

## THE INFLUENCE OF POLITICAL EVENTS AND IDEOLOGY ON THE FORMATION OF THE PICTURE CONCEPT OF DUNHUANG CAVES FRESCOS

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### Abstract

*The article is devoted to an analysis of the figurative concepts of the Dunhuang cave wall paintings. It was determined that, despite the fact that the Dunhuang wall painting is an example of Buddhist art, it represents a syncretism of Buddhism and local beliefs—Taoism and Confucianism—which manifested itself in the depiction of characters from Buddhism and Taoism in one plot. Dunhuang cave murals are not uniform in style and execution techniques. Its genesis testifies that in the early stages it was a literal borrowing of the ancient Indian traditions of Buddhist mural painting; instead, there was a gradual layering of local painting techniques from the Central Plains of China. This led to the diversification of cave wall paintings of later periods and eventually led to the formation of a specific stylistic direction of "Chinese secular Buddhism," in which realistic painting plays an important role—the portrait genre of benefactors and the landscape genre of "mountains and waters."*

**Keywords:** *Dunhuang murals, China, Concept, Style, Techniques, Political events, Ideology*

### Introduction

The Dunhuang Caves are named after the ancient city of Dunhuang and include the most famous Mogao Caves (莫高窟), the Western Thousand Buddha Caves (西千佛洞 Xīqiānfó Dòng), the Eastern Thousand Buddha Caves (东千佛洞 Dōngqiānfó Dòng), the Five Cave Temples (五个庙石窟 Wǔgèmiào shíkū). Together, they form a complex of Dunhuang caves with unique frescoes and sculptures. The Dunhuang Caves are considered one of the four main cave complexes in China.

The Dunhuang murals were not widely known until the Qing era (1636–1922). Only the local Buddhist residents knew about them; the murals were damaged, and foreign invaders stole tens of thousands of artefacts.

The appearance of Dunhuang's unique mural painting is associated with the spread of Buddhism in this region [1], and these processes pursued primarily political and ideological goals since adherence to a certain religion was determined exclusively by the religious views of

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the ruler. Buddhism, borrowed by China from India, merged seamlessly with the traditional Chinese teachings of Taoism (道教 religious and secular) and Confucianism. That is why the borrowed Buddhist art was not perceived as foreign and gradually became the main art of the Dunhuang caves, both in wall painting and in sculpture. Buddhists were the initiators of the transformation of grottoes into places of religious worship and their own dwellings; this tradition arose in Dunhuang Mogao in the 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. Despite the fact that as Buddhism spread, the development of temples directly was more active than that of cave complexes, we can talk about two lines in the development of Buddhist religious objects that went in parallel. The Buddhist art of the Dunhuang Caves reached its peak during the Tang Dynasty (618–907), when there were more than 1,000 of them.

The original reason for the spread of Buddhist fresco painting was the need to visually explain to people the content of the religious doctrine of sutras, that is, to promote the introduction of a new teaching. This proves the content of Dunhuang's early frescoes dedicated to the biography of the Buddha (the so-called 佛传故事 "Genealogy of the Buddha"): "Feeding the tiger by renouncing his body," "Saving pigeons by cutting his body," "Nine-coloured deer", "Transformation of 500 robbers into Buddhas", etc. In fact, these early frescoes played the role of ideological propaganda against the background of the difficult living conditions of the population and declared certain ideals of good and evil [2].

However, during the genesis of Dunhuang's wall painting, the departure towards realism becomes more noticeable, the means of artistic imagery are improved and diversified, and the techniques of fresco execution are supplemented.

Originally, the name "Dunhuang" was mentioned in the report of the Chinese traveler and diplomat Zhang Qian (died in 114 BC) to the Han dynasty emperor Wu-di. It is believed that this name is a Chinese transcription of the name "Dunhong" (敦龕) in the language of the local ethnic group (dun – big, huang – prosperous).

Today, the figurative concept of the Dunhuang caves (wall painting combined with sculpture) is considered the quintessence of national style, so it has become a source of inspiration for many modern Chinese artists who borrow plots, artistic techniques, and colours and creatively reinterpret them.

Therefore, the discovery of Dunhuang's unique art at the beginning of the 20th century fundamentally changed the national methods of artistic creativity and opened up new opportunities for the development of new lines of national art. Moreover, some of Dunhuang's works of art were direct examples of modern works; it is worth mentioning the modern Chinese dance "Hand with Sword Guanyin," created under the influence of the "Guanyin with Thousand Hands" sculpture in the Mogao Caves, and the modern dance drama "Flower Rain on the Silk Road." The Dunhuang grottoes have become the subject of many literary works and paintings. An important mission of Dunhuang in modern conditions is its transformation into the main tourist attraction of Gansu Province.

The murals of Dunhuang are represented in more than 100 caves in Mogao, dated to the periods of Sui (581–618), late Tang (618–907), Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (907–960), and The Northern Song (960–1127). Since the rulers actively supported Buddhism and financed the decoration of the caves, there are secular images of them alongside the religious subjects. During the Yuan period (1271–1368), the number of newly created caves decreased; there were only 8 of them. The main period lasting 460 years is called the time from the era of the Five Dynasties and ten kingdoms (907–960) to the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368). After the Yuan period, the construction of new grottoes as places of religious worship ceased, and the cave temple complex itself gradually fell into disrepair.

Sources were processed in the following areas:

- 1) general problems of protection, preservation and museification of historical sites [3–10],
- 2) historical heritage in the context of general processes of urbanization [11],
- 3) the influence of the surrounding environment on the perception of architecture [12],
- 4) restoration aspects and the concept of art in restoration [13, 14],
- 5) English-language sources dedicated to the Dunhuang wall painting [15–17],
- 6) Chinese sources devoted to the Dunhuang wall painting [1, 2, 18–22].

The purpose of the study is as follows: to analyse the historical stages of the creation of Dunhuang murals, the figurative concepts and plots of frescoes of different periods, the execution techniques and main characteristics, the presence of external influences, and, based on this, to formulate the defining features of the murals of different periods and to characterise the genesis of Dunhuang murals under the influence of political events, ideology, and prevailing preferences.

## Materials and methods

The tasks of the research determined the choice of general scientific research methods. Thus, the method of historical analysis made it possible to determine the reasons for the appearance of the Dunhuang cave temple complex and its political and ideological significance in the history of China at different periods. The method of artistic analysis made it possible to determine artistic means and figurative concepts in different periods. The method of comparative analysis made it possible to trace and argue the genesis of the figurative concept of the Dunhuang caves. The method of religious analysis made it possible to analyse the influence of prevailing religious teachings on the artistic imagery of murals and sculptures. The method of photofixation and the grapho-analytical method made it possible to draw up the evidence base for judgements and conclusions.

## Results and discussion

### *Periodization of Dunhuang Caves*

Today, Dunhuang Art, often called Mogao Cave Art, includes 735 caves with 45,000m<sup>2</sup> of 4th–11th century AD frescoes, more than 3,000 colourful sculptures, and five wooden buildings from the Tang and Song periods. Three caves are dated to the Northern Liang Dynasty (*Běi Liáng*), Northern Wei (*Běi Wèi*) – twelve caves, Western Wei (*Xī Wèi*) – ten, Northern Zhou (*Běi Zhōu*) – fifteen, in the era of the Southern and Northern Dynasties (or sixteen kingdoms) – seven caves, in the Sui era – seventy-seven, in the Tang era – more than a thousand, of which only two hundred and thirty-two caves have survived, in the Five Dynasties and ten kingdoms era (907–960) thirty-three, in the Song era (The Northern Song) (960–1127 AD), forty-three (248 reconstructed), in the Western Xia (*Xī Xià*) era (1038–1227 AD), eighty-two, in the era of Yuan (1271–1368), ten caves. The analysis of the periodization of the new caves' appearance shows that before the Sui and Tang periods, the number of caves was relatively small and did not increase too quickly, in contrast to the Sui (581–618) and especially the Tang (618–907).

In the Yulin Caves (榆林 *Yulin kū*), forty-two caves were excavated from the Tang Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty: eighteen dated to the Tang period, ten to the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (*Wǔ dài shí guó*) period, one to the Song period, eight from the Xī Xià to the Yuan period, and five to the Qing period.

There are twenty-two caves in *Xī Qiānfó Dòng* (Western Thousand Buddha Caves), where one is dated to the Northern Wei era, four to the Zhou era, two to the Sui era, and three to the Tang era, from Xī Xià to Yuan – two caves. Twenty-three caves are located in *Dōng Qiānfó*

*Dòng* (Eastern Thousand Buddha Caves), five of which are decorated with murals and sculptures.

There are 23 caves in the East Thousand Buddha Cave, including 14 caves in the West Cliff, five of which contain statues and murals; four of the nine caves in the East Cliff contain statues and murals. The earliest caves were opened in the Xia Dynasty, and they were repaired during the Yuan, Qing, and Republic of China periods.

There are nine caves in the eastern rocks, four of which are decorated with frescoes and sculptures.

The five Cave Temples (*Wǔgèmiào shíkū*) have nineteen caves, four of which have wall paintings. Originally, these caves were dated to the final period of the Northern Dynasties (420–589); later, they were rebuilt in the Xī Xià and Yuan eras. Three caves are dated to the era of Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (*Wǔ dài shí guó*) and one to the Song era (in the period 848–1026).

Restorations of the cave interiors were known during the Xī Xià, Yuan, and Qing periods, as well as during the People's Republic of China, when the protection, restoration, and promotion of Dunhuang's unique heritage became a government programme.

#### ***Characteristic features of Dunhuang's frescoes and their originality***

The uniqueness of the Dunhuang frescoes was analyzed according to their defining characteristics. The first defining feature is the anatomy of the figures. In particular, the techniques of depicting people and deities were studied in comparison with other techniques of traditional Chinese painting. A comparative analysis of the Dunhuang frescoes with the wall paintings of the tombs of the Southern and Northern Dynasties (or Sixteen Kingdoms) (420–589) made it possible to determine the main differences in the depiction of human figures – naked or semi-naked with respect to anatomy in the Dunhuang frescoes and dressed in wide robes with large sleeves, without observing the anatomical construction in the wall painting of the tombs of the Southern and Northern Dynasties, which corresponded to the moral and ethical principles of Confucianism. It is believed that this tradition of depicting naked or half-naked figures was directly borrowed from the Buddhist wall paintings of India.

The second defining feature is the technique of retouching and colouring. In the early stages, ancient Chinese wall painting was marked by a certain convention. In the Warring States period (*Zhànguó Shidài*) (475–221 BC), a red dot was placed on the heads of the figures; only in the Western Han period (206 BC–25 AD) and Eastern Han (25–220 (or 581) AD) conveyed the colour of the face in red, but without conveying volume. The technique of polychrome Buddhist wall painting was borrowed from India; in Chinese conditions, the figures' bodies are painted with cinnabar, darker at the bottom and lighter at the top, with white accents. Gradually, a special technology for retouching and colouring was developed. In the Dunhuang region, it was refined and combined with the local techniques of retouching and coloring, resulting in a new technique of volumetric figures that reached perfection by the Tang period.

Let's trace how the anatomy of the figures and the technique of retouching and coloring are maintained in the images of religious orientation (Buddha, Bodhisattvas, fetians, etc.) and ordinary people, since there is an element of realism in Dunhuang's wall paintings. Here too, significant differences are noticeable: the images of deities have a fantastic character, strange clothes, and are generally canonical and replicated, while the images of ordinary people, mostly in the Han clothes of Central China, are more realistic and individual. Similarly, retouching and colouring techniques are used differently in the images of deities and people: in the image of deities, the Shiu technique is used; in the image of people, local techniques are used. In the wall painting, bright saturated polychromy is used with the addition of mascara and the application of thick layers of colour for greater expressiveness of the wall paintings [18].

The third defining feature of Dunhuang's frescoes is the artistic means of expressing canonical subjects based on the synthesis of the Indian Buddhist canon and local techniques of artistic expression, as well as the canonical subjects themselves. Stylistic differences in the interpretation of Buddhist subjects in the times of different dynasties are noted. From the beginning of the appearance of the first Dunhuang caves to the Yuan Dynasty, the style of mural painting evolved. The frescoes of the Three Kingdoms (Cao Wei, Shu Han, and Eastern Wu) (220–265), Southern and Northern Dynasties (420–589), and Tang (618–907) periods varied in terms of plot structure and artistic imagery, and there was a partial borrowing of the traditions of Indian Buddhist wall painting combined with the artistic techniques of the Han period (Western Han (206 BC–25 AD), Eastern Han (25–220 or 581 AD)). By the Tang period, the spread of Buddhism in China had reached its peak, which is confirmed by the sharp increase in the number of new Mogao caves, decorated with religious canonical wall paintings that combine borrowed canons of Indian Buddhism with local cultural and artistic techniques.

There are six main such canonical subjects in Dunhuang's religious frescoes with certain variations.

1. *Buddha image (Fó Xiàng Hua)*. This is the main image of the Buddhist cult in both wall painting and temple sculpture. Buddha images have varied, with some canonical background to each image (Buddhas of the Three Ages, Buddhas of the Seven Ages, Shakyas, Dobao Buddhas, Bhadra Kalpa, etc.). The images of Bodhisattvas (Manjushri, Samantabhadra, Avalokiteśvara, and Mahāsthāmaprāpta) were also diverse. The heroes of religious stories are Heavenly Lord Tianlong Babu, King of Dragons, Flying Apsaras, King of Birds Garuda with Golden Feathers, and Heavenly Musician Kinnara. There are 12,208 Buddha sculptures in the Mogao Caves, and these subjects are presented in 933 frescoes; therefore, they are the main visual representation of the doctrine of Buddhism.

2. *Life in heaven and hell*, the so-called *Viparinatam*, which visually expresses the esoteric canons of Buddhism about life after death, and wall painting techniques visually express religious postulates.

3. *Portrait genre*. This is an image of a noble benefactor, a supporter of Buddhism, who financed the construction and decoration of the cave. Often, next to the benefactor, members of his family and even servants were depicted, in order to provide them with the patronage of the deities.

4. *Decorative elements*. They did not carry a certain religious content but served as a means of decorating the subjects of the wall painting. Such ornaments had a large number of variations since they were not limited by the canon.

5. *Historical plots*. This narrative genre had the purely ideological purpose of attracting the maximum number of believers for the propagation of Buddhist canons and dharma. Historical plots were directly related to the history of Buddhism and were divided into six options:

a) *Depictions of scenes from the life of Shakyamuni Buddha* based on ancient Indian epics, mythology, and folklore, with a clear logical sequence from the moment of birth to his departure from the world (six story lines from 87 images in cave number 290 of the Zhou period;

b) *The depiction of the good deeds of Shakyamuni during his previous incarnations*, the embodiment of the doctrine of karma in the theory of reincarnation (cause-effect), and the promotion of asceticism (early frescoes "Feeding the Tiger with Sattva by Rejecting His Body 萨埵那舍身饲虎", "Rescuing Doves by Cutting of His Body by King Sivi 尸毗王割肉救鸽", "Saving people by relinquishing himself to the nine-coloured deer 九色鹿舍己救人", "Nurturing parents by cutting off his body Susheti 须闍提割肉奉亲");

c) *The conversion of sinners and the story of salvation by the Buddha*, his disciples, and followers—wall paintings of strange content, quite dramatic, with a complex plot (murals "500 robbers become Buddhas 五百强盗成佛", "Crown Prince Shan Yu throws himself into the sea to bring treasures 沙弥守戒自杀", "Suicide of Shami 善友太子入海取宝");

d) *Buddhist legends and stories*: stories from annals, including from Buddhist sacred texts, sometimes associated with the higher clergy (depicted on the front walls of caves 323 and 72 and also on the four wedge-shaped planes of the inner surface of the vault, in the upper part of the tunnel, and in unimportant places in the corners);

e) *Images of metaphorical content*—semi-legendary tales of ancient India and Southeast Asia under the influence of Buddhist teachings – "The Protector of the Elephant and the Golden Elephant 象护与金象", "The Lion with Golden Fur 金毛狮子", etc.;

f) *Stories of the acquisition of canons by Xuan Tsang in the Tang period* – six frescoes of the *Xī Xià* period.

6. *The landscape genre "Mountains-Waters"* (山水画 *Shān Shuǐ*) is iconic for Buddhism and for Chinese culture as a whole, as it permeates various types of art; in all the caves, there is a landscape in the wall paintings, both based on the Buddhist canons of the heavenly pure land (Sukhavati) and real ("Images of Wu Tai Shan" in cave 61).

Additional to the canonical plots are the following three:

a) Genre "Flowers and Birds" (花鸟画 *Huaniāohuà*).

b) Plots on the theme of Taoist doctrine (late Northern Wei period, Western Wei period—paintings on the upper part of cave 249).

c) Additional elements of murals are architectural buildings (建筑画 *Jiànzhùhuà*), utensils (器物画 *Qìwùhuà*), and animals (动物画 *Dòngwùhuà*).

Thus, Dunhuang murals, despite their religious orientation, are characterised by a variety of subjects and the evolution of artistic techniques from period to period based on the synthesis of borrowed and local traditions.

A separate aspect is related to the style of wall paintings. A comparison of frescoes from different periods proves that in the early periods (Northern Liang, Northern Wei, Western Wei, and Northern Zhou dynasties), the frescoes inherited the styles of the Western Regions (Buddhism 西域 *Xiyu* styles), as the style had a significant influence on grotto art in the northwestern part of the Central Plains of China. Later, the style of Dunhuang murals reached its peak during the Sui and Tang periods, after which the level of artistic expressiveness of the style began to decline during the Five Dynasties (Wu De), Song, Xi Xia, Yuan, and Qing periods.

The main feature of the expressiveness of the style of wall paintings in their heyday is the deliberate violation by artists of strict Buddhist image canons, introducing subjects from the real lives of people ("Dancers and Singers," "Court Ladies," "Businessmen from Xiyui," "Foreign Monks," "Warlords," etc.). Thus, abstract and sometimes semi-mythical religious characters were given a certain connection with a rich social life.

Certain changes take place in the replacement of canonical subjects during the Tang and Five Dynasties with murals of a realistic nature (portraits of benefactors, historical events, scenes from life). The plot "西方净土 Image of the Western Pure Land" instead of "Biography of the Buddha" becomes especially popular when the pure land is interpreted as a heavenly world with so-called scenes of "bliss 极乐" – singing and dancing, similar in form to the lives of the highest circles of that time. In essence, this plot is devoid of purely religious decoration and is humanised and secularized. The departure from conditional canonicity towards greater realism is evidenced by the increase in the number of portraits of benefactors, of increasingly large size, when such portraits sometimes become the main theme of the fresco, reducing the

role of religious subjects (in cave 98, the plot "King Yu Tian with his family 于阗国王及其眷属", in cave 130, "family of Yue Tinggui 乐廷瓌一家"). Murals that do not have any religious background but reflect outstanding historical events ("Images of Zhang Yichao's campaign with troops 张义潮出行图", "Images of the journey of the wife of the ruler of the Song country 宋国夫人出行图"), sometimes take centre stage. There are also frescoes with scenes of agriculture and animal husbandry. So, this proves that at certain stages, when wall painting reached its heyday, more interest was aroused not by religious themes but by realistic plots [2, 19].

Thus, the genesis of the Mogao fresco wall painting testifies to the contradiction between rigid canonicity and the realities of life, when conditional canonicity, starting from the Han period, under the influence of the improvement of techniques and artistic methods, acquires greater realism in the flourishing periods of Sui and Tang and retains its properties in the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period [2]. This testified to the emergence of a new, specific version of the Chinese pictorial doctrine of Buddhism of the Sui and Tang eras, associated with local artistic traditions and methods of artistic expression.

Therefore, the main value of the Dunhuang wall painting is its authenticity, based on a creative reinterpretation of Buddhist canons borrowed from India and supplemented with scenes from real life and plots related to the local teachings of Taoism and Confucianism and plots of ancient Indian legends in a Chinese figurative interpretation. Thus, Dunhuang's wall painting combined Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, giving vitality to canonical plots.

Let's analyse the specifics of wall painting in specific historical periods.

#### ***Northern Liang Dynasty (401 – 439)***

During this period, wall painting played a significant role as a background for canonical sculptures. The main themes of the frescoes are "Portrait Images," "Buddhist Legends and Stories," "Portraits of Benefactors," and "Decorative Images." As for the execution techniques, they are borrowed from the Xiyu technology of retouching and colouring, and the portraits of benefactors are made according to traditional local portrait techniques.

#### ***Northern Wei Dynasty (439 – 534)***

The decorative decoration of Northern Wei caves differs from that of Northern Liang caves, primarily because most Northern Wei caves are central column caves and only Cave 487 is multi-room. The canon of such central columnar grottoes originates from the canons of Indian caves, but in the conditions of Dunhuang, a unique local variant of a cave with a central column and wedge-shaped vault surfaces (*zhen zi pi*) was formed. Changes also applied to the location of the sculptures relative to the planes of the walls: the coloured sculptures of the Northern Wei period were traditionally placed in niches on the four sides of the central columnar caves and in niches in the left and right-side walls.

Such a specific structural scheme determined a certain pattern of decorative decoration. The two wedge-shaped surfaces of the front part of the top of the grotto are formed by wooden structures and decorated with relief images, images of lotuses, and flying *apsaras* (*Fei tian*). At the end of the Northern Wei period, a flat surface was left in the centre of the wedge-shaped part and decorated with a checkerboard ornament (Fig. 1), and two large frescoes on the subject of Buddhist teachings were depicted on the lower parts of the wedge-shaped surfaces in the front part of the northern and southern walls. The main parts of the northern and southern walls housed plots of Buddhist stories. Large parts of the surfaces of the northern, southern, eastern, and western walls were decorated with scenes of "Thousand Buddhas." Less significant plots of Buddhist history were placed on the lower parts of the walls and around the central columns. In fact, the cave became a visual embodiment of the world of Buddhism.



Fig. 1. Decoration of the upper part of the cave with 248 checkerboard patterns. Northern Wei Dynasty.

#### **Western Wei Dynasty (535 – 556)**

Cave 285 belongs to the period of the Western Wei Dynasty. Caves of this period are represented by two types: a cave with a central column and a cave with an inverted top.

The inverted-top cave has remained a stereotype since the Western Wei period and became a common design scheme for caves after the Song and Tang dynasties [20].

During this period, there are noticeable changes in the nature of wall painting, which are reduced to the following and testify to the emergence of a new local style:

- change of portrait images of Buddha and Bodhisattva, instead of fantastic clothes they are depicted in more realistic clothes;
- the appearance of Chinese mythological stories as a separate topic after the reforms of Emperor Xiao Wendi;
- reducing images of bunsen stories;
- complication of the compositional construction of plots and dynamism;
- replacement of scenes of approaching the Dharma with realistic scenes, the appearance of landscape images of the "mountain-water" genre and landscapes characteristic of the Central Plain of China [2, 20].

#### **Northern Zhou Dynasty (557-581)**

Fourteen Mogao caves (Fig. 2) and four Xi Qian Fo Dong caves are dated to this period, and the remains of wall paintings from this period are also in the caves of five Cave Temples (*Wūgèmiào shíkū*). There are three structural schemes of grottoes: one with a central column, one with an inverted top, and a square grotto with one niche. The figurative concept undergoes a change; thus, in cave 461, there are no niches for sculptures on the front wall, and the doctrine of the teaching is represented by the plot of the fresco with the images of Shaky Buddha and Dobao. The very concept of Buddhist plots undergoes certain substantive changes. So, along with Buddhist subjects, purely mythological ones appear, such as images of the Eastern King,



God of the Immortals, or the goddess Queen Mother of the West. The number of benefactors' portraits also increases to the maximum; there are 1,198 of them in cave 428 alone [20].



Fig. 2. Buddha image on the southern wall of Cave 428. Northern Zhou Dynasty.

The fusion process in the Mogao wall painting of the traditions of Xiyu techniques and the local pictorial concepts of the Central Plain of China evolved into a new style that was formed by the beginning of the Northern Zhou period. However, they are not dominated by Siyu techniques but by local traditions, which are felt in the variety of lines that outline the forms as well as in the ways of conveying textures.

From the period of the Western Wei Dynasty (535–556), Dunhuang wall painting, which in its early stages was based on Xiyu techniques (Yungang Caves and Maizhishan Caves), became increasingly based on the local traditions of the Central Plain of China. This was facilitated by the reforms of Emperor Xiao Wendi of the Northern Wei Dynasty (439–534), as they raised the so-called "style of the Central Plain of China" to a new level. This style first appeared in the Longmen Buddhist Caves and later spread to the Dunhuang Caves [20].

#### ***Sui Dynasty (581 – 618)***

Chronologically, the wall painting of the Sui dynasty is divided into three periods: the first begins in 580, the second in 589, and the third in 613. Despite a short period of thirty-seven years, more than a hundred new grottoes were created, and some existing grottoes were restored. The characteristics of the wall paintings of these periods are reduced to the following:

- 1<sup>st</sup> period – the plot "Thousand Buddhas" is located on four walls, and in the centre of the composition is an image of the essence of the teachings of Buddhism, a sharp increase in the number of images of flying *Fei tian* (*apsara*);
- period two and three – the use of a linked cycle of stories about the essence of Buddhist teachings, a sharp increase in the number of images of flying *Fei tian* (*apsara*).

On the upper parts of the four walls near the end of the grottoes, the surfaces are painted blue to create the impression of celestial space, and above these blue planes are placed the figures of *Fei Tian*, flying *apsaras*.

The story "Life in Heaven and Hell," by the so-called Vīparinatam (*经变画 - Jing Bian Hua*), became very popular in the Sui era and later in the Tang era. This plot, known in several varieties, becomes especially popular; for example, there were up to eleven such compositions in the wall paintings of the Sui dynasty. At the same time, even in the Buddhist grotto paintings, there are Chinese mythological stories. For the first time, the Buddhist landscape genre of "mountains and waters" begins to be actively introduced in wall paintings. Landscapes are present in historical plots, where trees are drawn in detail [20].

The story "Life in Heaven and Hell" in the Sui era is presented in two ways, which will later turn into the stories of this orientation in the Tang and Song eras: the first is an expression of the content of the Buddhist canons in the form of a long scroll, where these canons have a certain order (caves 302 and 303); the second is the expression of the content of Buddhist canons by visual means, through the spatial landscape of "mountain water," through the image of a reservoir, or through the architecture of temples, when they are supplemented with numerous scenes of human activity (cave 423). At the same time, the background plot was determined by the set tasks: the image of the temple contributed to the creation of the elevation and greatness of Buddhism; on the other hand, centrally symmetrical compositions with images of scenes of real life and the detection of planning and spatiality were essentially the initial stages of realistic Chinese painting of the following centuries [20].

Evaluating the work of Sui era wall painting masters in comparison with previous periods, one should note its special importance in the formation of the national style of realistic wall painting, which was borrowed and continued by artists of subsequent periods.

#### ***Tang Dynasty (618 – 907)***

The characteristics of the wall painting of the Tang period can be reduced to the following:

- the continuity of the plots with the previous Sui period, while "Life in Heaven and Hell" becomes the most important plot and is located on the northern, southern and eastern walls of the grottoes, often occupying the entire plane of the wall;
- the plot "Life in Heaven and Hell" acquires an emphasized scale and monumentality (for example, the length of the fresco in Cave 148 is 23 metres and consists of 66 fragments;
- the maximum flourishing of the portrait genre, the "mountains-water" landscape genre and images of architectural objects;
- the development of ideas about human anatomy, which finds expression in the portrait genre, where artists have perfect knowledge of the structure of the human body, the transmission of emotions and the portrayal of characters;
- deepening the influence of the art of the Central Plains of China both in the interpretation of human anatomy and in colour expression.

So, the main feature of early Tang wall painting is the maximum fusion of canonical Buddhist traditions with local artistic traditions of the Central Plains of China, which began in earlier periods (Fig. 3).

The difference between the portrait genre of the Tang era and the early portrait genre of previous periods is as follows: in the Tang era, they depart from the Siyu concave-convex execution technique to elevate the role of lines, colour shades, and retouching and colouring techniques. The role of the "mountains-water" landscape genre, which is also being improved and detailed, is growing. In fact, during the Tang Dynasty, Dunhuang mural art became Buddhist art in the national Chinese version [20].





Fig. 3. Image of the deity Guanyin on the southern wall of Cave 57. Early Tang.

You can also analyse the development of mural painting from the early Tang to the late Tang:

- in relation to the development of Dunhuang wall painting, three half-periods are distinguished: early Tang, middle Tang, and late Tang, where the middle Tang is considered the period of transformations in Dunhuang wall painting;
- while preserving the theme of frescoes, there were changes in the compositional construction of images and the manner of performing wall paintings;
- the plot "Life in Heaven and Hell" remains the main and most large-scale image, although its size gradually decreases (in the early Tang period, from two to five such plots were placed in parallel on one wall, and in the lower part of the images there is an image of a rectangular Ping screen feng Hua, which emphasises the detailing of the main plot;
- the difference between early Tang and middle Tang wall paintings is as follows (Fig. 4): in the early Tang, the fresco images are multi-figured, bright polychromy is used; on the other hand, in the middle Tang, the value of lines, space not filled with figures, the landscape genre of "mountains and waters" and images of architecture as the background for the main plot, the colours become lighter and less contrasty and saturated; it is believed that these changes in the middle Tang took place under the influence of Indian Tantrism.



- the difference between the wall paintings of the early and middle Tang and the late Tang is as follows: a canon of figures of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas is being formed, where figures with a bare torso are depicted, clothes emphasise the contours of the body, the anatomy is precisely maintained in accordance with Indian aesthetic canons, and the role of the landscape genre "mountains and waters" is growing with a change in the techniques of conveying the structure of mountains and trees and a simplification of coloristics, more similar to traditional ink painting, the wall painting acquires greater compositional and colouristic integrity.

A small number of benefactors' portraits of the Middle and Late Tang periods have survived to this day. It is known that the descendants of the benefactor Zhang Yichao, an important military figure of the Tang era, financed the creation of Cave 156, so the surfaces are decorated with his portraits, and on the southern and eastern walls there are large-scale historical scenes called "Images of Zhang Yichao's Campaign with Troops."



Fig. 4. Buddhist scene on the south wall of Grotto 112. Middle Tang.



*The eras of Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (907–960),  
Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127), and Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279)*

The plot of "Life in Heaven and Hell" continues to be the main one and consistently repeats the traditions of the late Tang in the style and compositional construction of images. A unique example of the application of the "mountain-water" landscape genre is the image of the U Tai mountains more than three metres high and more than thirteen metres long, which is both a canonical Buddhist image and at the same time a large-scale example of the "mountain-water" genre (Fig. 5).



**Fig. 5.** The plot of the Buddhist sutra. The southern wall of grotto 61. The era of the Five Dynasties.

The image of the Heavenly King is located in the cave, which, together with the ritual sculptures, was supposed to perform a protective function. Since most of the caves of this period were created at the expense of the Cao family, this explains the appearance of a large number of portraits of benefactors and sculptures of Cao family members with corresponding inscriptions. Such images of benefactors also have value for the study of ethnographic features of the era and region – clothing, lifestyles of different social strata of the population, etc. Compared to the previous Tang period, external influences and influences from the Central Plain of China are less noticeable, so the previous canons are preserved and the level of innovations decreases.

### ***Xi Xia Dynasty (1038–1227)***

The period of the Xi Xia dynasty is marked by the appearance of the Hoi Hu style (回鹘 Uyghur) (Cave 330 and fifteen more caves) [20]. Frescoes from this period are often created by repainting frescoes from earlier periods. Also, during the Xi Xia period, Cave 409 of the Five Dynasties era was restored, and the walls were decorated with portraits of the king and queen of the new dynasty. Portraits of children in ethnic clothing are depicted on both sides of the niche in Cave 97.

During the Xi Xia period, continuity with the traditions of the Dunhuang wall painting of the Song era was maintained.

The plot of "Life in Heaven and Hell" remains the main one, but its composition is complicated and supplemented by a detailed second plan – the background (palaces, temples, pavilions, terraces), but there is a certain inconsistency between the images of architecture and the images of Buddha.

The innovation of Dunhuang wall painting in this period was manifested in the appearance of "Travelling Monks", "Patrons and patronesses of Hoi Hu," and others, which were absent in previous periods [20]. Another innovation that should be considered is the direct influence of the stylistics of Tibetan Buddhism, which led to the appearance of mandala images in the murals. The figures resemble the signs of the Indian artistic style and are characterised by dancing grace and dynamism.

The following main subjects are used: interpretation of the canons of Buddhism, portrait images, and the landscape genre of "mountains and waters," dominated by blue-green shades. The technique of accentuating the face and body of the Goddess of Mercy Guanyin, with gold is used. Canonical images were often supplemented with items of use from the Xi Xia era, which gives them historical and ethnographic value [20].

At the same time, the wall painting of the Xi Xia era is not characterised by the monumentality inherent in the mural painting of the Tang era, and in the landscape genre of the "water mountains" of the Xi Xia era, despite its detail, there is no scene of a landscape with low mountains and a small pond of the Southern Song period. It is believed that the impetus for the transformation of the figurative concept of Dunhuang's murals was Indian Tantrism.

### ***Yuan Dynasty (1271 – 1368)***

Buddhist wall painting of the Yuan era is also characterised by a specific style based on the borrowing of the artistic style of Tibetan Buddhism and traditional painting of the Central Plains of China. Accordingly, two styles of wall paintings of the Yuan period are distinguished: the first "Tibetan" style is represented by Cave 465 Mogao and Yulin Cave 4, and the "Chinese" style is represented by Caves 3 and 95 Mogao. The Yuan period was marked by the continued growth of the role of Indian Tantrism, which affected the visual imagery of canonical Buddhist

subjects. For example, near the images of the thousand-armed and thousand-eyed Guanyin, servants began to be depicted, and even in the case when the wall painting belonged to Tantrism, it could be performed in the traditional "Chinese" manner (the image of the thousand-armed and thousand-eyed Guanyin in Cave 3 of Mogao).

During the Yuan period, few new grottoes were built, but the restoration of grottoes from previous eras continues. Figures in Mongolian clothes stand out among the few portraits of benefactors.

The role of the Yuan dynasty was in the unification of China, which influenced the access of artists to new, borrowed styles of wall painting, primarily Tibetan Buddhist art.

#### ***Combination of Buddhist art traditions and Taoism traditions in Dunhuang wall painting***

Despite the fact that the Dunhuang Caves are known as examples of ancient Buddhist art, the influence on the formation of their figurative concept of the local beliefs of Taoism and Confucianism should be emphasized. Thus, although the apsaras of Buddhism are considered analogues of Fei Tian, this image is simultaneously the embodiment of two Taoist ideas: flying immortals and immortal Taoist monks. Purely related to the doctrines of Taoism are the images of the Eastern King (东王公), the Western Mother (西王母), the Green Dragon (青龙), the White Tiger (白虎), Fuxi (伏羲), and Nuwa (女娲), etc. These images, the correlations of which are found in ancient Chinese mythology, are placed in caves 249, 285, and 297 of Mogao. Consequently, a synthesis of Buddhist and Taoist images took place, which brought the religion of Buddhism closer to its perception by the local population, starting in Western Wei and Northern Zhou [21, 22]. The mural painting of the upper parts of Cave 249 is Taoist in essence and reflects the common concept of gods, monks, and immortals flying to the Heavenly Palace.

The image of Fuxi (伏羲) and Nuwa (女娲) on the inclined eastern plane of the top of cave 285 is also an embodiment of the Taoist idea of gods and immortals, known from the Han Dynasty period. These images are interpreted differently from the point of view of Buddhism and Taoism: according to the figurative doctrine of Buddhism, it is an image of the Buddha and a bodhisattva; according to the figurative doctrine of Taoism, these are gods and immortals. Therefore, it is more likely to assume that the examples of wall paintings in the upper parts of caves 249, 285, and 297 embody a combination of the concepts of Buddhism and Taoism, which do not contradict each other and essentially form a specific "Chineseized" version of Buddhist wall painting.

The specifics of the wall painting of Cave 285, which is one of Dunhuang's three Zen meditation grottoes, boil down to the following:

- a combination of "canonical" and "local" style: the frescoes of the western wall are made in the Xiyu style; the frescoes of the eastern, southern, and northern walls are in the style of the Central Plain;

- a combination of Buddhist and Taoist pictorial doctrine: depictions of traditional Chinese deities and immortals alongside Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (as in Cave 249), expansion of the list of celestial beings beyond the list mentioned in Buddhist sutras, the emergence of so-called "secular Buddhism";

- the appearance of a new artistic style of portrait painting called "thin bone and thin face" ("秀骨清像"), when the portrait subjects have thin faces, slender figures, and are dressed in wide robes with long sleeves.

Thus, when analyzing the wall painting of the Yuan era, it should be noted the further merging of the borrowed religion of Buddhism with local beliefs, which was manifested in the correction of the figurative doctrine of the wall painting of the Dunhuang caves. Borrowed Buddhism absorbed some components of local beliefs, which led to a Taoist flavour in Dunhuang murals. This testifies to how strong local beliefs were, which led to the transformation of Buddhism with established canons. This also proves the truth of the term "integration of three religions (三教合一)" in relation to the Dunhuang mural.

The images of the Western Goddess and the Eastern King as traditional Chinese immortal deities in the upper part of Caves 249 and 419 indicate that in the imagination of the people, they, like the Buddha and bodhisattvas, reflected the dream of eternal life and ideal harmony. At the same time, the Chinese deities were also the main rulers of the Heavenly Kingdom.

Purely local symbols are images of a three-legged crow—a symbol of the Sun, frogs – symbols of the Moon, enlightened divine animals – a turtle and a snake (三足乌)(蟾蜍)(玄武).

Taoism borrowed and transformed even earlier mythical representations. Such images include the mythical emperor Fuxi and his sister Nuwa, who repaired the sky. Their images are in Cave 285, along with the images of monks. Fuxi and Nuwa have human heads and snake bodies and thus belong to the earliest animistic pantheon of deities. Fuxi holds a rectangle and an inkpot, and his chest is adorned with a sun disc Nuwa holds a compass and an unknown object. This image is an illustration of the old expression that, without a rectangle and a compass, you cannot draw a square or a circle. However, in reality, this expression should be understood not literally but allegorically, since it means the balance between heaven and earth. According to the most ancient ideas, these deities contributed to the evolution of man and taught them useful activities.

## Conclusions

Dunhuang's mural painting presents two techniques – borrowed from Xiyu and traditional methods of making frescoes of the type found in Han and Jin tombs. The main characteristics of the frescoes: plot, painting techniques, construction of the composition, polychromy. The main characteristics of Dunhuang's frescoes include compositional ones.

The first of them concerns space and means of its expression. The effect of three-dimensional space is replaced by two-dimensional space using a combination of points, lines, and planes as characteristics of two-dimensional space:

- transformation of a point into the main element in the composition of planes and into the main element of the expression of the canons of beauty, the use of combining points for visual effects;

- a combination of different types of lines – solid and invisible dashed – to enhance visual effects for separating images, the lines in Dunhuang's wall painting act not only as means of delineating the form, but also bear the aesthetic properties of the categories "potential" (势 shi), "form" (形 xing), "energy" (气 qi), "power" (力 li), "rhyme" (韵 yun), linear drawing is the main method of modeling both in the Dunhuang mural and in traditional Chinese painting;



– the special role of the plane, which is meaningfully divided, frescoes can be divided into several parts and form compositions of planes that visually express the postulates of Buddhist doctrine.

The second characteristic is related to the application of the principles of symmetry and asymmetry. Yes, symmetry is dominant in Dunhuang's wall paintings, but asymmetry techniques have been introduced to enliven it and eliminate static.

The third characteristic of the composition of frescoes is nuance, contrast, unity. In particular, the social hierarchy of the figures and their significance are distinguished by the methods of contrasting the figures' scale. At the same time, joint techniques are used in order to avoid excessive contrast.

The fourth characteristic is the metro-rhythmic construction of frescoes. Metrical repetition is used both in sculptures and in frescoes, for example in the depictions of the celestial *apsaras* of *Feitian* (early Tang mural of Mogao Cave 321).

The fifth characteristic is the specific polychromy of the Dunhuang mural and its symbolism. The ancient palette of Chinese painting "Danqing" ("Red and Blue Pigments 丹青") included blue, red, white and black colours. Buddhism made its correction in the symbolism of colors, in particular, good deeds were associated with white, evil deeds with black. Accordingly, the white colour of purity became the colour for images of the Buddha, bodhisattvas, the goddess of Mercy Guanyin. The colour enhanced the content of the fresco, depicting holiness or solemnity (golden or red colour of the clothes of Buddhas and bodhisattvas), the dark side of evil forces (black or dark tones of the figures of demons). However, the polychromy of Dunhuang's frescoes developed in several stages. In early frescoes, this is the "*tianzhu yunzhan*" method from ancient India, when the same colour in tone and saturation expressed the three-dimensionality of the depicted face. Under the influence of negative factors – both external – stone erosion, jamming, and internal – chemical changes in the pigment – the colours of the frescoes changed, the lines became poorly defined, the faces of the figures darkened.

Despite the general canonicity of the subjects of the cave wall paintings, they differ in their originality both in terms of the arrangement of the subjects in terms of content, their sizes and locations, as well as in the styles and techniques of execution. A clear visual concept of the plots is subordinate to the main thematic image.

The murals of the early period have a planar character without expressing the depth of space, on the other hand, after the Tang period, the murals express plan and spatiality, and the compositions become more complicated. Additional dynamism is given to the compositions by the figures of flying *Fei Tian* (飞天). The continuous rows of the ornament form floral compositions – of fourteen lotuses with curved petals and fourteen patterns similar to clouds. Blue, green, red background in combination with a white short arc adds brightness. Together, everything creates a dynamic centre of a bunch of flowers, which seems to rotate in a circle.

It is traditionally believed that the Dunhuang Caves are a unique phenomenon of Buddhist art embodied in sculpture and wall painting. In the early periods, the imagery and technique of frescoes were borrowed from India. At the same time, starting from certain periods, local traditions, as well as beliefs – Taoism and Confucianism – had a significant impact on the figurative concepts of wall paintings. The combination of figures of Buddhism and mythical creatures of Taoism in one seemingly canonical Buddhist plot, as well as the interpretation of celestial *apsaras* in the image of Chinese *Fei Tian*, testifies to the phenomenon of syncretism of

three religions and the formation of a unique phenomenon of "Chinese secular Buddhism" with the spread of portrait and landscape genres. The image of *Fei Tian* is not a literal image of the canonical ancient Indian apsaras, they do not have wings or feathers, they look like Chinese girls and have Chinese-like clothing.

A characteristic feature of the figurative concept of Dunhuang is its dynamism: it undergoes changes and transformations from period to period, external layering due to the change of dynasties and external contacts. If we characterize the genesis of Dunhuang wall painting, it is a movement from simplicity and conventionality towards complication and improvement, from a literal repetition of borrowed ancient Indian canons towards the creation of a national style of Buddhist wall painting, from conventional canonicity and mythology towards realism, from simpler and conventional painting techniques to more diverse.

Dunhuang's murals influenced the development of Chinese art, including modern architecture, design, painting, ceramics, and dance.

In 1944, the National Dunhuang Institute of Arts was established, in 1950 it was renamed the Dunhuang Institute of Cultural Relics, and in 1984 the Dunhuang Research Institute. In 1986, the State Council of the People's Republic of China received the status of a famous historical and cultural city of China, and in 1987, the Mogao Caves were included in the World Heritage Protection Project, and in 1991, the Mogao Caves were awarded a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Certificate.

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