economies, such as the Prosperous and Middle Tang Dynasties, the Feitian Legends in Dunhuang murals have obvious feminine features, while the donor's paintings have prominent female status, brightly dressed and peaceful faces. While the economy was not very developed, or there were more wars, such as the Late Tang Dynasty and the Northern Zhou Dynasty, the Dunhuang murals have a low degree of femininity, slender stature, and rigid faces. But due to the imitation of the painting style after the Late Tang Dynasty, the trend of feminization still maintains at a high level, continuing that level of the Middle Tang Dynasty.

Secondly, the degree of communication with the Central Plains Dynasty also affects the feminization of Dunhuang murals. During the Prosperous Tang Dynasty, the Dunhuang area had frequent exchanges and close ties with the Central Dynasty. Most of the female images presented in the murals were in line with the real situation—plump, well-proportioned, and luxurious. However, in the Song Dynasty, due to the weakness of the Song Dynasty, the Hexi Area was eventually lost. Furthermore, the Dunhuang murals in the Song Dynasty lacked innovation, and most of them continued the feminine style of the late Tang Dynasty, and the process of feminization was hindered.

As for the effects of religions and thoughts, in open-minded dynasties, Dunhuang murals always tend to be more feminine. For example, in Song Dynasty, due to the development of Cheng-Zhu Science, women were often shackled in the family, and their daily behavior was restricted. Therefore, the Dunhuang murals in this period have a low degree of innovation and a slow process of feminization. During the Tang Dynasty, due to the inclusive policy of the Tang Dynasty, various ideas flourished, and women had more free space in their daily life. Therefore, women in Dunhuang murals in this period were leisurely, and the Feitian legends in the images were slow to move.

5.2 Reasons for the Changing Status of Women

From Chart 3, we can see that before the Late Tang Dynasty, the status of women was rising continuously. That is because of the relatively rising economy as a whole and the open social atmosphere in this period. For example, in the Prosperous Tang Dynasty, women even could wear men's clothing. However, after the Late Tang Dynasty, especially after entering the Song Dynasty, the status of women declined sharply. From the point of view of social thought, as we mentioned above, Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism imprisoned the social development of women. Women are more imprisoned in the family and bear the responsibilities of the family. Although in the Song Dynasty, the economy was developed to a certain extent. However, because the work performed by women cannot directly bring productive value to the family, their hard work is often ignored. That is to say, in people's general conception, only those who bring money home from outside are the main productive forces and should be respected by people. This also leads to the lower family status and social status of women.

In the Yuan Dynasty, the social status of the entire Han nationality was generally low due to the ruling power of ethnic minorities. In the decree promulgated in the Yuan Dynasty, the wife was regarded as the husband's private property (Zhang, 2013). Women's social functions are further confined to the family, for example, the carrying out of textile work. Women's ideological education was further confined to books that taught women's words and deeds. In the family, women further became the vassals of men, and the social family status further declined. Yuan Dynasty law even stipulated that fathers could kill their daughters with impunity.

Therefore, after the Late Tang Dynasty, due to the policies and laws implemented by the government, and the rising of Cheng-Zhu Science, the high status of women in the previous time did not exist anymore.

6. What Does the Different Trend Reflect?

So, what exactly does the status of women refer to? The author believes that how judge the status of women in society should depend on whether women really have their rights, whether the society respects these women's rights, whether women have real labor value, and whether women really participate in social production.

As we can see, even though the feminization of murals after the late Tang Dynasty lacked innovation, it remained at a relatively stable level. Conversely, women's status has declined. That is to say, there are still a certain number of female donors' paintings and images of female Feitian legends in the creation of murals in this period, but the status of women cannot be compared with that of the Tang Dynasty. From the root, the author believes that this has been determined by China's patriarchal society since ancient times. Women depend on patriarchy to exist. "Follow the father at home, the husband when married, and the son when the husband dies" has become a truth that Chinese women must follow. The female donors in the offering paintings are also

mostly the wives, mothers, or daughters of the male donors. Under this tone of the times, Chinese women have no status or contribution of their own, and all their income is given to men. This also explains why the trend of feminization intensified during the Tang Dynasty, and the trend of feminization remained after the late Tang Dynasty while the status of women declined. It is not because of the lack of aristocratic families after the late Tang Dynasty. On the contrary, it was precisely because of the rise of aristocratic families after the late Tang Dynasty that the control over women was strengthened. Even though some dynasties introduced some laws to protect women's rights (for example, the Song Dynasty allowed women to file for divorce), the deep-rooted folk ideology is still the main reason affecting women's lives. Coupled with the successive wars after the late Tang Dynasty, the connection between the Central Dynasty and the Dunhuang area was weakened, and the Dunhuang murals lacked innovation and naturally lacked the ability to reflect the real situation.

That is to say, when women cannot truly participate in social production, cannot truly realize their own value in social production, but depend on others, no matter how the form of expression changes, the status of women has never been substantially improved.

7. Women's Status in Today's Society

Continuing with what was discussed before, it is more reasonable to judge the status of women in one society from economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment, these four key dimensions.

In today's society, women's rights and status are still important issues of worldwide concern. After the Industrial Revolution, more and more women participated in production and education, and with more powerful economic rights, more and more women participated in political power.

The progress of eliminating gender inequality is on the way with the hard work of countries, countless organizations, and the public. According to the Global Gender Report of the United Nations (2020), based on the data from 2006 to 2019, it will need 100 years to close the gender gap in the four dimensions mentioned before. However, due to the occurrence of COVID-19, more and more women are restricted in the family to take care of their families. According to the Global Gender Gap Report of the United Nations (2022), it will take 132 years to close the gender gap, with more than thirty years increasing to achieve the goal. With the process against COVID-19, compared to the 136 years gap (World Economic Forum, 2021), although we shortened four years, 132 is still a big project.

It seems that under the situation of the pandemic, females are more vulnerable than males. The reasons can be listed as follows: first, as The World's Women 2020 illustrated, less than 50 percent of women worldwide are in the labor force, with the rest in unpaid domestic work, which has barely changed over the past twenty-five years. With the outbreak of the epidemic, women's unpaid domestic work and nursing work have increased, further restricting women's ways of finding work. In participation in the economic decision, according to the United Nations Global Gender Gap Report (2022), the global share of women in senior leadership across public and private sectors is only 33%, and that of men is almost 70%. In the private sector alone, women represent only 31% of leaders globally. A lack of leadership in the economy has led to female employees being considered first when companies lay off staff. In terms of politics, in the new United Nations election to be completed in 2020, the United States, which has the largest proportion of female parliamentarians, only accounts for about 30%, and some countries in Oceania do not even have the participation of female parliamentarians. (*Proportion of Women Parliamentarians Worldwide Reaches 'All-Time High,'* 2021) This makes the formulation of laws and policies lack a female perspective and cannot fundamentally safeguard women's rights and interests. From an educational point of view, the pandemic enlarged the gender inequality in obtaining educational opportunities. According to the report (Global Gender Gap Report, 2022), in secondary school enrolment, 16 countries reported a gender gap of more than 10 percentage points, 13 in sub-Saharan Africa, 2 in South Asia (Pakistan and Afghanistan), and 1 in East Asia and other regions. The lack of education reduces the ability and ways of women's self-protection and self-improvement. Worldwide, nearly 70% of the practitioners in the healthcare system are women (Boniol et al., 2019). In terms of salary, however, this 70% of women are paid about 28% (Boniol et al., 2019), less than the remaining 30% of men. This inequality may be due to stereotypes about gender.

On the other hand, because of the social atmosphere that has always been there, men are in a dominant position in society. The state mechanism is established by men, and the state ruling machine is run by men. Men can truly control the operation of society and have an absolute advantage in the economy. (Yu, 2014) The number of people participating in politics accounts for the vast majority of the total number of people, and they also have advantages in health care and education. Therefore, when men are affected by external shocks, such as the epidemic, they are not greatly affected.

In China, according to the results of the Fourth China Women's Social Status Survey (2020) published by China Women's News, from 2010 to 2020, as Chart 4 shows, Chinese women were mainly employed in the tertiary industry. As of 2020, more than the average number of practitioners in the tertiary industry are women. In addition, this survey shows that (Chart 5) in 2020, women

of all ages have a high willingness to participate in democratic political construction (about 30%). In terms of education level (Chart 6), women aged 18-34 have more years of education than men in the same age group, while men and women in the remaining age groups have basically the same number of years of education. In terms of health care, in 2020, women will be more active in seeking medical treatment, and the proportion of childbirth expenses reimbursement or subsidies has increased, as demonstrated by Chart 7.

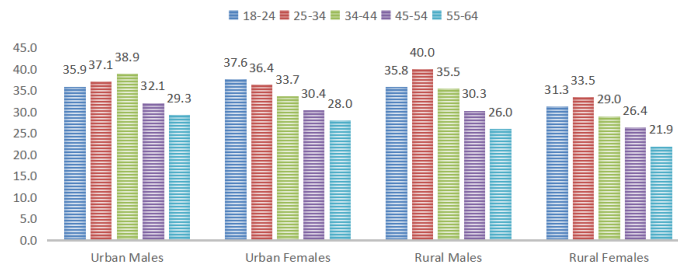
Employment Ratio of Women in Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Industries in 2010 (%) Employment Ratio of Women in Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Industries in 2020 (%)



Chart 4: Employment ratio of women in primary, secondary, and tertiary industries in 2010 and 2020 (%)

Source: Made by Authors according to the Fourth China Women's Social Status Survey.

WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE IN THE VILLAGE/NEIGHBORHOOD COMMITTEE ELECTION (%)



Char 5: Proportion of willingness to participate in the election of village/neighborhood committee members by age and gender (%)

Source: Made by Authors according to the Fourth China Women's Social Status Survey.

AVERAGE YEARS OF SCHOOLING BY GENDER AND AGE

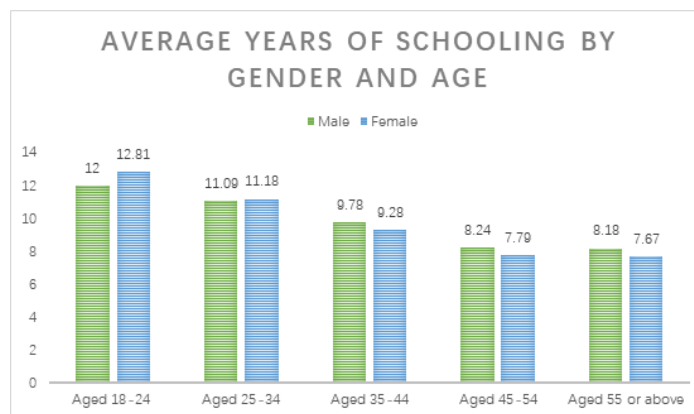


Chart 6: Average years of schooling by gender and age

Source: Made by Authors according to the Fourth China Women's Social Status Survey

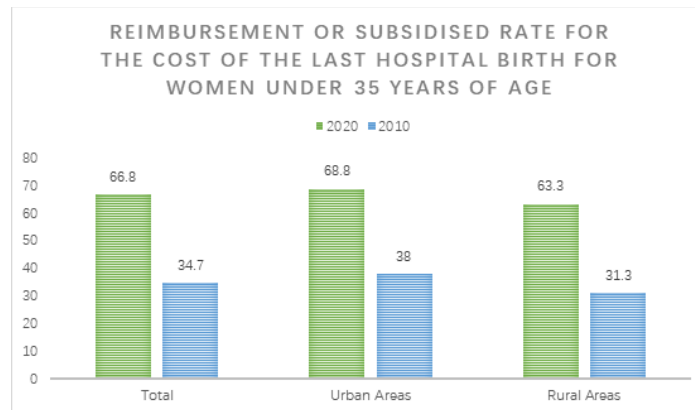


Chart 7: Reimbursement or subsidized rate for the cost of the last hospital birth for women under 35 years of age

From this report, we can see that from 2010 to 2020, on the surface, the status of Chinese women improved to a certain extent in various aspects. However, in essence, due to the insufficient presentation of the report, we cannot see what exactly the positions women hold in the industry, whether they play a real and powerful role in political construction, whether they receive fair treatment in education, and whether all women have received the protection they deserve in terms of health care.

8. Possible Solutions

These previous analyses show that the change in women's status needs to be discussed from the aspects of participation in economic production, participation in political activities, improvement of women's education, and medical and health protection. Similarly, addressing gender issues and improving the status of women also need to start from these aspects. Here, this article briefly gives a few suggestions. The first is to increase the actual participation of women in the economic and political spheres. In other words, let women really play a role in economic and political life and play a certain role. Let them make more policies and regulations which are beneficial for females. Another, focusing on practical solutions to women's health care and education, various institutions and government departments should work together to create a good social atmosphere.

9. Conclusion

To sum up, in this article, we obtained the trend of feminization of mural images by sorting out the female donors and images of Feitian legends in Dunhuang murals in different periods. Through the comparison, we know the trend of feminization and the status of women in the developing period of Dunhuang murals from the Beiliang Dynasty to the Yuan Dynasty. The two trends are not entirely consistent. From the beginning of the Sixteen Kingdoms to the end of the Yuan Dynasty, the degree of feminization of Dunhuang murals generally showed an upward trend, while the status of women showed a sharp decline after the late Tang Dynasty. From this, we came up with a question about how we can analyze women's status and learned that to truly see the status of women; we need to look at issues from a deeper perspective, such as women's labor value and social production participation, participation in politics and power in the economy, and whether it gets deserved protection in health care and education. Afterward, the article comes to today's women's issues. Gender inequality is a serious issue in the whole world at all times. With the occurrence of COVID-19, as the article mentioned before, the process of eliminating the gender gap becomes longer than before, to 132 years in 2020, according to the report by the UN. To solve gender inequality, we need to take this problem seriously and solve it from the four dimensions respectively to make more and more females take participation in political and economic decisions and enjoy the education and health care they deserve. Also, due to the intensified trend of globalization, to solve today's problems, we need to unite international forces, truly realize women's rights, improve men's quality, and then promote the common progress of human society.

10. Limitations and Suggestions

Due to the limited data of this research and the limited ability of the author, it is impossible to systematically study all the murals in the Dunhuang Caves. Therefore, the research has a certain one-sidedness. In addition, this article uses more qualitative research methods, lacking data support, so the subjectivity is reduced to strong. What is more, what the authors would like to explain is through the whole history of ancient feudal China, women's status was maintained at a very low level. What is discussed in this article is the relative status of women in a specific period. That is to say, what Chart 3 previously shows is just a different fluctuation in our research period.

However, the author also believes that this study broadens the research scope of Dunhuang murals and makes the study of Dunhuang murals combine with current events to gain practical significance. In subsequent studies, researchers should try to quantify the data and further strengthen the study of Dunhuang murals through systematic analysis. What is more, as the

characteristic of this article, we do not come up with specific suggestions on how to improve women's status. We really hope this article can attract the attention of the public environment and contribute to the improvement of women's status.

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