Artistic Confluence: Examining the Cultural and Religious Interplay Between Yunnan and Imperial China During the Sui-Tang and Song Periods in Art

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Abstract. This study delves into the cultural nuances of the peripheral kingdoms in the west and south-west regions during the Sui-Tang and Song periods of Imperial China. While there's extensive research on mainstream Chinese identity, these peripheral regions, particularly Yunnan, have been relatively underexplored. The area witnessed a shift from scattered chiefdoms to more structured governance, with the Nanzhao Kingdom consolidating power by the 8th century. With the introduction of Azhaliism, a form of esoteric Buddhism, in the 9th century, Buddhism replaced local pagan practices, significantly influencing the region's cultural and artistic expressions. This study analyses art pieces from the Nanzhao and Dali Kingdom periods, examining four pieces from both the respective local kingdoms and their corresponding Chinese dynasties. The art pieces, including the renowned Illustrated History of Nanzhao and the Thousand Buddha Picture from the Dali Kingdom, offer insights into the evolving cultural dynamics, reflecting both unique regional attributes and broader Chinese influences. The research suggests a growing alignment of Yunnan art with mainstream Chinese styles post the Tang dynasty, emphasizing the region's gradual Sinophilic shift, while retaining its distinctive Indo-Tibetian elements. This analysis underscores the multifaceted cultural interplay between Yunnan and central China, illuminating the symbiotic evolution of their artistic and cultural identities.

Keywords: Yunnan; imperial china; artistic confluence.

1. Introduction

While studies into the cultural aspect of Imperial Chinese identity within the Sui-Tang and Song periods are myriad and expertly analytical, such as Wang's Images of women in Chinese thought and culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin period through the song dynasty [1], there is a relative lack of attention given to the independent peripheral kingdoms, especially in the west and south - west directions. As Lisa Hoecklin suggests in her paper Managing Cultural Differences, understanding the local cultures and traditions and how they absorbed and diverged from mainstream Chinese culture could not only help us better understand the faculties of the exchange of cultural and ethnical relationships back then, but also the dynamic that we can find in the region today [2]. The region of Yunnan had been dominated by petty chiefdoms since the start of the first civilizations there, and by the 700s, most of the region was under the very loose suzerainty of the reigning Chinese Tang Dynasty, which titularrily controlled the region but exercised no actual administrative or legislative power. By the end of the first half of the 8th century, the region, for the first time in history, was united under king Piluoge, who through a series of military campaigns conquered the rest of the chiefdoms. Buddhism would enter the kingdom a century later, around the first half of the 9th century, in the form of Azhaliism, a form of esoteric Buddhism within the Vajrayana sect [3]. Quickly replacing the local pagan worships as the mainstream religion, it was adopted as the religion of the state and stayed in prominence within the region up until today. This study will aim to establish the foundation and avenues of progression and evolution of key cultural differences between the southwestern and the prevalent central cultures of China, through the analyzation of different art pieces of two distinct eras of the region: the Nanzhao Kingdom period under the late Tang dynasty, and the Dali Kingdom Period under the late Song period. The study will specifically look at four pieces that are prevalent in the society of the period: 2 pieces each from the Chinese dynasty and Nanzhao or Dali kingdom

respectively according to each period, and will relate their subject, form, material and significance towards a cultural difference between the subjects. This study hypothesizes that art examined will show differences in the respective cultures to enlarge as the timeframe examined moves forward on and that Yunnan art behaved in a pattern that saw the artforms of the region grow more foreign to Chinese art compared to contemporary art of the region.

2. Comparisons in the Nanzhao-Tang Period

The first artefact that this study will examine in the Nanzhao period is contained in the buddhist graphic The Illustrated History of Nanzhao, the first of its kind known to historians and currently held by the Yurinkan in Kyoto. The illustrations, which are a group of seven colourful paintings, are painted upon one singular long scroll. One of the paintings is depicted as Fig.1. With a total length of 552 centimeters and a height of 31.5 centimeters, the artworks were dated to be painted in 898 ADS, in the late period of the kingdom [4]. It depicts the story of Guanyin, the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy, preaching in Dali [5]. The scroll depicts many characters from mainly local buddhist traditions, such as the preacher Candragupta, who is said by local tradition to have spread Buddhism to the region [6]. The painting is significant as it shows just how the locals both utilized and relied on religion as a tool. The painting, upon first inspection, is striking as it lacks any background colours beside the natural beige-yellow tint of the paper it was constructed upon, and describes mainly figures and a limited part of their surroundings using primarily the colours blue, white and red. The depictions of the characters, however, are simple yet intricately detailed. Analysing the specific qualitative qualities of the pieces, we can observe several key cultural points that contribute to the making of this piece. The shapes of the characters on the page are certainly oriental, comparable to many Chinese and even Japanese depictions of people with its relatively lacking of third-dimensioned perspectives and shading, but compared to late Tang drawings of its time frame, the figures are noticeably less plump. The landscape has similar elements, with the construction of rock mountains widely utilizing sharp cliffs and overhangs while lacking foliage akin to thern northeastern cousins, they seem more rounded and uniform. Finally, there are the existence of symbols and structures that would rarely if ever appear on contemporary oriental paintings: snakes and exotic animals, along with pillars and the liberal use of Indochinese clothing on the characters, which is very unique in the style this piece employs. While Nanzhao art has seldom survived the centuries leading up to today, there are many exemplary Tang works of religious art surviving, and the largest collection can be traced to The Mogao Grottoes. Constructed as far back as the Northern Dynasties, the grottoes have also seen quite massive expansions during the Sui-Tang and Song period alike. The grottoes are usually a small rock-hewn room covered in statues and murals. For example, the 217th grotto, as can be observed in Fig.2, was constructed during the very start of the eighth century, has a statue of the bodhisattva in the centre while murals cover the room on all sides, including the roof. The walls are almost full to the brim with paint, and decorations are elaborate upon the kasayas, ornaments and rings of the saints and buddhas that strewn across the room. Colours of the cave can be observed as red and blue in general, but the paint used on the figures of the buddhas (perceived to be a form of while) has degraded to the point of almost black. The imagery of the lotus and the pose of meditation was widely used, along with the signature pose of buddhist meditation. The iconography of the paintings is much more evident and myriad. Comparing the two pieces, the Nanzhao piece shows evident signs and exotic elements that signify cultural exchanges and interactions. The exotic animals, such as snakes, and Indochinese clothing depicted in the illustrations are indicative of a syncretism between local traditions and foreign influences [7][8]. Comparatively, the Mogao Grottoes, with their extensive and vibrant murals and statues, are mainly localized and more original and traditional to the buddhism of Indian origins, interestingly. Another difference that should be taken into account is that while the Mogao Grottoes were impressive and seemingly a much more expansive endeavour than its counterpart, it is imperative to compare the economical and logistical differences of the two works. While the expansions of the Mogao grottoes were not an important official endeavour by the imperial

court and instead mainly a local and charitable effort, the lands of China were rich in the era of one of its greatest dynasties. And while the Illustrated History was a direct commission by the King of Nanzhao to artisans that held it in a position of national importance, the kingdom did not have nearly as much manpower or skill and technical knowledge. The differences in art can very well be not only cultural, but have a relationship with the amount of effort available to construct these works.



Fig. 1 Excerpt from the illustrated history of nanzhao

(https://www.ames.cam.ac.uk/file/illustrated-history-nanzhao-nan-zhao-tu-chuan-899-detail-apotheosis-avalokitesvara-12th13th)



Fig. 2 Mogao grottoes, grotto 217

(https://www.e-dunhuang.com/cave/10.0001/0001.0001.0217)

3. Comparisons in the Dali-Song Period

The Huafanxiang or the Thousand Buddha Picture is a unique scroll from the Dali Kingdom, with debates over its specific date of creation. It is an entirely gilded, meticulously drawn scroll with predominantly Buddhist themes but expanding upon that to show the historic chronology and events of the history, religion, culture, and customs of Dali and its predecessor, Nanzhao, not unlike the Illustrated History of the Nanzhao Kingdom [9]. This scroll, almost all-encompassing in nature, appears to function quite like an encyclopedia, depicting many aspects of life in these kingdoms. While reflecting on the diverse religious influences and complex cultural interminglings in the region during the Song Dynasty. As can be observed in Fig.4, The scroll shares many traits with the previous work, having much the same background and landscapes, but the similarities end there. The artwork is noticeably more nuanced and depicts more closely deity-like figures instead of the mainly human dominated Illustrated History, and lines are more simplistic, rounded, almost akin to the Tang Mogao murals. Other previously unaccounted elements also show themselves: rings behind the heads of the saints, meditation poses and lotus as a symbol all can be found on the scroll [10]. Comparatively, another artwork, “Monkey Serving Mercury God”, depicted in Fig.3, by Zhang Sigong from the Song

Dynasty, measuring 121.4 by 55.9 centimeters, depicts Mercury in a contemplative state of writing with a monkey assisting her. The meticulous accuracy in modeling, fluid lines, and the animated expression on the monkey illustrate the precise and nuanced artistic approach of that time. This piece, initially procured as a Buddhist painting, was later identified as a painting of the local Chinese goddess of mercury, and stands as the sole surviving depiction of the Mercury Goddess from the Southern Song Dynasty. The painting depicts the goddess holding pen and paper, while a monkey stands by her side holding up an inkwell for her. Colouration wise, the painting had faded over centuries of changing hands, but the vivid red and yellow on her garbs and its ornamental fabrics can still be observed. The two pieces depict an interesting cultural development: over time, the peripheral culture of the Yunnan region seems to be catching up yet lagging behind the contemporary chinese culture, as we can observe that the Dali piece has many shared techniques with what has been seen in Tang art [11], while Song art developed further into another style. Also worth noting is that the importance of the Monkey Serving Mercury God means that pagan worship within China proper is still acceptable custom, despite the preferences of the Imperial court, and yet the Yunnan region would see almost hegemonic domination of surviving art being almost purely buddhist. This might suggest both an increased need for Buddhism by the governing institutions to justify legitimacy in the region, but also a greater cultural unity.



Fig. 3 Monkey serving mercury god

(https://baike.baidu.com/pic/%E5%AE%8B%E5%BC%A0%E6%80%9D%E6%81%AD%E7%8C%B4%E4%BE%8D%E6%B0%B4%E6%98%9F%E7%A5%9E%E5%9B%BE/639548/1/1f178a82b9014a90f6030f9ac6202e12b31bb05140c6?fr=lemma&fromModule=lemma_top-image&ct=single#aid=1&pic=1f178a82b9014a90f6030f9ac6202e12b31bb05140c6)



Fig. 4 Huafanxiang

(https://www.sohu.com/a/145344257_815512)

4. Analytics of the Change

Analysing the compared articles of art, it can be deduced that the cultural differences between Yunnan and China share a fluid continuity that is parallel to each other's development while being

closely tied together. As a local synapse of the overarching superculture of China, the Yunnanese culture showcases unique regional syncretism with its exotic elements, while distinguishing itself from not only the mainstream but the various cultures that it shares ties outside of the sphere of China. From the comparison of the artworks previously done, we can through analysis determine that the change brought by the fall of the Tang dynasty and the establishment of the Song saw the region's culture shift towards a more sinophilic position. With a significant undertone shift in terms of clothing, poses, patterns and colorations that started to detach from Indo-Tibetian influence and began to assume a more Chinese pattern. Yet, even as Yunnan art leaned more towards Sinophilic expressions, it never lost its essence. The region's strategic location, acting as a crossroads for multiple civilizations, ensured that its art remained a tapestry of varied influences, harmoniously woven together, reflecting a multifaceted cultural legacy. The entry and eventual dominance of Buddhism, particularly the esoteric branch of Azhaliism, in Yunnan, was key to this. The spiritual narratives, rituals, and iconography introduced by Buddhism intertwined within itself in the form of Chinese Mahayana and Tibetan Vajrayana, and with the existing local pagan practices, leading to a distinct religious identity which helped facilitate cultural parallelism.

5. Summary

The intricate fabric of Yunnan's art, as showcased through the dynamic periods of the Nanzhao and Dali Kingdoms against the backdrop of the Sui-Tang and Song dynasties, provides a profound window into the broader cultural exchanges and evolutions of Imperial China. What is evident from this in-depth exploration is that art is not merely a reflection of aesthetic inclinations but a testament to socio-political, economic, and religious transformations. The cultural trajectory of Yunnan, as reflected in its art, underscores the complexities of regional identity formation within the vast expanse of China's historical empire. While Yunnan absorbed and integrated elements from central Chinese culture, it concurrently retained and celebrated its distinctive attributes, which were enriched by its Indo-Tibetan affiliations and its unique geographical position as a nexus between varied civilizations. This dual nature - of assimilation and distinction - is at the heart of Yunnan's artistic heritage. The gradual Sinophilic shift post the Tang dynasty, characterized by increased alignment with central Chinese artistic norms, was counterbalanced by a persistent celebration of regional specificity, influenced heavily by its foreign interactions and the religious imprints of Buddhism. It's imperative to understand that while overarching political or economic forces can guide cultural expression, regional identities have their own inherent resilience and dynamism. Yunnan's art stands as a testament to this fact. Despite the shifts in dynastic powers and the ebb and flow of dominant religious or cultural forces, the region's art remained an authentic tapestry of its multifaceted history, influences, and aspirations. In closing, the Yunnan region serves as a compelling case study, illustrating the delicate dance between local and central, foreign and familiar, tradition and transformation. Through its art, Yunnan not only offers insights into its own rich legacy but also enriches our understanding of Imperial China's vast and varied cultural landscape. It reminds us that while empires may have dominant narratives, the tapestries of their peripheries are equally, if not more, illuminating.

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