
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Analysis of the Artistic Characteristics of Dances in Dunhuang Murals

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| ABSTRACT

Dunhuang art is regarded as a great miracle and treasure in the traditional culture and art of the Chinese nation, with the murals in Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes as the main component. Dunhuang dance is not only one of the important components of Dunhuang murals but also embodies rich content and various expressive techniques. In the long process of development, it gradually formed a unique style. Based on this, taking Dunhuang dance as the research object and combining it with the existing research results, this paper aims to explore the performance techniques and characteristics of Dunhuang dance patterns in China's ancient dance from two perspectives, including its style and characteristics, as well as its artistic characteristics in the dance images of Dunhuang murals, and to ponder over how to inject valuable new vitality into the precious heritage left by ancestors.

| KEYWORDS

Dunhuang Dance; Style and Characteristics; Artistic Characteristics.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

In the 1950s, *Flying Apsaras*, created by a famous dancer in China, Ms Dai Ailian, was the first dance inspired by Dunhuang murals. Since 1978, with the cooperation and concerted efforts of dance art experts and experts dedicated to Dunhuang studies, the Dunhuang murals, which have been dusty for more than a thousand years, have ultimately been "resurrected" in a vivid dance form. Nowadays, the Dunhuang dance that people can enjoy on the TV screen is the result of the extraction and research of the colorful murals in the Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes by contemporary dance artists, marking a new type of dance created through the deliberate study of ancient Dunhuang dance in China and artistic inspiration from the musical-dance images in Dunhuang murals. Additionally, *Thousand Hand Buddha* won praise from hundreds of heads of state at home and abroad for its unique dance style as well as rich and varied content after it became popular at CCTV Spring Festival Gala in 2005. Dunhuang dance has thus attracted increasing attention. On the whole, not only does Dunhuang dance reflect the unique vitality of the cultural heritage of the Chinese nation, but it is also a concrete reflection of the excellent culture of the Chinese nation. Under the background of global economic and cultural integration, the authors will explore the historical and research value of the Dunhuang dance in this paper.

2. Origin of Dunhuang Musical Dance

Dunhuang, located at the western end of Hexi Corridor in Gansu Province and the intersection of three roads leading from the Central Plains to the Western Regions, is a bright pearl on the ancient Silk Road. After Dunhuang disappeared from history for more than 600 years, a Taoist named Wang Yuanzhan discovered Sutra Cave in Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes in 1900. More than 50,000 files found in the Sutra Cave (Cave 17 of Mogao Grottoes) in Dunhuang that year contained extremely rich and precious information about ancient musical dances. As the case stands, the smooth development of the research and practice of ancient musical dance in China benefited from a host of traceable historical evidence, including more than 140 sutra illustration paintings in Mogao Grottoes, hundreds of musical-dance images, and thousands of musical instrument images recorded in 33 secular

musical-dance murals, and rare documents represented by pipa scores and dance scores of Tang Dynasty and Five Dynasties preserved in the Sutra Cave. Specifically, the murals in the Mogao Grottoes reflect diversified images and styles, including the primitive musical-dance forms represented by "Huteng Opera", "Hu Spinning Dance" and "String Music", the classical musical-dance images represented by "Butoh Music" and "Hu-music", the religious music images represented by folk songs and music for offering sacrifices to gods, and the musical-dance images depicting the daily entertainment scenes of the aristocrats and the scenes of men and women feasting. In addition, from the perspective of its content, the musical-dance images in the murals typically focus on expressing labor-related scenarios and reflect primitive movement characteristics. From the perspective of the aesthetic effect of dance, the aforementioned musical-dance images not only involve majestic and solemn sacrificial scenes but also show carnival and dance rhythm. In closing, from the perspective of dance appreciation, they can be used to appreciate not only the magnificent costumes but also the bold and unconstrained dances, as well as the scenes of festively singing and dancing. Thus it can be seen that the musical-dance images of Dunhuang, like a lighthouse that leads us to veritably understand the music and dance culture of ancient China, have promoted the fire-new development of continuous communication and integration of Chinese culture in the long history.

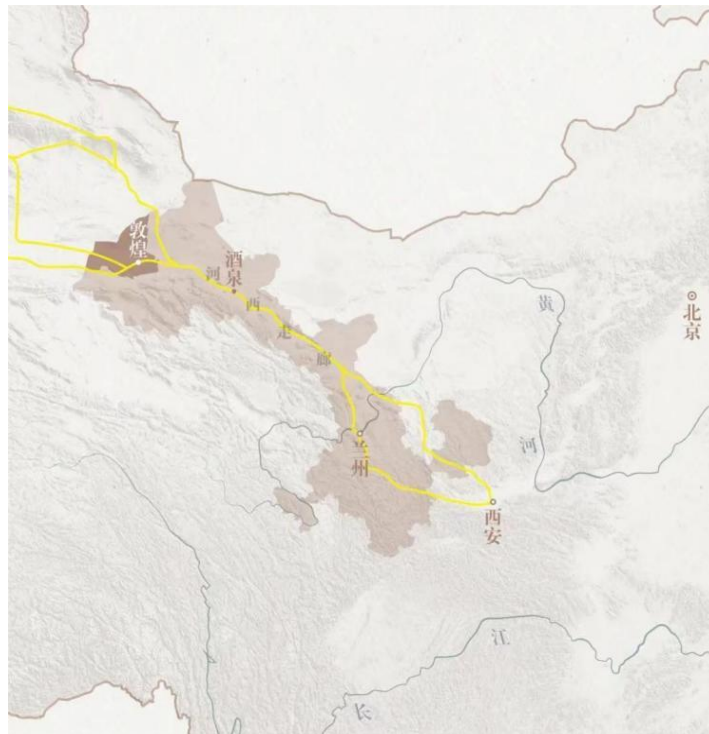


Figure 1. Schematic Diagram of the Geographical Location of Dunhuang

3. Style and Characteristics of Dunhuang Dance in Different Historical Periods

Mr Duan Wenjie, a famous scholar in the field of Dunhuang studies, argues that "the musical dance in Dunhuang murals lasted for more than a thousand years from the Sixteen Kingdoms to the Song and Yuan Dynasties." The musical dance in these murals has inherited the artistic achievements of musical dance since Han, Wei, and Jin Dynasties. Moreover, after the evolution and development of the Northern Wei Dynasty, Sui Dynasty, Tang Dynasty, Song Dynasty, Western Xia Dynasty, and Yuan Dynasty, it evolved into an artistic system of musical dance with historical eras and different styles and characteristics.

3.1 Early Stage (A.D. 397-581)

The Dunhuang murals in the early stage originated from Northern Liang, Northern Wei, Western Wei, and Northern Zhou Dynasties. During this period, the dancing postures present similar characteristics, that is, the full-bodied western-region style, with flying Apsaras musicians and dancers, heavenly musicians and dancers, Buddhist musicians and dancers, as well as transformed beings musicians and dancers as the main contents, and single-person performance as the main form. In addition, the figures in these murals usually show short and stout stature, a bare upper part of the body, a high nose, and deep eyes, as well as bare-chested and half-naked images, with the male as the main musician and dancer. Moreover, in terms of layout, the early murals are generally composed of heavenly and flying apsaras musicians and dancers at the top of the murals, with Buddhist musicians and dancers at the center and yaksha and donor musicians and dancers at the bottom of the murals. In a nutshell, it reflects a horizontal hierarchical form that is different from the later layout.

3.2 Mid-term Stage (A.D. 581-618)

In the mid-term, the Dunhuang murals officially entered the stage of connecting the past with the future, that is, the Sui Dynasty. During this period, the number of flying apsaras showed a significant increase, and the figures became more elegant, slim, and graceful visually. Meanwhile, with the gradual disappearance of heavenly musicians and dancers, as well as Buddha's warrior attendants, some murals depicting real-life scenes appeared. For this reason, the musical-dance forms appearing in these murals were further called secular musical dance.

3.3 Period of Great Prosperity (A.D. 618-907)

Benefiting from the prosperous economy, puissant national strength, and high level of trade and cultural exchanges of the Tang Dynasty, the golden age of the Silk Road on land followed. More importantly, the eastward transmission of Buddhism has brought Dunhuang murals into their heyday. Overall, there are a total of 122 caves with musical-dance images of the Tang Dynasty. Compared with the gloomy expression shown by the figures in the early murals, the figures in the murals of this period are more vigorous and full of vitality. Moreover, the shapes of the figures originally with the western-region style have also been more in line with the Han nationality style. To put it concretely, regarding appearance, the figures' faces become fuller, and their bodies become stronger and thinner. Regarding clothing, men are dressed in robes (i.e., pleated robes with soft gauze towels for wrapping heads) and Hu costumes, with a significant difference between official and folk customs. In contrast, women are dressed in narrow-sleeved Confucian shirts or long skirts, which are waist-high to the chest, showing the graceful and elegant image of aristocratic ladies in the Tang Dynasty, thereby reappearing the free, open, and eclectic social outlook of the Tang Dynasty. In terms of themes, the murals at this time have become more abundant than in the previous period. Meanwhile, in terms of layout, the murals at this time changed the layout of the flat dharma-preaching paintings that were commonly used in the early stage and placed the content of musical dance at the bottom of the whole picture to increase the area of the scene and the diversity of figures in modeling, until it developed into a giant three-dimensional sutra illustration dharma-preaching paintings. It can be seen that the craftsmen who were responsible for painting murals at that time had demonstrated a fairly high level of aesthetic ability and technical level.

3.4 Late Stage (A.D. 960-1368)

Three dynasties, including Song Dynasty, the Western Xia Dynasty, and Yuan Dynasty, are important historical stages in the development of the musical-dance culture. Nevertheless, influenced by numerous reasons, such as weak national strength and regime change, the Dunhuang Grottoes were not taken seriously by the rulers, so the murals in the late stage gradually declined. During this period, the number of newly-built grottoes decreased, and the content, theme, and form of the murals are the same as in the past, without introducing innovative thinking and unique style. Under the influence of the aforesaid factors, the murals in Dunhuang Grottoes entered a stylized stage. Specifically, secular musical dance shows the characteristics of the narrow formation and single scene. Compared with individual large-scale grottoes with fine drawings, some grottoes no longer draw musical-dance images, with some crudely-made paintings depicting large-scale scenes appearing. Additionally, the figures in the musical-dance murals at this time not only present a dull and clumsy manner, a rigid and rough image but also lack vitality, while the figure modeling is still dominated by the image of the traditional Chinese painting of beautiful women. On the same note, the murals in some grottoes are no longer presented in the form of musicians and dancers but in the form of a mandala. The image of a bodhisattva holding a musical instrument also appeared in the mandala or other occasions. This kind of situation is most typical in Cave 465 of the Mogao Grottoes and Cave 3 of Yulin. Given that the major rulers of the Yuan Dynasty believed in Esoteric Buddhism, the Esoteric Buddhism of the late murals was in a dominant position. Simply put, the musical-dance murals of the Yuan Dynasty are self-contained and unique from costumes to movements.

4. Formation and Development of Dunhuang Dance

The Dunhuang Grottoes, located in the northwest of China, recorded a large number of murals concerning Dunhuang musical dance, which reflected the musical-dance culture of different times in the past. More precisely, during the Northern Dynasties, when Buddhism and the Han nationality were initially integrated into the culture, the musical dance was mainly based on rough and wild images. In the Tang Dynasty, when the styles of the Northern barbarian tribes in ancient China gradually prevailed, the musical dance of the Central Plains, which gradually became gentle, was integrated with the strong characteristics of the western regions. From the Five Dynasties to the Song Dynasty, musical dance was not as vivid as that of the Tang Dynasty, but it was still influenced by the Tang Dynasty (Hu, 2018). Dunhuang Dance, as a branch of China's classical dance, was further created by dancers and academic researchers inspired by the natural dances in the musical-dance murals with various styles and features as well as rich historical details. Through the static Dunhuang musical-dance paintings, the painters express their vision and spiritual feelings through body language in the form of movements, thus presenting an integrated visual feast for the audience (Li, 2019). Dunhuang dance has similarities and differences with other traditional dances in China. For instance, the gestures, hip movements, and other factors of the Dunhuang dance are similar to the traditional dance of the Dai nationality in China, but they are quite different in breathing, footwork, as well as movement, and content presented. In terms of facial expression and temperament, Dunhuang dance is similar to classical dance but slightly different from it in some body movements and rhythms. The "playing-pipa-behind

posture” is also one of the more common dance steps in Dunhuang dance, which originates from the shape of the dancer playing the reverse pipa in the *Musicians and Dancers Painting* in Cave 112 of the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang, China (Zhou, 2010). The artistic expressions of playing-pipa-behind posture and flying Apsaras are very distinctive in Dunhuang paintings, showing the extremely high artistic level of Dunhuang paintings. Likewise, the elegant and charming posture of rebounding pipa, standing with knees bent, twisting the leg, and hooking the feet has evolved into a major feature of Dunhuang dance. Dunhuang musical dance is simple and dignified, while the Dunhuang dance derived from it is the outcome of the collision between traditional culture and contemporary art. In this respect, experts and scholars develop and constantly explore its cultural value through exploration, to promote the sustainable development of the Dunhuang dance.

5. Artistic Characteristics of Dunhuang Dance

5.1 S-Shaped Dancing Posture in Dunhuang Dance

The S-shaped dancing posture is regarded as a very representative dancing posture in Dunhuang dance. The prototype of an S-shaped dancing posture originated from a Buddhist musician and dancer who played the reverse pipa in Cave 112 of Mogao Grottoes, with its graceful dancing posture showing strong artistic appeal. In essence, dance is presented by the dancer's body language. S-shaped dance steps endow Dunhuang dance with unique characteristics. Different from the traditional dance in China, the S-shaped dance steps in Dunhuang Dance utilize people's imagination of their movements, shapes, and costumes to express their corresponding thoughts and feelings. Therefore, it is imperative to master the twisting and bending radians of the head and neck, waist, hips, and legs, as well as feet, in dance to present the unique rhythm of the S-shaped curve (Chigger, 2023). Similar to other Dunhuang dances, the S-shape presents the lines, structures, and movements of the body in a soft arc through three curves, thus making the dancing posture loose, stretching but still elegant and graceful. The aesthetic features contained in such lines not only show the beauty of the coordination of the body but also give the Dunhuang dance a gentle and elegant aesthetic feeling. Concurrently, it also reflects the artists' unique thinking about dance. The dancers dance with three S-shaped curves, presenting the lightness and flexibility of the flying Apsaras dance, as well as a feminine and vigorous style unique to oriental women. More importantly, Dunhuang dance expresses the humanistic features of Dunhuang with rich and colorful body language (Chigger, 2023). Compared with traditional murals and colored sculpture arts, which use the color of lines to express people's emotions, it is in a position to better reflect the rhythm and changes of people's emotions, thereby generating a strong emotional resonance among viewers (Zhou, 2022). As outlined above, Dunhuang dance forms a special sense of rhythm and emotional tension with its graceful dance steps and dancing posture, which makes the images of music and dance in the murals vivid (Yang, 2015). Moreover, the S-shaped dancing posture also endows the Dunhuang dance with the grace of flexibility and the strength of rigidity, which fully reflects the unique charm of the Dunhuang dance.



Figure 2. Dancer Playing the Reverse Pipa in Cave 112 of Mogao Grottoes

5.2 Regional Features of Dunhuang Dance

The Dunhuang dance reflects the vitality of the Dunhuang murals, which not only have unique oriental aesthetic characteristics but also show distinct local characteristics due to different cultural conflicts and integration. Besides, through long-term development and evolution, Dunhuang dance is a special art form that combines the folk customs, living customs, and artistic characteristics of various regions. Apart from presenting unique national and folk customs, it is also an extremely inclusive art form.

In other words, after years of development, the Dunhuang dance is an important embodiment of the cultural exchange between China and the West. A host of dance steps in Dunhuang dance, including raising eyebrows, moving eyes, rebounding pipa, twisting waist and hip, rotating body, barefoot, hooking feet, etc., all without exception, give people an obvious exotic dance style as if to place the viewer on the important route of ancient Silk Road such as Uygur, Iran, Russia, and even further India (Q. Li, 2010). In the Tang Dynasty, benefiting from the unprecedented prosperity of culture, Dunhuang dance was dominated by the Tang style, which was also perfectly integrated with the western-region style. In particular, the diversified factors in the dance, such as human body shape, techniques, and footwork, all reflect the unique national customs and exotic features in the Dunhuang dance. The regional characteristics of Dunhuang dance are not only reflected in body language and costumes but also in tunes and music. In the interest of carrying forward the quintessence of Dunhuang culture and showing the enchantment of Dunhuang dance, the large-scale music and dance epic entitled *Silk Road* combines the connotations of eastern and western music cultures to perfectly integrate the seemingly different ancient tones of Han nationality with the tones of Central Asian music, thus embodying the spirit of cultural exchange and integration of the Silk Road. On the same note, the rich regional characteristics of the music culture also deepened the cultural connotation of Dunhuang dance, and sublimated its artistic expression, thus reflecting the rich and colorful regional characteristics.



Figure 3. Dunhuang Song-and-dance Drama Entitled the Silk Road

5.3 Image and Spirit in Dunhuang Dance: A Case Study of "Flying Apsaras."

Rather than a traditional dance passed down from China through the ages, Dunhuang Dance is created by modern dancers and scholars in combination with music, dance, and other artistic forms contained in Dunhuang murals. Dunhuang dance embodies numerous artistic features, with the prototypes all taken from Dunhuang murals, such as flying Apsaras of various generations, Bodhisattva Vajrapani and heavenly Kings of Buddhism, and musicians and dancers from Northern Liang to Northern Zhou Dynasty, which have distinctive image characteristics. Among them, the most representative is the "flying Apsaras" in Dunhuang murals. Many musical dances in Dunhuang murals are displayed in the form of flying Apsaras, showing a natural, free, and unrestrained artistic effect (Yang, 2015). In the murals, the image of flying Apsaras is mostly half-naked with flowing ribbons. The dancers in murals have different movements and postures, either above the air or soaring in the clouds. Some dancers roll on the ground or stand upside down, while others hover in mid-air, showing completely different postures (T. T. Li, 2010). Inspired by these images, the choreographer introduced smooth and tactful movements based on the S-shaped dancing posture to realize the changes of different postures, thus presenting the expression and shape of flying Apsaras. The image of flying Apsaras flying without wings marks an expression of "freedom". In Dunhuang dance, the image of flying Apsaras is typically dominated by light, slow and coherent steps, supplemented by light and smooth walking in circles, broken steps, as well as stretching and flying jumps and extension of the body, thus fully demonstrating the beautiful dancing posture. While vividly presenting the beautiful scenery of flying freely in the sky with fluttering ribbons of flying Apsaras, it also embodies the high praise of artistic spirit and human nature itself, the refutation of feudal ethics, thoughts, and spirit, and the yearning for the meaning of unrestrained freedom. In short, it vividly expresses the artistic charm of Dunhuang murals and the cultural charm of Dunhuang dances, and more importantly, it embodies the artistic-conception beauty of China's traditional culture.



Figure 5. Flying Apsaras Musician and Dancer Offering Flowers in Cave 327 of Mogao Grottoes

6. Contemporary Development of Dunhuang Dance Art

Dunhuang dance art, as a spiritual exchange spanning thousands of years of time and space, symbolizes the cultural consciousness and pursuit of the art of the Chinese nation and has made a great contribution to the development of China's culture and art history. Moreover, it has consistently played a positive role in the artistic creation of later generations. Under the current background of modernization and globalization, such a profound cultural heritage should shine brilliantly. As far as Dunhuang culture, which is a part of the world's cultural treasures, is concerned, it is even more necessary to establish relevant cultural institutions and then collect relevant, valuable information from the perspective of cultural centers and museums to promote the research for the purpose of carrying Dunhuang dance art culture, thus effectively promoting Dunhuang culture in the world. As a matter of fact, it is extremely limited to rely solely on stage display to spread the charm of Dunhuang dance. Hence, it is also of great importance to strengthen the relevant communications media. In the current era of a huge amount of information, it is an indispensable way to show the unique charm of Dunhuang dance art by strengthening the dissemination and innovating the dissemination methods. Also, art itself should be constantly innovated and developed during the process of creation (Wang, 2021). In other words, in the study of Dunhuang dance, it is strongly recommended to excavate, sort out and create a more viable Dunhuang dance from the characteristics of the times and the creation of Dunhuang dancers instead of merely taking Dunhuang murals as an artistic carrier. The large-scale song-and-dance drama entitled *Silk Road* is a typical example, which not only transforms the ancient dance music materials of Dunhuang into the important content of modern Dunhuang dance music creation but also effectively embodies the inheritance of tradition. Meanwhile, it "revived" and creatively developed China's traditional culture. Furthermore, while showing the artistic charm of Dunhuang murals and the cultural charm of China's traditional music, as well as the achievements and level of the Chinese nation's literary and artistic creation, it also reveals to the world the brand-new achievements in the creation and development of China's music and dance in the new era. In the long run, the innovation and development of Dunhuang dance art should not only be bold in innovation and breakthrough but also consider how to better realize the inheritance and development of this art from the perspective of social development, intending to better promote its spread and sustainable development.

7. Conclusion

To sum up, the rich content and characteristics of Dunhuang musical dance have left a precious cultural heritage for future generations. As one of the world's intangible cultural heritage, Dunhuang musical dance is one of the important components that cannot be ignored in human history and civilization. Moreover, Dunhuang dance, as an important art form of the Dunhuang nation, has evolved into a dazzling gem among the artistic treasures of the Chinese nation due to its unique charm. In the context of modernization and globalization, Dunhuang dance should continuously adapt to the changes of the times and then better integrate with modern civilization. Simultaneously, we should inherit, protect and carry forward the national tradition, as well as promote the development of national culture. In particular, we should make use of diversified cultural resources represented by cultural centers and museums and innovate the media communication methods to vigorously spread the excellent Dunhuang culture around the world so that it can stand on the world stage with a unique posture.

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