

# The Dunhuang Caves: Showcasing the Artistic Development and Social Interactions of Chinese Buddhism between the 4th and the 14th Centuries

Xinyue Zhang

Beanstalk International Bilingual School

**Abstract.** The Dunhuang Caves, situated in China's Gansu Province, are renowned globally for their significant collection of murals, sculptures, architecture, and ancient Buddhist manuscripts. These caves, established along the historic Silk Road, encapsulate a rich tapestry of cultural exchange and artistic evolution spanning from the 4th to the 14th centuries. Comprising sites like the Mogao Caves and the Yulin Caves, they not only stand as reservoirs of ancient Buddhist art but also highlight intersections between Buddhism and neighboring Central Asian and Chinese cultures. The evolution of the Dunhuang Caves' art is segmented into periods mirroring Chinese dynasties, showcasing diverse influences from various regions, marking the journey from purely religious symbols to a more secularized and inclusive representation. Concurrently, the Caves mirror the secularization trajectory of Buddhism in China. Beyond their artistic merit, the Dunhuang Caves played a pivotal role socially, reflecting the intertwined relationships between Buddhism, society, and the Chinese ruling elite. As Buddhism assimilated into Chinese life, its representation in the Dunhuang Caves evolved, ultimately serving both spiritual and political purposes. This study delves into the artistic progression and the multifaceted social implications of the Dunhuang Caves' existence.

**Keywords:** Dunhuang Caves; Buddhist art; Silk Road; Secularization; Cultural exchange; Chinese dynasties.

## 1. Introduction

The Dunhuang Caves are famous worldwide for their architecture, murals, painted sculptures, and the thousands of ancient Buddhist manuscripts discovered within. A series of grottos and sanctuaries hewn into the cliff face in what is now Gansu Province in China, the Dunhuang Caves were once situated at a point of rich cultural exchange along the Silk Road. The Mogao Caves, the West Thousand Buddha Caves, the Yulin Caves, and rooms that were living quarters for monks and storehouses of Buddhist cultural relics comprise what we usually call Dunhuang Caves. These roughly 735 caves including nearly 45,000 square meters of murals, and more than 2,000 color sculptures were not just the foremost depository of Buddhist art from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. They were a point of social convergence where various cultures interacted and traded. Taken together, the Dunhuang Caves stand as a monument, recording the connections between Buddhism and the surrounding societies of China and Central Asia. This paper will examine the history of the Dunhuang Caves from two perspectives, namely the artistic development of the caves and the social interactions fostered there.

The Dunhuang Caves art is a comprehensive art form that consists of caves, painted sculptures, and murals that complement and enhance each other, portraying rich and intricate scenes. The different caves serve different functions, including Zen Caves for meditation, Central Pagoda Caves for worship and meditation, Temple Caves with Inverted Bucket-Shape roofs and Buddhist Altar Caves for worship and enshrinement, and Grand Buddha Caves for paying respect for Buddha. The vividly painted sculptures represent figures such as the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, Disciples, Heavenly Kings, and Guardians. Furthermore, the murals can be categorized into various types, including depictions of Sakyamuni, ancient Chinese Immortals, sutras illustration, Buddhist historical events, and Decorative Paintings, constituting an encyclopedia.

In terms of artistic development, the history of the Dunhuang Caves can be roughly divided into four stages that fit Chinese dynastic periodization: the Northern dynasties (439-581), the Sui (581-681) and Tang (618-907) dynasties, the period from Five Dynasties (907-979) to the Song dynasty

(960-1279), and the period from Western Xia (1038-1227) to the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368). The first construction of the Dunhuang Caves took place in the period of Northern Dynasties. By the turn of the last millennium, monks were spreading Mahayana Buddhism, (dàshèng) in Chinese, northward and eastward from its birthplace in India into Han China. Within this period, the kingdoms that made up the Northern Liang state (420-439) saw Buddhist art gradually spread from the Western Regions to Dunhuang, overlapping with the earliest caves constructed in the region. The murals, painted sculpture, and architectural style of the earliest caves show strong characteristics of Buddhist art from Western Regions, in which most of the figures are high-nosed, big-eyed, and robust. In terms of their painting method, the murals mainly adopted the Western Regions' technique of stereoscopic blending, showing a simple and solemn style.

During the Northern Wei dynasty (439-534), the native style of the Dunhuang region gradually emerged, showing evidence of early localization and sinicization. Later, the influence of central China also became detectable. The Western Wei (535–556) and Northern Zhou (557–581) dynasties increased stylistic and cultural exchanges between northern, southern, and western regions in China. Chinese influence from the north, south, and west, in addition to the local culture of Dunhuang, was further integrated into the caves. Therefore, from their early history, the Dunhuang Caves art showed characteristics of cultural integration, which were the result of Buddhism's spread and trade along various Silk Routes.

The Sui and Tang dynasties were the height of artistic expression at Dunhuang, which innovatively demonstrated further secularization of Chinese Buddhism, with rich artistic themes, magnificent scenes, and colors. Character modeling, color blending, and line drawing had been crafted to a fine skill by this point. During the Tang Dynasty, the style of Dunhuang Caves art was further influenced by central Chinese culture, becoming imposing, generous, ethereal, and free. During the Mid-Tang dynasty, however, when the Dunhuang region was ruled by the Tubo Kingdom, a minority regime that had conflicts with the Tang dynasty, the style of mural paintings changed to become increasingly delicate, with more exotic colors. In the late Tang dynasty, because of the turmoil in central China, Dunhuang Caves art was re-influenced by the mixture of central Chinese elements with foreign and local cultures. The secularization of mural and painted sculpture art was thus intensified, but still under certain oppression.

From the Five Dynasties to the Song Dynasty, the subjects of the murals and sculptures were mostly inherited from the Tang Dynasty, showing more secular styles. From the Western Xia to the Yuan Dynasty, rebuilding older caves and repainting worn murals became a priority. There emerged a large number of murals in this period, but few new subjects.

In addition, the Dunhuang grottoes, with a history of over a thousand years, not only provide a historical panorama of Chinese Buddhist art, but also serve as an illuminating reflection of the interaction between Buddhism, art, and society in China. Originating from Central Asia, Buddhism entered China, a vast, populous, and culturally diverse country with legacy religions of Confucianism and Taoism. Due to Buddhism's inherent inclusiveness and the Chinese traditional assimilative ability for foreign cultures, it started a journey of secularization from the very beginning. Similar to how Europe restored the "humanism" of ancient Greece during the Renaissance, the Dunhuang caves likewise reflect the evolution of religious art towards humanistic art. Therefore, the Buddhist art of Dunhuang actually followed a path of "departing from the ethereal and distant world detached from human emotions and physicality, returning to the earthly realm teeming with human sentiments and significance", along which Buddhism became secularized in China. The caves consequently vividly recorded the process of secularization through the interaction with Chinese society over thousand-year.

In terms of social and cultural exchanges, Dunhuang Caves reflected the interaction between Buddhism and society, as well as the interaction between local Buddhist monks, Chinese dynastic governments, and diverse groups transporting goods and ideas on the Silk Road — a key track itself for the secularization of Chinese Buddhism. The Mogao Caves at the site were first built as living quarters and temples by monks. Later, though, dynasties such as Northern Liang, Northern Wei, and

Northern Zhou were happy to use state initiatives to continue work on the caves. After this, the Dunhuang Caves were no longer only built by Buddhist monks, but also by princes, nobles, and commoners alike, which became an important part of the social life of the people in Dunhuang.

From a social perspective, in different periods, the features of Dunhuang Caves art reflected the specific characteristics of the secularization stages of Chinese Buddhism. The Sixteen Kingdoms and Northern Dynasty represented the early stage of Buddhism's localization and sinicization in China, which showed the integration of the rough expression style of the Western Regions with local or Central China elements, and the sacred interpretation of Buddhism. After that, Buddhism flourished even more during the Sui and Tang Dynasties, and the emergence of branches of Buddhism such as Tibetan Buddhism and Zen Buddhism occurred. Chinese Buddhism further engaged with rulers and integrated into people's daily lives, which secularized more rapidly and innovatively under the influence of Han's culture. Then, the splendid, prosperous, and graceful atmosphere of the Tang dynasty was also depicted in the Dunhuang Caves art of this period. The artworks became even more diverse and vibrant, even featuring fabled characters, replacing the original mystery of Buddhism with more earthly images like emperors and commoners. Moving into Song and Yuan dynasties, the influence of Buddhism spread wide and deep and was further intertwined with the lives of ordinary people. The murals and sculptures in the caves featured both the rich color and texture of traditional Chinese painting and the solemn, elegant, and graceful style of Buddhist art.

Finally, as a consequence of Buddhism's secularization, the Dunhuang Caves themselves fulfilled a social role as well. As a hallmark of Buddhist culture, the caves were built to meet the ordinary people's need for religious beliefs, lead people's attention away from the sharp social conflicts and inspire them to dedicate themselves to the government and rulers. The Dunhuang Caves also met the political needs of rulers, who strengthened their rule by promoting Buddhism as a united belief system in China. In short, the development of Dunhuang Buddhist art, while satisfying the people's spiritual needs and the emperor's political and economic interests, also catered to the needs of religion to use politics to consolidate its own social position.

## **2. Organization of the Text**

### **2.1. The Early Artistic Features of the Dunhuang Caves as a Reflection of Cultural Integration**

Located in western Gansu, Dunhuang served as an important transportation center on the Silk Road and a center for cultural exchange between China and the West. It is also widely regarded as the birthplace and representative of Chinese Buddhist art, reflecting significant characteristics of Buddhism's development in China.

The readiness of Dunhuang to accept Buddhism and Buddhist arts can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, its geographic location played a crucial role in defense and trade, and it was a mandatory stop for monks and merchants traveling from the Western Regions, making it a hub for cultural exchange. Secondly, in the late Han dynasty, a large number of people from the Central Plains, including officials, merchants, and monks, migrated to Dunhuang, bringing with them a wealth of typical Chinese assimilative cultural traditions. Thirdly, Dunhuang was originally inhabited by multiple ethnic groups, creating a diverse and inclusive cultural atmosphere that allowed for the fusion of different artistic styles and religious traditions. Dunhuang thus had a strong religious culture, with a diverse mix of religions including Taoism, Confucianism, and some local minorities' beliefs.

When the inclusiveness of Buddhism encountered the assimilation capacity of Chinese culture, it paved the way for the secularization of Chinese Buddhism. Since the introduction of Buddhism in China around 2 BCE, Buddhist art was also gradually introduced from India to Dunhuang through the Western Regions, and then from Dunhuang to Central China. Throughout this introduction, the cultures of the Western Region, Central China, and Local Dunhuang intermingled, influencing the artistic styles and physical structure of the caves. Along the path of Buddhism's secularization, shifts in Dunhuang's religious and social landscape across one thousand years of history impacted the Caves'

artistic styles. The myriad sculptures, murals, and sutras housed in the Caves cannot help but reflect the intertwining of religion, society, and art at this critical point of confluence.

The Grotto, or the Buddhist cave as a spiritual center, originated in ancient India. There, monks would carry out their practices and daily works like chanting sutras. Initially, monasteries and grottoes had the same function. While monasteries were made of brick or wood and typically located in a city, grottos were carved into the cliffs of more remote regions. Even though monasteries were conducive to spreading Buddhist teachings, monks needed a quieter environment to practice. In addition, civil structure monasteries were often turned into ashes by fire or destroyed due to political changes or wars. Caves carved into rock faces in quiet mountains or forests were safer for the monks' work, and, as attested by time, more enduring.

The construction of the Dunhuang Caves can be traced back to around 366 CE, the second year of the Pre-Qin dynasty. According to a Chinese legend from the 4<sup>th</sup> century, a monk named Le Zun traveled from Central China to Dunhuang to meditate, southeast of the city where the terrain was broad and open. When opening his eyes, he suddenly saw countless golden rays of light reflecting from Sanwei Mountain, where a thousand Buddhas seemed to appear, and he engaged craftsmen to carve a grotto in the rock wall. Although the caves of Le Zun can no longer be found today, they marked the beginning of the practice of excavating caves in Dunhuang. The period of the Sixteen Kingdoms and Northern dynasties (420-589) saw the initial stages of the development of Dunhuang Caves art, and the artistic features of the caves gradually evolved with the emergence of Northern Liang, Northern Wei, Western Wei, and Northern Zhou dynasties. The cave art also reflected the initial stages of Buddhism's secularization during this period, which mainly involved integration and sinicization.

Although the Northern Liang dynasty (420-439) was a "barbarian" regime, it had a high degree of sinicization and close cultural exchanges with the traditional Chinese in the south. The court also advocated Buddhism and established the ruling ideology of using Buddhism to govern the country and maintain stability, thus establishing the social status of Buddhism in Dunhuang. Against this background, the Dunhuang aristocracy also began to believe in Buddhism and build pagodas and temples, while Buddhist activities began to penetrate all aspects of society. The construction of cave temples became a societal activity, and the construction of Dunhuang Caves also became an important part of social activity at the time. By the Northern Liang dynasty, integration and sinicization were well underway.

The murals from this period primarily included small illustrations of Dharma Preaching, a thousand Buddhas, Offerings Bodhisattvas, music and dance performances in Tiangong, and Jataka tales. This art was exotic, containing robust, half-naked characters featuring large noses, big eyes, and long skirts, mirroring artistic styles from India. Applied against an earthy red background, the style of painting was also heavily influenced by the Western technique of stereoscopic blending. The cave painting style of this early period was simple and childish, but solemn, as seen in the offering Bodhisattva painted on the south side of the west niche of Cave 27. This features plump bodies, breasts, and abdomens highlighted with strong color blending, reflecting the influence of Indian art.

During the Northern Liang period, the Mogao Grottoes of the Dunhuang Caves were in their initial stage. The main statues of this period are all single without bodyguards. For example, the shape of the Bodhisattva in murals, and the painting techniques in use show the strength of Western Region Buddhist iconographic characteristics. For example, the joined-feet Bodhisattva is the typical statue in Gandhara, the area in ancient North India, during that period, which refers to a specific Buddhist iconographical depiction of a bodhisattva where both of their feet are touching and joined together. This posture is often seen as symbolizing the bodhisattva's readiness and determination to take action in helping others on their spiritual journey.

At the same time, some traditional Chinese elements became embedded into the Western Region-style statues as well while still maintainin a strong influence from their "original" Indian styles. For example, the Maitreya Buddha statue on the west wall of Cave 275 (Northern Liang) wears a three-sided crown with a meditational seal relief in the center of it. The upper body is naked, and it is

decorated with necklaces, wristbands, and Yingluo, a Chinese style of pearl and jade necklace, skirted and with joined feet sitting which vividly reflects the integration of Chinese elements and Gandhara cave art.

In addition to painted sculptures, the fusion of Han elements and Western Regions forms also appeared in the architectural construction of the caves, which also reflected the early sinicization and integration. The cave architectural style in this period was mainly Zen Caves (Chan Ku) and Central Pillar Caves. Zen Caves originated in India and were used by monks to practice meditation. Cave 268 is a small grotto, believed to be the earliest grotto in Dunhuang. It is a passageway about 1 meter wide, with four small Zen rooms on each side, each only large enough to accommodate one person, seated in meditation. Experts speculate that Cave 268 was originally built without murals or statues. However, later Buddha statues were built and painted with murals for the needs of Zen observation which serve to keep the Buddha and its philosophy constantly in monks' minds since visualization is often part of meditation.

The Central Pillar Cave also originated from the Zhiti Caves in India. Zhiti means tower, a form referred to as Pagoda Temple in the context of the Dunhuang Caves. The Pagoda Temple Cave is functionally a worship cave as opposed to the others. The Central Pillar Cave in Dunhuang is a little different from the Zhiti of India. Indian Buddha niches in caves typically feature rounded arches, a style called the "round arch emperor." But in the Dunhuang Caves, there are Que-shaped niches in addition to the round arch niches. The so-called "Que" is an important type of traditional Chinese architecture that was in use since the Zhou Dynasty for palace gates, city gates, mausoleums, and ancestral temples. The Que in the Dunhuang Caves is the same form of the Que that was characteristic of the Han dynasty. Because the Que was mostly used in dynastic architecture and design, it symbolized the Supreme Court and suggested Buddhism's Heavenly Palace, a theme important to the ancient Chinese understanding of Buddha's Kingdom. In this period, China regarded Buddha as supreme as a secular emperor. Obviously, the elements of Chinese Han culture were already naturally integrated into the construction of Dunhuang Grottoes in its early stages, which reflected the beginning of the secularization of Buddhism in China.

The Dunhuang Caves of the Northern Wei (439-534) witnessed the gradual emergence of localized style informed by increasing sinicization. Compared with Northern Liang, the Dharma Preaching paintings from this period tended to be larger, with the three holy Buddhas (otherwise known as the "figures of Western Elysium") appearing for the first time. The figure in the center was typically Amitabha Buddha, and he was flanked on his left and right by Avalokiteshvara and the Great Trend Bodhisattva. The characters were more varied than before and included images of the disciples of the king of heaven and Apsaras, in addition to the offering and serving Bodhisattvas. In terms of the narratives behind these paintings, there were Jataka tales of "enduring humiliation and sacrifice," but also karmic stories such as "Bhikshuni Wei Miao Being Punished for His Guilt in the Previous Life" and "Five Hundred Robbers Becoming Buddha". The body shape of the characters was not as sturdy as in Northern Liang, but slenderer with beautiful curves and a serene demeanor, exemplifying the sinicization and localization of the medium. The story paintings of the Northern Wei also included more complex plots, richer imagery, and more diverse compositions. The story "Five hundred robbers become Buddha" reflects the historical background: at that time, peasant rebellion had occurred in the eastern part of Dunhuang around the west of the river, and cut off the passage between Dunhuang and Central China. The muralists used the story of the robbers becoming Buddha to express their desire for the rebels to return to the fold. This reflected the subtle changes in Buddhist stories during the further development of Buddhism in China, where the spirit of sacrificing and enduring humiliation for the sake of Buddhism was gradually replaced by more practical themes, demonstrating further secularization.

The period between the Northern Wei and the Western Wei witnessed changes in the artistic style of the murals which were closely related to the Sinicization Reforms introduced by Emperor Xiaowen of the Northern Wei (471-499). Emperor Xiaowen moved the capital to Luoyang, where he overhauled the temples and adopted the ritualistic music of the Southern dynasties, which enhanced

its cultural influence on the Northern dynasties. A number of monks from the Southern dynasties headed north to Luoyang, along with many others from the Western Regions, thus making Luoyang the center of Buddhist activities and ensuring that the Buddhist art of Central China spread to the Kansu Corridor and the Western Regions. The Policy of Sinicization and the popularity of Buddhist culture in Central China in turn caused Dunhuang Caves art to become increasingly diversified in style. For example, in the cave paintings of the Northern and Western Wei dynasties, the commoners are usually dressed in the native costumes of the Xianbei (an ethnic group of the Northern Wei dynasty), while the nobles are dressed in Han costumes, indicating that while the rulers were obsessed with Han culture, the commoners' lives retained more of their ethnic characteristics.

By the Western Wei dynasty (535-556), Dunhuang Caves art was also influenced by the Xuan style of central China during the Southern and Northern dynasties. These figures are described as Xiu-gu-qing-xiang, slender and elegant figures with clear and beautiful appearances. The murals from this period were more colorful and decorative, with the Buddha statues taking on a more genial and lifelike look. Murals reflecting human life also began to appear, integrating Buddhism, Taoism, and heavenly mythology, to reflect the interplay between Western Region beliefs and Central Chinese culture.

The content of Western Wei murals increased unprecedentedly, with themes mainly including Buddha painting, Buddhist story painting, Chinese traditional myths, donor portraits, and decorative pattern painting. At the same time, a large number of Chinese traditional mythological themes, like Fu Shi, Nüwa, the Eastern King, and the Queen Mother of the West, appearing during this period reflected the impact of the new type of Buddhist ideology and art from the Central Plains on Dunhuang Caves art after Emperor Xiaowen of Northern Wei dynasty's reform.

By the Northern Zhou dynasty (557-581), due to ongoing cultural exchanges between various parts of China, the artistic style of the Western Regions was further integrated with Central Chinese culture. This is reflected in the murals and sculptures. The characters depicted during this period were no longer slender and ethereal as in the Western Wei but were more consistent with actual human proportions. The costumes also reflected the style of dress of both the Han people and the Huns. The paintings done during this time incorporated more worldly features. In addition, Buddhist involvement in social welfare and service to the people also appears during this period. For example, Cave 296 of the Mogao Caves contains several paintings of the "Blessed Field Stories", depicting monks healing people and building bridges. This is because, during Northern Zhou Dynasty, the number of privileged monks increased significantly, creating a financial burden on the state that seriously affected the country's economic development. Yuwen Yong (543-578), Emperor Wu of the Northern Zhou dynasty thus dealt a devastating blow to Buddhism out of a need for economic development. In order to regain the support of the rulers, Buddhism then had to take measures to serve society and the public so that they could survive after the crackdown on Buddhism.

In general, this fusion developed gradually over time, from the combination of forms that appeared during the Northern Liang and Northern Wei dynasties, to the integration of content during the Western Wei period, and even to some dominance of traditional Chinese thought during the Northern Zhou Dynasty. The evolution of Dunhuang Caves art during the Northern dynasties was characterized by a combination of Buddhist and Taoist ideas as well as a trend toward increasing secularization. In addition, the content of Dunhuang's murals can also reflect the major political events of the time, such as the rebellions of Northern Liang Dynasty, the reforms of Northern Wei Dynasty, and the crackdown on Buddhism of Northern Zhou Dynasty, reflecting the relevance of religion and politics.

## **2.2. Innovation and Flourishing in the Sui and Tang Dynasties**

With the unification of the country in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century and the rulers' support for Buddhism, Buddhist art flourished during the Sui and Tang dynasties and the Dunhuang Caves entered their golden age. The existing caves underwent significant expansion during this period, and many innovations came to be reflected in the new features presented in the cave forms, sculptures, and murals. The Chinese Buddhist secularization during this period showed more emphasis on politicization and de-sacralization, which was visible through the figures' shape and mural content.

Eight years after claiming the throne in 581, Yang Jian, the Emperor Sui of the Northern Zhou dynasty, who grew up in a temple, unified the country and in so doing ended a period of division that had lasted for more than 400 years. During his reign, the emperor remained a vigorous supporter of Buddhism, reflected in the construction of numerous temples and statues as well as the development of cave art throughout the country. Emperor Yang of Sui ordered troops to be stationed at fortresses along the Silk Road such as Jade Gate Pass to ensure the smooth passage of merchants, which brought prosperity to the Silk Road trade. The emperor would also send senior monks from the capital to Dunhuang. For example, in 590, the Buddhist monk Dharma Yatra traveled from Dunhuang to Daxing, and in 601, Emperor Wen of Sui sent the monk Zhiyi to the Mogao Caves to resettle the relics of other monks. Monks were not the only ones who traveled to and from Dunhuang, but also merchants from the West. Furthermore, after 400 years of warfare and division, the Chinese people ushered in an open and unified Sui Dynasty, which aspired for further cultural innovation and inclusion. In particular, the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang experienced a golden age of development during this period. Within 37 years of the Sui Dynasty's founding, many new caves had been constructed, 100 of which remain in existence to this day. Cave art also underwent significant changes, building on the style of the Northern dynasties and influencing the later work of the Tang Dynasty. The expressions and demeanors of the statues were more vivid than those of the Northern dynasties, with particular attention paid to portraying the solemnity and kindness of the Buddha, the devotion of the Bodhisattva, and the elegance of the clothing. The spirit of innovation during the Sui dynasty is evident everywhere, not only in the murals, but also in the changes in the style of cave construction and the shape of painted sculpture. The roots of this spirit of innovation can be located in two places: from the enlightened monarchs and the long-repressed people, and the unified social environment and the revival of the Silk Road.

For example, the changes in cave architecture, including the unique transformation of the central pillar into the Sumeru style pillar or a Buddha altar in the form of the Temple caves, represent unprecedented innovations and an exploratory spirit. The painted sculptures rapidly absorbed cultural influences from both the Northern Qi and the Southern dynasties, resulting in grandiose and individualized artworks that laid the groundwork for the Tang Dynasty's painted sculptures. The figures became more personalized, reflecting the free-thinking spirit of the Sui Dynasty, and the expressions became more friendly and humane, indicating the trend of de-sacralization. The murals depicting Buddhist traditions were accompanied by Jataka and Karmic stories from the Northern dynasties as well as the transformation of the Amitabha Pure Land and the Lotus Sutra. In the smudging of the characters, the caves reflected not only the traditions of Northern Dynasties but also the new style of Southern dynasties, while Persian patterns containing lions and phoenixes emerged in the characters' clothing. The sutra illustrations left enough space for Buddhist art to carry religious doctrine, political demands, economic purposes, and artistic pursuits. The enlightened rulers and social freedoms of the Sui Dynasty showed early politicization in its secularization progress.

After the fall of the Sui Dynasty, the art of the Dunhuang Caves gained new development in the Tang Dynasty (618-907). A large number of caves were constructed during the early Tang dynasty, 127 of which are extant today. Before developing their distinctive style, the cave paintings during the early Tang closely adhered to the conventions of the Sui dynasty, with statues located in the western niche, Buddha legends or Vimal Suttas painted on both sides of the niche, the remaining three walls covered with a thousand Buddhas, and a preaching painting in the middle. Due to the wars at the end of the Sui Dynasty, Turkic and other powerful minority countries along the Silk Road took the opportunity to occupy key positions and block the Silk Road, which led to relatively little artistic exchange between the Tang dynasty and the outside world. Due to the limitations of cultural exchanges in this period, the new style developed in Central China had not yet been introduced. Beginning with the reign of Empress Wu Zetian (624-705), the Tang dynasty completely unified the Western Regions. Therefore, the Silk Road between the Tang dynasty and the Western Regions became increasingly unobstructed. Moreover, the economy developed rapidly, laying a solid

foundation for the development of Buddhism and Buddhist art. The secularization of Buddhism during the Tang dynasty was most prominent in terms of politicization and de-sacralization.

The splendid and prosperous era of the Tang dynasty, with its noble and luxurious temperament, is depicted in the Dunhuang Caves art of this period. The murals and painted sculptures are even more colorful and diverse, applying heavy colors according to the "assigning colors according to category" principle, and even featuring fabled and glamorous human figures, replacing the original mysteriousness of Buddhism. This significant change indicates that Buddhism in China was further integrated into people's daily lives, and the societal value orientation towards Buddhism also underwent a transformation influenced by Confucian ideas such as prioritizing the well-being of the people and the state. As a result, Buddhism gradually shed its initial air of mystery and blended with traditional Chinese culture in further secularization.

In terms of the caves' artistic and stylistic design, during the Tang Dynasty, the caves inherited some of the large central-pillar caves from the Sui Dynasty, while the most popular type was the Temple cave with an Inverted-Bucket-Shape roof. The Grand Buddha caves were the most remarkable during the early Tang period. In addition to their unique architecture, the construction process reflected the deep interaction between politics and Buddhism. The rulers' increasing support of Buddhism ensured that the cave construction entered a new era. Before she ascended to the throne, Empress Wu Zetian, used Buddhism to create momentum for herself, claiming divine linkage to Maitreya in Dayun Sutra. So during Wu Zetian's reign, she invested lots of money in building the Dayun temple and Maitreya Buddha statues all around the country. The Maitreya Buddha statues also appeared in Dunhuang as the Mogao Caves 96, which were created in her likeness. Also, unlike the Buddha statues of the Northern and Sui Dynasties, the Buddha and Bodhisattva statues during the flourishing period of the Tang Dynasty reflected vivid humanity. Kasyapa was portrayed as a thoughtful and persistent old man, Ananda was a polite youthful figure, and the Bodhisattva assumed a feminine image. At the same time, the proportions of the human body in the sculptures became more coordinated.

The themes of murals in the early Tang Dynasty mainly included Buddha portraits, Buddhist story paintings, Sutra illustrations, Portraits of donors, and decorative pattern paintings. Due to the prevalence of sutra illustrations, also referred as transformation tableaux, they often became the most attractive theme within a cave, overshadowing others. However, regardless of the content, painters depicted their subjects with great enthusiasm and creativity, making painting flourish during this period. The themes of murals also became bolder in concept, catering to secular needs. For example, the social phenomenon of the Buddhist-Taoist conflict in the early Tang Dynasty led to many Buddhist temples trying to please rulers in order to gain their social position. In Cave 323 of the early Tang, the depiction of Zhang Qian's mission to the Western Regions was altered to emphasize the importance of Buddhism, which falsified the facts to achieve their own political goals.

In 756, however, after An Lushan (703-767) initiated a rebellion against the Tang government, the Tubo regime invaded China's northwestern border and occupied Dunhuang until 848, when it was finally returned to Tang rule. But because the Tubo regime was also a strong advocate of Buddhism, the art of Dunhuang during this period continued to develop. To consolidate their rule and stabilize the situation in Dunhuang, Tubo rulers also paid great attention to using Buddhism to serve their governance. During more than 60 years of Tubo's rule over Dunhuang, a policy of vigorously supporting Buddhism was consistently pursued. The status of monks was greatly elevated, and some senior monks even directly participated in political affairs. In addition, Dunhuang still had a large concentration of Tang people during the Tubo occupation. They took advantage of the Tubo rulers' belief in Buddhism to build a large number of Buddhist caves, which still featured statues and murals in the Tang style. Tibetan rule did not hinder the secularization of Chinese Buddhism. On the contrary, it strengthened the politicization of Buddhism.

After the Tubo regime, and with the declining control of the central government, Dunhuang was effectively ruled by the family of a local official named Zhang Yichao (799-872). Although Buddhism was restrained compared to the Tubo period, it continued to flourish and became more secularized.

The Zhang-led Guiyi Army implemented measures to limit the expansion of the Dunhuang Buddhist society because it had become exceedingly strong in the Tubo period. They reduced the population of temple households, greatly weakening the economic power of the temples. They also abolished the Tubo-era system of monk officials and replaced it with the "DusengTong" system established in the early Tang Dynasty. These reforms not only dispersed the economic power of the vast temple economy and the overly centralized property of the military governors but also reduced the authority of the DusengTong system. During this period, Dunhuang Buddhism became more secularized in terms of both politicization and de-politicization and the power of Dunhuang Buddhism weakened and gradually attached itself to secular regimes. Therefore, monks began to serve the secular regime, mainly by holding religious ceremonies and activities to pray for blessings and praise the Guiyi Army regime, its leaders, and their subordinates.

The number of murals and sutras greatly increased, as did tantric images like the Senju Kannon, while images of the Tubo Zanpu Buddha and Tubo offering figures began to appear in the murals, reflecting the unique politics background of the times. At the same time, the shapes of the characters also became more realistic and the line drawing more skillful, with the murals characterized by an elegant use of color and a fresh style. In addition, portraits of patrons became more numerous and prominent, and paintings depicting people traveling began to appear. The Mogao Cave 156, for example, contains a painting with a long-scroll composition depicting an image of Zhang Yichao and his wife Song traveling with numerous other characters including a song and dance troupe and guards of honor. It is a classic work painted by secular patrons, reflecting the prestige and influence of the Zhang Yichao family. During this period, secular scenes had massively infiltrated the holy land of the Buddhist kingdom, which signified that religious art was being replaced by the realistic art of the secular world.

### 2.3. The Cao Family and the Dunhuang Caves during the Five Dynasties Period

Following the Tang Dynasty, China once again entered a divided period consisting of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (907-979), when Dunhuang was ruled by the local Cao family (914-1037). Facing the powerful ethnic minority regimes around it, the Cao family adopted a friendly and flexible foreign policy, including political marriages, which helped maintain stability in the Dunhuang and Guazhou regions for more than a hundred years. As with the Zhang rebel army in the late Tang, the Cao family also cultivated Buddhist art by renovating and expanding the Dunhuang Mogao Caves and even established an Academy of Painting and an Institute of Skills responsible for the expansion of the Caves, the painting of the murals, and the construction of the sculptures. Yet due to a lack of communication between the Cao regime and Central China, Dunhuang was largely cut off from the latest artistic trends. Hence, the style of painting remained relatively simple and formal, and the development of cave art during this period was limited by the financial resources of the Cao regime.

During the period of Cao's Guiyi Army, the appointed military governors (*jiedushi*) highly esteemed Buddhism, laying a solid foundation for the flourishing of Buddhist culture. In such a socio-cultural environment, the number of Buddhist monks and nuns in Dunhuang increased, with over a thousand nuns among them. This indicates that female monasticism had become a norm in Dunhuang under the strong influence of the Buddhist atmosphere. Even many prominent individuals from high-ranking families in Dunhuang joined monasteries and became ordained practitioners, illustrating how Buddhism had influenced all levels of society. Furthermore, Buddhism continued to exhibit characteristics of serving secular political powers, as almost all Buddhist activities praised the achievements and contributions of the military governors and sought their blessings and protection. In general, the interactions above accelerate the secularization of Buddhism in this period.

During this period, the caves, mainly Inverted Bucket-Shape with central Buddhist Altars, were built on a large scale and with elaborate decorations. The color was primarily green, and the decorations were mainly based on the flower and curly grass patterns so popular in the Tang Dynasty. The important parts of the Buddha and offering statues were adorned with gold and painted in simple,

elegant, colors. As for the content of murals, sutra paintings remained the primary theme as they had been during the Tang Dynasty, while the number of depictions of sutra preaching and Buddhist stories increased dramatically.

Since most of the caves during this period were funded by the Cao family, the caves were lined with murals depicting generations of Cao rulers such as Cao Yijin and Cao Yuande and their families. This shifted the focus away from religious sacrality. For example, the murals in Cave 98 of the Mogao Caves even depict Cao family members' figures on one side and figures of the previous rulers' families on the other side in an attempt to reflect the legitimacy of the Cao regime as the region's rightful heirs. This reflects the smooth transition of the Dunhuang regime from the Zhang family to the Cao family. In short, while the artistic achievements of cave art during the Cao regime were limited, a degree of progress can still be discerned.

In addition, the Cao family used the Dunhuang Caves as a place to welcome and entertain their guests. They held large Buddhist ceremonies in the caves and invited local officials and nobles to attend as a way of maintaining friendly relations; furthermore, the Cao family would receive foreign ambassadors, such as the Prince of Hui, in the Mogao Caves. This suggests that the Dunhuang Caves also served a political and diplomatic function during the Cao family's reign.

During this period, the secularization of Buddhism extended the impact on Dunhuang Caves art even further, as seen in the inclusion of secular elements in Buddhist historical site paintings, such as the prominent example of the panoramic mural of Wutai Mountain in Cave 61. This mural, measuring over 3 meters in height and more than 13 meters in length, depicts the geographical features of Wutai Mountain and its important temples. From a geographical perspective, it functions as a three-dimensional map; from a Buddhist historical perspective, it can be considered a Buddhist historical site painting; and from a landscape painting perspective, it is a large-scale landscape with figures. Within a single painting, the sacredness of religion, the natural beauty of the landscape, and the practical functions are all integrated, distinctly illustrating ongoing de-sacralization in the progress of secularization in Buddhism.

#### **2.4. Syncretism and Ultimate Glory in Western Xia and Yuan**

After the fall of the Cao family, Dunhuang fell under the control of the Western Xia regime (1038-1227), the dynasty established by the Tangut people in Northwestern China, who were also pious Buddhists, allowing Buddhist art to flourish and become mainstay of the period's artistic tradition. Most of the new caves, consisting of almost 100 Dunhuang Mogao and Anxi Yulin caves, were constructed at the western end of the Hexi Corridor, while the existing caves were renovated, rebuilt, or repainted in the style of the Northern Dynasties, Sui Dynasty, Tang Dynasty, and the Five Dynasties. There is a lack of original features in the architecture of the cave in this period, and the painted sculptures inside the caves have suffered severe damage, with only a few survivors that have been extensively restored during the Qing dynasty (1636-1912), resulting in significant alterations. Therefore, the artistic achievements of Dunhuang Caves art during Western Xia are mainly reflected in the murals. In the early period of Western Xia murals, they inherited the artistic norms of the Cao Family Painting Academy. Later, based on further sinicization, a unique style of character depiction emerged, combining the Central Plains style with Western Xia ethnic characteristics.

From the perspective of artistic styles, the cave paintings of the early Western Xia were heavily influenced by Song Dynasty imagery of the "Western Clean World" (*Xi-fang-jing-tu*) as well as paintings, offerings to Bodhisattvas, and various other themes, and the decorative patterns consisted mostly of dragons, flat ceilings and flowers. The wide and short faces of the Bodhisattvas resembled the Tang and Song murals, but the caves contained more offering Bodhisattvas and Thousand Buddhas than during the late Five dynasties as well as a few murals of patrons in Western Xia clothing. Of the most popular Buddhist themes, the Western Clean World that had originated in the Eastern Jin dynasty remained the subject of universal belief among people of all social strata, reflecting the pursuit of a better world in the afterlife. As such, depictions of the Clean World Sutra, which were modeled on the Pure Land thought, also became works of high artistic achievement. The thought of

the Pure Land *Jingtu*), with its simple and easy-to-understand principles, is the most influential belief system among the general population in China. It not only reflects the religious aspect of Buddhism but also embodies a form of secularization. Its significant impact on the development and evolution of Chinese ethical and moral beliefs is still visible in China today, particularly in rural areas.

As for the late Western Xia, the caves witnessed a rapid expansion in the subject matter of the murals. In addition to depictions of Preachings and the Western Clean World, new themes such as the Maitreya Sutra, Vajra, monks, and Budai monks began to appear. The layout of the caves also diverged from previous generations, and the scale and complexity of the murals, their meticulous style, and their craftsmanship far surpassed earlier works. With the spread of Tibetan Buddhism in Dunhuang, the caves of the Western Xia were influenced by the Tibetan esoteric art style and the national features of Western Xia. Other than representing the syncretism of Buddhism from Central China and that from Tibet, they also reflect the cultural and artistic traditions of the Han people during the Tang and Song dynasties.

In the end, the development of cave art during the Western Xia period is inextricable from the religious beliefs of the era. The introduction of Buddhism attracted the masses with simple and easily accessible teachings and was used by the rulers to pacify the people, who had suffered greatly during the Western Xia's wars with the Song, Jin, and Mongolian dynasties. Buddhism taught them that if they could not get rid of this suffering, they could at least hope for a better afterlife. The people built temples, statues, and murals as a reflection of this belief, thereby contributing to the richness of cave art during the Western Xia.

In March 1277, the Mongols destroyed the Western Xia and occupied the Dunhuang region. By 1280, the entire region of Hexi Corridor, a narrow stretch of traversable and arable plain west of the Yellow River, was under the rule of the Yuan Dynasty. The rulers of the Yuan Dynasty set up the Shazhou Road General Administration Office in Dunhuang, which was subordinate to Gansu Province. The Yuan Dynasty had a vast territory, with Tibet under its jurisdiction, and exchanges between Dunhuang and Tibet were closer and more frequent. For example, King Sulaiman of Xining and his concubines built the Huangqing Temple in Dunhuang to promote Buddhism. Therefore, in the newly excavated caves of the Yuan Dynasty, a stronger Tibetan Buddhist art style can be seen.

The number of newly excavated caves in the Yuan Dynasty is small, and its murals mainly present two styles: the Han style from Central China and the Tantric style from Tibet. The representative of the former, the "The Sutra of Guanyin of Thousand Hands and Thousand Eyes" painted in Cave 3 of the Mogao Caves, includes the characters shaped by manifold line drawings of mainly ink lines, and simple colors, which imitate the style of the Northern Song painter Li Gonglin (1049-1106). It reflects the influence of the Han style of Central China, suggesting that the Mongol rulers also drew heavily upon Han culture after establishing its power in China. The latter is represented by Cave 465 of the Mogao Caves, in which the murals represent Esoteric Buddhist themes, with a great sun in the center of the cave roof and murals on the four walls with Mandalas such as Vajra and 84 statues of the venerated ones. The caves show meticulous design and uniform painting style. The proportions of the characters are accurate, and the contrast of colors is strong and mysterious. Tibetan Buddhist art spread to Central China during the Western Xia and Yuan Dynasties, and Dunhuang was deeply influenced by its geographical proximity to Tibetan areas.

Since the Song and Yuan dynasties, the increasingly prosperous Maritime Silk Road had become the main channel for political, economic, and cultural exchanges between China and the West, while the land route via the Hexi Corridor had declined. As the overland Silk Road gradually became desolate, Dunhuang, a key town on the Silk Road, also gradually became isolated.

After the fall of the Yuan Dynasty, the rulers of the Ming and Qing dynasties did not build new caves, but at most restored the original murals. Therefore, the Yuan Dynasty became the last era of the development of Dunhuang Caves art. Thus, at the end of the development of Dunhuang art, Dunhuang was mainly under the rule of the two dynasties of ethnic minorities, the Western Xia and the Yuan. These two dynasties were also important periods for the spread of Tibetan Buddhism to

Central China when the mural art was influenced by Han and Tibetan Buddhist culture, reflecting the continuous exchange and integration between different cultures.

## 2.5. Conclusion

While the Dunhuang Caves were a product of Buddhist art from the 4th to the 11th century, their evolution was closely linked to Buddhism's development and spread in China, which was also deeply influenced by local culture. The Dunhuang art accompanied Buddhism's secularization in China, a shift from the mystical ideal world closer to the complex real world which inevitably intertwined with the "complex real world" and integrated different ethnic and religious cultures, as a result of various interactions with the politics and economy of the society of that time. It vividly and comprehensively reflects the evolution of Chinese society and people's livelihood over a thousand years.

During the Northern dynasties, Dunhuang Caves art was in its early development stage and mostly reflected the inclusiveness of Buddhism and the acceptance of Chinese culture. The integration with Central China and Han culture was the main theme of this period. The important feature of the sculpture and mural art was the integration of the primitive and rough expression style of the Western Regions and the sacred interpretation of Buddhism. The cave sculptures centered on the doctrines and thoughts of Buddhism, and the solemn and compassionate expression of the Buddha reflected the compassionate teachings of Buddhism. The early murals also mainly focused on the sacred doctrines of Buddhism, narrating the life stories of the Buddha's ascetic practice and Nirvana. The most famous murals such as "Nine Colored Deer Saving Humans" and "Five Hundred Arhats Becoming Buddhas" depicted stories from Buddhist scriptures, visually spreading the teachings of Buddhism to the public and arousing strong resonance among people towards the sacred doctrines of Buddhism.

Although the religious aspect of Dunhuang art was predominant at this time, the secularization of Buddhism began from the moment it was introduced into China. The Dunhuang art was also under the influence of the convergence of Buddhist and Taoist thought, as well as their moving from religion to secularism in China. The cave art, too, reflected the major political events of the time. This includes the changes in clothing brought about by Emperor Xiaowen's reform in the Northern Wei Dynasty. It also includes how the monasteries and monks served society out of self-preservation in response to the crackdown on Buddhism in the Northern Zhou Dynasty ordered by Emperor Wu. Both of these phenomena were reflected in the cave murals, evidently showing the close connection between religion and politics in the real world.

During the Sui and Tang dynasties, Buddhism further integrated into people's daily lives and, influenced by Chinese culture. The secularization of Buddhism accelerated, with the mysterious and profound Buddhist doctrines and images gradually becoming "humanized." As the country moved toward unification with the striking development of society and economy in the Sui and Tang, Dunhuang Caves art flourished and reached its prime, which was inextricably linked to the rulers' support for Buddhism. At the same time, various branches of Buddhism, such as Tibetan and Zen, emerged, which made Buddhism spread more widely and deeply. Therefore, the Dunhuang Caves increasingly featured murals and works of art that reflected the daily lives of ordinary people and were increasingly influenced by the culture of Central China. The most obvious change was that Buddhist statues at this time had already transformed from purely Buddhist figures to representations of emperors, imperial officials, or local leaders. The themes of cave murals also underwent significant changes with local historical figures or folk legends being added to the original single Buddhist stories, such as the murals of "Zhang Qian's mission to the Western Regions" and "Emperor Wu of Han worshipping the Golden Man" in cave 323 painted in the early Tang Dynasty. The expression of these folk stories was integrated with Buddhist teachings, using local stories as carriers to educate the believers of the time.

The splendor and prosperity of the Tang Dynasty led to a transformation of the society's value orientation regarding Buddhism, with Confucian ideas such as "putting the well-being of the people and the stability of the state first" affecting Buddhism's status. As a result, Buddhism gradually shed its initial mysterious aura and gradually merged with traditional Chinese culture in the secularization

process. Reflected by the Dunhuang Caves art, it far surpassed the earlier cultural fusion and sinicization of symbolic elements and steered Buddhism's evolution in China. Furthermore, in theory, the Zen school emerged, demanding the complete fusion of faith and life.

In the 10th and 11th centuries, Dunhuang came under the rule of the Cao family and the Western Xia government. The Cao family used the Dunhuang Caves not only as a religious site but also for political and diplomatic purposes; the Western Xia made use of Buddhism to maintain its rule as well; the people used Buddhism to relieve themselves of the pain of reality, all of which promoted the development and re-flourishing of Dunhuang Caves art. Parallel to this era was the Song Dynasty in central China. Just as religious philosophy, including Zen, was completely replaced by the secular philosophy of the Song Confucians, Buddhist art would also be eventually replaced by secular art. Therefore, during this period, although the caves were vast, they were spiritually empty. The rows of bodhisattvas on the murals are numerous and large, but lifeless, highly stylized, and conceptualized. Only the landscapes that were close to realism (such as "Wutai Mountain Picture") were considered acceptable but that is no longer religious art. In such kind of caves, it was full of Song Dynasty's Neo-Confucianism without religious passion and profound contemplation, which is regarded as the ultimate phase of Buddhist secularization.

In the Yuan dynasty, fewer new caves were opened. However, as the Yuan dynasty completed its great unification, Dunhuang and Tibet became increasingly close and the Dunhuang Caves came more under the influence of Tibetan Buddhism, with cave art reflecting both Han and Tibetan Buddhist cultures. As the Maritime Silk Road became increasingly active from the Southern Song dynasty, Dunhuang gradually lost its important position as a gateway for transportation and a transfer station for economic and cultural exchanges. Its commerce and culture also gradually declined. The Yuan dynasty also proved to be the final era in the development of Dunhuang Caves art.

In short, the development of the Dunhuang Caves reflects the interaction and close ties between religion and politics, society, and different cultures, which always accompanied Buddhism's secularization journey in China.

## References

- [1] Chang Qing, "Buddhist Art of Chang'an in the Western Wei Dynasty and Cave Ruins along the Silk Road", Art Research vol.1, The Central Academy of Fine Arts, 2019
- [2] Duan Wenjie, Studies on Dunhuang Caves Art, Lanzhou: Gansu People's Publishing House, 2007.
- [3] Fan Jinshi and Zhao Shengliang, Splendid Buddha Palace, Hangzhou: Zhejiang Literature and Art Publishing House, 2011
- [4] Gu Shuyan, Dunhuang's Cave Art from Sixteen Kingdoms to the Sui Dynasty, Lanzhou: Gansu Education Press, 2016.
- [5] <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/440/>, 2022.6
- [6] Han Rong, the Art of Early Dunhuang Cave Paintings and Their Aesthetic Value, Master's Thesis, Lanzhou University, 2010.
- [7] Li Haixia, A Study into the Secularization of Dunhuang Buddhism in the Middle and Late Tang Dynasty, the Five Dynasties and the Early Song Dynasty, Master's Thesis, Lanzhou University, 2020
- [8] Li Keran, Inscription on the Restoration of the Mogao Grottoes Buddhist Shrines by Li Keran, Tang Dynasty
- [9] Li Zehou, The Path of Beauty, Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2016
- [10] Li Yinxia. Research on the Art of the Caves of Western Xia. Northwest Normal University, Master's thesis, 2009
- [11] Ma De, "Interactions between Buddhism and Society as Seen from the Dunhuang Grottoes", Studies of Buddhist Cultural, Vol 7, 2019
- [12] Ma De, Wangxiangwei, A Brief Discussion of the Socialization of Buddhism in Medieval Dunhuang, Beijing: China Social Science Press, 2010

- [13] Ning Qiang, *Art, Religion and Politics Dunhuang Cave 220, Doctrine Dissertation*, Harvard University & Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1997.
- [14] Niu Dasheng, "A Brief Introduction to the Mural Art of Western Xia", *Ningxia Social Sciences*, No.4, 2007.
- [15] Shi Weixiang, *a Study of Dunhuang History and Mogao Cave Art*, Lanzhou: Gansu Education Press, 2002.
- [16] Susan, Whitfield, *Life along the Silk Road, Second Edition*, University of California Press, 2015.
- [17] Victor H. Mair, *Records of Transformation Tableaux (pien-hsiang)*, T'oung Pao, 1986, Second Series, Vol. 72, 1986,
- [18] Victor H. Mair, "Religious Formations an Intercultural Contacts in Early China", *Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe* by Volkhard Krech, Brill Academic Publishers, 2012
- [19] Wang Yanyun, "Maitreya Sutra in the Mural Paintings of the Western Xia Caves in Hexi Caves." *Journal of Ningxia University*, No.3, 2003.
- [20] Xia Leiming, "The social life of monks in the Kingdom of Shanshan as seen from the Kulu manuscripts: A discussion on the emergence of secular Buddhism in Dunhuang from the late Tang Dynasty to the Song Dynasty", *Silk Road Ethnic Ancient Script and Cultural Academic Symposium*, Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences. 2005
- [21] Yan Tingliang, "The existing religions in the earlier period of Dunhuang", *Dunhuang Research*, No.1, 2010.
- [22] Yang Li, *Research on the Spread of Buddhism Culture in Dunhuang during the Han and Tang Dynasties*, Master's Thesis, Lanzhou University, 2021
- [23] Zhao Shengliang, *A Brief History of Dunhuang Grottoes Art*, Beijing: China Youth Publishing House, 2016