

Cultural Interaction between Flying Buddhas of Northern Wei and Tang Dynasties' Mogao Grottoes and Heian Period Japan

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Abstract. Japanese Buddhism originates from Chinese Buddhism, on what basis? Books, music, dance, architecture and other arts and cultures are the carriers of Buddhism. Murals and sculptures are no exception and are visual media that can strongly embody cultural interaction. Through the existing academic research, the author understands the artistic style of flying Buddha statues in the Northern Wei and Tang Dynasties. On this basis, this paper takes several flying Buddha figures recorded in Mogao Grottoes of Dunhuang as the typical flying Buddha figures and discusses the mural art of Northern Wei Dynasty and Tang Dynasty. It further compares the aesthetic characteristics of the flying Buddha statues in the Heian Period of Japan with the two dynasties of China. This paper discusses the communication and development of flying Buddha figures in color, face, body posture, costume, shape, and specific styles in Northern Wei Dynasty, Tang Dynasty, and Heian period. Finally, this paper concludes that the flying Buddha statues of Heian period imitated the flying Buddha statues of Northern Wei Dynasty and Tang Dynasty while developing the style of localized Japanese flying Buddha statues.

Keywords: Northern Wei Dynasty, Tang Dynasty, Flying Buddha, Heian Period, Cultural Interaction.

1. Introduction

Japanese Buddhism was introduced from China in the 6th century AD and influenced Japanese art styles of different periods, including architecture, sculpture, painting, and so on. This paper examines the Chinese influence on Japanese Buddhist art during the Heian Period, including two periods in China, the Northern Wei period and the Tang Dynasty. This paper specifically discusses the presentation of the art form of the flying Buddha, which proves that the flying Buddha in the Heian era of Japan is not only similar to the influence of the Northern Wei Dynasty and the Tang Dynasty of China, but also proves the localization of the art of the flying Buddha in the Heian era of Japan.

The research method of this paper is based on the historical and artistic facts that have been studied and demonstrated by scholars, combined with the art works of the flying Buddha of three eras displayed in the museum database, to carry out an easy-to-understand visual analysis and comparison, thus make it easy for scholars at all levels to read and understand.

2. Flying Buddha During the Northern Wei Dynasty

Flying Buddha figures are based on the Indian flying Buddha [1], but gradually developed a unique symbol of the Northern Wei Dynasty. In the Northern Wei Dynasty, Chinese Buddhist art was in the transition period of localization. The Buddhist figures in this period all show the localization characteristics of the Northern Wei Dynasty. The flying Buddha of Northern Wei Dynasty mainly appeared in the cave temples in the form of murals [2]. This paper selects the Buddhist art form of discussing the murals in specific grottoes to analyze the color, shape, and appearance characteristics of the flying Buddha figures in this period.

The mural of the center column of the main room of Cave 254 in Mogao Grottoes faces east, as shown in Figure 1 [3]. The facial features of the flying Buddha statue in this hole are extremely abstract, and almost all the looks of the flying Buddha are unified. They are all approaching oval faces. The lines of the nose are directly connected to the face and neck. A few white touches can paint the whole eye. All the flying Buddhas are represented in the form of bald heads.



Figure 1. Cave 254, Mogao Grottoes

The skin color of many flying Buddha figures in this cave shows two colors. In the mural surrounding the giant Buddha statue in the niche, the skin color of the flying Buddha is uniformly black and gray. In the mural at the top of this column, all the flying Buddhas are represented in white skin tones. The two different skin tones show the diversity of the flying Buddha in this cave. Although their appearance is almost the same, their skin color can be differentiated.

The remarkable feature of the flying Buddha in this cave is that the long, flowing garments cover the lower part of most of their bodies. In some depictions, their toes are visible, while in other, their toes are not shown. In certain cases, the lower body is turned into the image of a lotus seat. The flying satins of the flying Buddhas and their flying skirts are particularly prominent in terms of color and volume. When the skin of the flying Buddha is depicted as white, the silk behind them almost merged with the halo and appears either blue or black. Behind the dark-skinned statue of the flying Buddha, the halo and the flying silk are not uniform in color, showing two separate elements; Although the color of the silk varies, the garments worn by all the flying Buddhas appear to float high in the air.

Another feature that can show the “flying” characteristic of the flying Buddha is their arms. Some arms stretch out straight; Some have one hand bent and the other hand raised; Some put their hands together in front of their chest. The movements of the arms and the group costumes flying in all directions enable all the flying Buddhas in this cave to achieve the “flying” effect. There are no clouds or wings around the Apsaras Buddhas near the large Buddha statue in this cave, which can help them to fly, but the silk, clothing and arm lines match each other to form the effect of flying. On the top of the main column, some flying Buddhas omit the shape of their bodies, which are almost reduced to flower-shaped wings to form the effect of flying.

3. Flying Buddha During the Tang Dynasty

In the Tang Dynasty, Buddhism was more prevalent, and the image of the flying Buddha flourished after the Northern Wei Dynasty [4]. This paper takes the Tang Dynasty, which has the local characteristics of China and continues the flying Buddha image, as another period to compare and discuss the imitation of Japanese flying Buddha figures to Chinese flying Buddha figures and the differences between them. The reason why this paper chooses the late Tang Dynasty as the research object is that the time interval between the late Tang Dynasty and the Northern Wei Dynasty is long enough. Therefore, the development of the flying Buddha image was also more profound, and the state of the flying Buddha image in the late Tang Dynasty was sufficiently different from that of the Northern Wei Dynasty before it, rather than developing in the same way.

Another mural, also from the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang, is the artwork discussed in this paper that represents the flying Buddha of the late Tang Dynasty. This mural is located in Cave 16, as shown in Figure 2 [5]. Compared with the extremely large number of abstract flying Buddha figures in Cave 254 of the Northern Wei Dynasty, this mural depicts only one image of flying Buddha in a realistic style, showing the characteristics of flying Buddha statues in the Tang Dynasty.



Figure 2. Mural paintings of Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang: Flying Buddha

First, realism is reflected in the use of clear and detailed strokes to outline the face and torso of the flying Buddha. The eyes of the flying Buddha are open, and the eyeballs are dotted with white. The features are clearly visible, the curved eyebrows, the lengthened earlobes, the rich chin, and the mouth with a slight smile. The Buddha's long white hair is curled up and he wears a headdress similar to a gourd shape on his head. The overall skin color of the flying Buddha blends into the wall of the mural. Its fingers and toes are well defined. The depiction of the rhomboid navel all reflects the realistic style. For the use of the color of the flying Buddha, black and green continue to be the main colors. The upper part of the body is still naked. It also continues the wearing of accessories. But the ornament is embellished with green and white rings.

The four auspicious clouds on the feet of the flying Buddha fully reflect the authenticity of the Buddha traveling in the sky. In Figure 2, the legs of the flying Buddha appear more powerful. One of his legs is bent at the knee in a kneeling position, while the other is stretched out straight back in a very natural way, rather than falling straight down and being covered by his skirt. The flying Buddha wears pants, and a short skirt superimposed on the waist, which shows the dynamic sense of flying as they float up in a neat and uniform form. The silk, which is half white and half green, and the lower clothes of the flying Buddha and the tail of the auspicious cloud all flutter to the same upper right, forming a unified aesthetic feeling.

4. The Flying Buddha of the Heian Period

Buddhism was introduced to Japan from China in the 6th century and developed during the Asuka, Nara, and Heian periods. During the Heian period, Buddhism introduced into China and the traditional Japanese religion Shinto began to communicate with each other. In the end, Buddhism in Japan gradually transformed from the initial imitation of Chinese Buddhism in the Asuka Era to the localized Buddhism in Japan [6]. This paper discusses the similarities and differences between the flying Buddha statues in this special era of cultural exchange and the flying Buddha statues in Chinese Buddhism.

Figure 3 is a cypress flying Buddha sculpture from the Heian period [7], which at first glance gives people an impression of abstract and simple; It can be related to the depiction of the flying Buddha in the abstract style of Cave 254 of Mogao Grottoes in the Northern Wei Dynasty. The hidden feet can also be associated with the body shape of some of the flying Buddha statues in Cave 254. This work of art can present detailed, realistic body lines in abstract simplicity. Examples include a clearly visible neckline, a prominent navel, tight lips, a small nose, and extended earlobes. These body features echo the realistic style of the Flying Buddha in Cave 16 of the Mogao Grottoes, as well as the towering bun.



Figure 3. Cypress flying Buddha sculptures during the Heian period

Comparing figures 2 and 3, it can be found that another similarity to the style of the portrayal of the flying Buddhas of the Tang Dynasty in Mogao Grottoes is that the arms of the two flying Buddhas are extended to the left and above, while the leg lines are extended to the right and above, showing a symmetrical aesthetic feature. Figure 3 Under the body of the flying Buddha is a cloud in the shape of a sea wave, which also continues the characteristics of the flying Buddha in Mogao Grottoes in the Tang Dynasty. This statue of the flying Buddha has its unique elements compared to the specific frescoes of the Mogao Grottoes of the Northern Wei and the Tang dynasties. The Buddha has closed eyes and expressionless features, with no accessories adorning the figure. In addition, the flying silk is very shorter compared to the high, overhead silk of the Northern Wei Dynasty and the extremely long, flowing silk of the Tang Dynasty, which limits the flying effect.



Figure 4. Statues of the Heian period

Figure 4 is another fine statue from the Heian period [8]. Japanese cypress with lacquer and gold. The eyebrows, eyes, nose, mouth and ears of this flying Buddha are depicted in more detail than in Figure 3. Slightly curved eyebrows, lightly closed eyes are highlighted with black on the plane; The nose is carved more convex; The mouth showed a light red color. This is different from the previous three works.

Like the three flying Buddhas discussed above, it retains a bare upper body, but the Buddhas are not covered with circular ornaments like the flying Buddhas of the Northern Wei and Tang dynasties. As in Figure 3 of the Heian Period, the flying Buddha has no ornaments on his body but wears a pyramid-shaped crown on his head. The flying Buddha sits with his legs crossed on an auspicious cloud of symmetrical beauty. Like the flying Buddha in Figure 3, the existence of its feet is not visible, and the state of its legs is only judged according to the natural folds of the robe worn by the flying Buddha. The flying silk behind this flying Buddha is not just designed on one side of the body of the flying Buddha like the flying Buddha of the Tang Dynasty and the Heian period. But similar to the Northern Wei flying Buddha, the flying silk is more evenly distributed on the left and right sides behind the flying Buddha, flying to the upper space. Both hands hold the same instrument, and it has

a specific mudra. The work of art in Figure 4 is the most detailed in the discussion of the flying Buddha Statue in this paper, and the sense of quantity of the silk is also relatively the largest, highlighting the importance of the flying silk in the aesthetic depiction of the flying Buddha.

As can be seen in Figure 3 and 4, the unique characteristics of the flying Buddha statues in the Heian period are different from the specific murals of the flying Buddha statues in the Northern Wei and Tang dynasties. The first is the lightly closed eyes of the flying Buddha, even as the main part of the five features. In the depiction of their eyes, the artists avoided the artistic characteristic of the flying Buddha's eye contact with our audience. Secondly, the flying Buddhas of the Heian period generally showed a relatively static state, because of their static and gentle body posture; Including that the artists omitted depictions of their legs, weakening the presence of legs and feet; The extremely relaxed expression and extended arms all show the image style of the flying Buddha, which is more static than that of the Northern Wei and Tang dynasties. From this visual comparison analysis, the comparison between the specific Heian period flying Buddha statues and those recorded in the murals of Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang of the Northern Wei and Tang Dynasties can be seen that the flying Buddha figures of the Heian Period developed the unique aesthetic characteristics of the local flying Buddha figures while absorbing the style characteristics of the Northern Wei and Tang Dynasties.

5. Conclusion

Even though the murals and sculptures discussed in this paper may lose their original colors and shapes after a long period of storage, what remains unchanged is the traces of the artists who created these artworks, as well as people's determination to discover the history and connotation behind them. The conclusion of this study is that the flying Buddha statues of Heian period in Japan imitated the images of flying Buddha statues in Mogao Grottoes of Northern Wei Dynasty and Tang Dynasty in China and created the characteristic images of Japanese localization.

In this study, only four works of art were used to explore the Northern Wei Dynasty in Mogao Grottoes of Dunhuang, and the communication between the flying Buddha statues of the late Tang Dynasty and the flying Buddha Statues of the Heian Period may lack the diversity of comparison and discussion of similar artworks due to text limitations, and more graphic data are needed for further exploration and research.

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