The Pictorial Saga of Social Control: An Analysis of Political and Social Symbolism in Dunhuang Murals

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to investigate the historical role of Dunhuang murals as a tool for political and social control. By conducting a thorough analysis of the themes, elements, and textual content of the murals, the study findings revealed how these artworks reflected the political ideologies, social norms, and moral values prevalent during their creation. This article aims to clarify this perspective from a multidisciplinary standpoint, drawing upon insights from art history, political science, and sociology to provide fresh interpretations grounded in both theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence. The research underscores that art serves as a reflection of political will, engages in a dynamic interplay with social control, and serves as an innovative platform for political propaganda, thereby demonstrating a profound interconnection and intricate relationship between art, power dynamics, and societal structures.

Keywords: Dunhuang murals, social control, political symbolism, religion and politics, ideology

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Dunhuang murals embody artistic expression within the Dunhuang aesthetic realm, illustrating a complex interplay between art, politics, and society. These murals are not solely religious and aesthetically valued; they also vividly reflect the interconnection between political will and social structures.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The research on Dunhuang murals has a long history and has yielded fruitful results. The author roughly categorizes it into three main categories: mural research, mural preservation, and artistic derivatives. In the field of mural research, numerous scholars have conducted in-depth analysis of individual or multiple Dunhuang murals, exploring their historical origins, cultural connotations, aesthetic qualities, philosophical and religious ideas, as well as their reflection of social realities. In terms of mural preservation, researchers have combined knowledge of biochemistry to decode the production techniques and material selection of Dunhuang murals, proposing innovative preservation methods that provide scientific basis for the effective conservation of Dunhuang murals. The artistic derivative field witnesses how scholars extract aesthetic elements and symbols from the murals and integrate them into various art forms such as dance, oil painting, contemporary ceramic murals, and mixed media painting. They have also combined them with modern scenes such as women's fashion design, furniture design, and electronic games, promoting cross-disciplinary cultural and creative design. Despite the efforts of numerous scholars to advance the comprehensive development of Dunhuang mural research, the exploration from the perspectives of political science and sociology remains insufficient. Consequently, this article seeks to address this gap by analyzing the social control mechanisms inherent in Dunhuang murals through the lenses of political science and sociology. It aims to investigate the intricate relationship between art, politics, and societal structures, using the Dunhuang murals as a compelling case study. Specifically, this study examines how art reflects political intentions, explores its interaction with social control, and investigates its innovative utilization in political propaganda. By doing so, it endeavors to fill the research void in the political and sociological dimensions of Dunhuang murals and deepen scholarly comprehension of these significant cultural artifacts.

1.3 Methodology

The article uses an interdisciplinary approach, integrating art history, political science, and sociology, to examine the Dunhuang murals, exploring their implications for social control.

2. Political and Social Symbolism in Dunhuang Murals

2.1 Connection between Mural Themes and Contemporary Political Environment

The Dunhuang murals vividly depict a wide range of subjects, including Buddhist narratives and legacies, mythological tales and deific reverence, historical figures, portraiture, music, and dance, as well as every day and folklife. These intricate portrayals are inextricably linked to the historical backdrop of the Dunhuang region. Dunhuang flourished during the Sui and Tang dynasties, coinciding with the prevalent practice of Buddhism. The influx of Buddhism profoundly impacted the themes and styles depicted in the murals. Concurrently, the Sui and Tang periods represented a vibrant era in Chinese history, characterized by political, economic, and cultural prosperity. Against this backdrop, the centralized and powerful central governance provided crucial political impetus to the creation of the Dunhuang murals. Some sections of the murals were commissioned by the government or temples, serving as tools of political propaganda. They aimed to showcase the authority of the rulers, the prosperity of the nation, and the positive influence of Buddhism on society, all to strengthen the legitimacy of the ruling class and maintain social stability. The mural tapestry of Dunhuang offers an exquisite tableau that encapsulates a multitude of motifs: the sovereignty of emperors, the enigma of myth, and the valor of legendary characters.

2.1.1 On the Sovereignty of Emperors

Within the mural-infused walls of Dunhuang, the portrayal of imperial dominion is often envisioned through depictions intertwined with Buddhist lore, epitomized by figures such as the "Chakravartin" or the "avatar of Buddha." The "Chakravartin" delineates the archetype of the worldly sovereign whose reign ushers in harmony and affluence. His effigy, gracing various frescoes like the eminent "Chakravartin figure" in Cave 45 of the Mogao Grottoes, with its regal and compassionate visage, bedecked in resplendent finery, mirrors the elevated stature and potentate of the emperor. These visual narrations articulate the dual role of the emperor as a guardian of the Buddhist dharma and a paragon of ecclesiastical virtue.

2.1.2 On the Enigma of Myth

In ancient Chinese society, the relationship between mythology and imperial power was inseparable, with both being mutually dependent and influential on each other. Mythology provided sacred symbolic meaning to imperial power, while imperial power utilized mythology to strengthen control and rule over society. The mural paintings depicting the Jataka story of King Shibi in the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang serve as a typical example.

The Jataka story of King Shibi tells the tale of his selfless act of cutting flesh from his own body to save a dove and fulfill the demands of an eagle. This story embodies the Buddha's love and compassion for all living beings, as well as his reverence for the sanctity of life. King Shibi's actions moved the heavens and earth, ultimately receiving the blessings of the Dharma and his body being restored. This spirit of sacrifice and unwavering faith in the Dharma provided a sacred symbolic meaning for imperial power.

In ancient China, the emperor was regarded as the "Son of Heaven" and possessed supreme power. They used mythological stories like the Jataka tale of King Shibi to promote their divine status and their care for the nation and its people. By likening themselves to mythological figures such as King Shibi, the emperors attempted to convince people that their power was divinely bestowed upon them and that they possessed unique divine qualities.

Furthermore, the Jataka story of King Shibi also emphasizes the spirit of sacrifice and moral standards. The emperors strengthened moral control over society by propagating such stories, making people more obedient to their rule. They sought to convince people that only by adhering to moral standards and emulating the actions of mythological figures like King Shibi could they receive the blessings and protection of the Dharma.

Therefore, the presence of mural paintings depicting the Jataka story of King Shibi in the Mogao Grottoes not only reflects the teachings and spirit of Buddhism but also highlights the relationship between mythology and imperial power, as well as how imperial power utilized mythology to strengthen control and rule over society. These mural works are an important part of the strategies of control and governance in ancient Chinese society, and they serve as significant resources for understanding ancient social history and culture.

2.1.3 On the Valor of Legendary Characters

The valorous exploits of heroes constitute another salient theme within the murals of Dunhuang. These depictions underscore the superlative aptitudes, noble ethos, and momentous achievements of historical paragons. For example, in Cave 323 of the Mogao Grottoes, the portrayal of General Ban Chao of the Han era, clad in martial regalia and exuding an aura of dauntlessness, signifies the fortitude of the state and the steadfastness of its frontiers. Such artistic renditions not only honor bygone luminaries but also encapsulate the essence of heroism.

The genesis of these sophisticated artistic expressions and the curation of their narrative substance not only mirror the ingenuity and aspirations of the artisans but also encapsulate the spiritual convictions, ethical benchmarks, and statecraft narratives prevalent during their era. Employing masterful pictorial syntax and allegorical methodology, the creators elevate the frescoes beyond mere aesthetic entities, fashioning them into potent conduits for the propagation of political and societal tenets. Thereby, the murals are transformed into potent tools of societal orchestration.

In its entirety, the allegorical renditions of personages within the Dunhuang frescoes profoundly explore the motifs of sovereign governance, mythic tradition, and valiant distinction. By dissecting and deciphering these visual texts, one gains a more nuanced comprehension of the politico-cultural milieu of antiquity while concurrently discerning the methods wielded by dynastic powers to harness fine arts as a means of ideological shepherding and communal governance. Such scholarly disquisitions provide a vantage point for contemplating contemporary political machinations and their proclivity to sculpt societal worldviews through cultural artifacts. The Dunhuang frescoes, as a historiographical lens, reflect the intricate spectrum of human societal progression and the covert political aspirations enshrined within their vibrant tableaux.

2.2 Religious Symbolism: The Intersection of Buddhist Doctrine and Political Power

Religion itself is a socio-cultural phenomenon shaped by power dynamics, and it fundamentally involves the construction of power relations based on the hierarchical structure between the divine and human realms, as well as interpersonal interactions. Hence, it can be argued that religion is inherently intertwined with power, possessing inherent power attributes.

The amalgamation of Buddhist teachings with political authority aims to reinforce secular dominance by invoking the sanctity of spiritual doctrines. Within the murals of Dunhuang, this fusion is exemplified through the portrayal of Buddhist saints and narratives. The life of the Buddha, the compassionate spirit of Bodhisattvas, and the wisdom of the Arhats are all utilized to convey an ideal state of social harmony and tranquility. In this context, religion functions not merely as a personal spiritual path but also as a foundational source of legitimacy for rulers.

For instance, the frescoes in the Mogao Caves frequently depict Siddhartha Gautama, accompanied by an array of Bodhisattvas and Arhats, adorned with halos and depicted with noble features, presenting an elevated image that transcends the mundane and symbolizes supreme authority. These images reinforce the connection between the sovereign and Buddhist principles, suggesting that the emperor is a secular embodiment of the Buddha, entrusted with the divine right to govern the state and guide the populace.

Furthermore, the political interpretation of Buddhist narratives within the mural paintings reveals that many stories serve as allegories for prevailing political ideologies and power dynamics. For example, certain frescoes depict tales of salvation and triumph over adversity, reflecting not only the Buddhist ideals of compassion and universal salvation but also symbolizing the benevolent and wise image that rulers sought to project.

2.3 The Embodiment of Social Norms and Moral Values: Family, Social Hierarchy, and Law

The Dunhuang murals also encapsulate the social norms and moral values related to family, social hierarchy, and law. The paintings are not solely expressions of religion but also authentic reflections of societal life at the time. Through detailed scene depiction, they reflect the societal norms of daily life, fostering an ideal social order and moral standards (Jie, 2018).

The family, as the fundamental unit of society, holds significant prominence within the murals. For example, some murals depict family scenes reflecting the familial ethics and filial piety found in Confucian culture. These paintings underscore traditional values such as familial harmony, hierarchical respect, and male dominance, conveying a message of stable social order and reverence for tradition.

Social hierarchy is also a salient theme within the murals. Individuals of varying social statuses are represented with differing scales and adornments, reflective of their societal standing. This not only mirrors the stratified

structure of society but also reinforces the rationality and necessity of a hierarchical system. By emphasizing the order of rank, the murals convey messages promoting social stability and respect for societal norms.

Law, as a critical instrument for maintaining social order, is also evident within the Dunhuang murals. Certain depicted scenes may allude to legal regulations of the time, such as property distribution or punishment of criminals. These portrayals help to strengthen adherence to and awareness of the law, thereby maintaining the normal functioning of society.

In summary, we can assert that ancient ruling classes utilized typified means of social control to deify emperors and extol "heroes," thereby deepening the ideological imprint on the populace to foster loyalty to the emperor and veneration of "heroes." The divine right of kings was authoritative and awed, commanding respect and willing subordination from the masses. The so-called "heroes" were paragons of royal service, and admiration for "heroes" discouraged the populace from overstepping societal bounds, inspiring them to emulate these figures. My intention here is not to critique ancient heroes but to highlight the social control implicit in commonplace depictions and propaganda. Moving beyond medieval theocratic rule and focusing on China, religion becomes a tool for secular governance, where the secular monarch may use spiritual belief to grant themselves legitimacy and uphold dynastic rule. Religion offers a psychological sanctuary for the lower echelons of society, providing explanations for life's hardships. Meanwhile, institutions, law, family, and social structures not only shape the norms and references for popular conduct, offering predictable consequences for actions, but also convey the ideological underpinnings of the system, delineating what is right and wrong, which are closely tied to the dictates and standards of the ruling elite. In essence, all forms of power fundamentally shape notions, cognition, and preferences. Power wielders exercising this authority can naturalize a subordinate position for the subjects or convince them of the absence of alternative choices, thereby accepting prescribed arrangements in values, psychological cognition, and behavioral patterns. This form of power, by inducing and maintaining internal constraints on self-determination, undermines and distorts individuals' self-esteem and self-awareness, misguides and subverts their judgment on how best to advance their interests, resulting in subjects with "false consciousness" who remain blissfully ignorant under the veil of "politics for the unenlightened." The preferences, beliefs, and desires shaped even mask the "true interests" of one's life, serving preemptively to prevent malcontent and avoid conflict, thus exemplifying the interplay between art and social control. Aspects awaiting further innovation and discussion

In terms of innovation and highlights, the author believes that the following perspectives could further deepen the analysis:

First, interactive analysis: Analyzing the visual interaction between the figures in the Dunhuang murals and the audience, exploring how art influences and shapes the moral views and behavior patterns of society members through visual communication. This is about further refined discussions on the relationship between the dissemination of artistic media and social control.

Second, cultural integration perspective: Examining the fusion of multiple cultural elements such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism in the Dunhuang murals, analyzing how different cultures interact within art to shape the social ideology of the time. This is a further discussion on the relationship between civilization assimilation, cultural integration, and social control.

Third, gender perspective: Starting from the angle of gender studies, analyzing the portrayal of male and female roles in the Dunhuang murals, exploring how gender is constructed in art, and reflecting the societal gender norms and moral values of the time. This is about further discussing social control under the mainstream of the male gaze.

Fourth, the relationship between law and religion: Delving into how law and religion mutually influence each other in the Dunhuang murals, how law is reinforced through religious doctrine, and how religion gains societal legitimacy through the execution of the law. This is about further discussing how religion organically combines with law to achieve effective social control.

Through the above analysis, we can see that the Dunhuang murals are not only masterpieces of visual art but also historical documents of cultural, political, and social interactions. Through in-depth research on these murals, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the complex role of religious symbols, political power, social norms, and moral values in ancient social control, and how these factors influence our understanding of social control today.

3. Specific Case Analysis

3.1 The Huayan Three Saints Mural in Mogao Cave No. 12

The "Huayan Three Saints" mural in Mogao Cave No. 12 is a Dunhuang mural that reflects the relationship between Huayan religious doctrine and the legitimacy of imperial power. In analyzing this mural, the author will start with the relationship between Buddhist doctrine and political power to explore the symbolic meanings it embodies and its metaphorical implications for ideal governance.

3.1.1 The Combination of Buddhist Doctrine and Political Power

The Huayan School is one of the significant sects in Chinese Buddhism, and the doctrine of the Three Saints' Harmonious Integration, advocated by Chengguan during the Tang Dynasty, has had a profound influence. According to this doctrine, "all dharmas are interconnected," and in the practice of bodhisattvas, there is an integration of cause and effect, means and ends, comprehension and practice, and wisdom and intelligence. Practitioners who understand this principle will have every thought fulfill the cause and every thought achieve the result. By following this practice, they will inevitably attain the virtues of the Three Saints.

Moreover, the Huayan School emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of the universe and all sentient beings. In Dunhuang murals, this idea is reflected in the depictions of numerous Buddhas and bodhisattvas. They often appear in a dignified and harmonious manner, symbolizing the cosmic harmony and unity emphasized by the Huayan School. This concept resonates with the political ideology of centralized imperial power, social unity, and order during that time. The emperor was regarded as the chosen one by heaven, responsible for maintaining the order of the country and society. His rule aimed to achieve harmony and stability in the world, aligning naturally with the Huayan School's worldview (Cilian, 2017).

3.1.2 The Symbolic Significance of the "Huayan Three Saints" Mural

The main mural of Mogao Cave No. 12 depicts the Huayan School's principal Bodhisattvas: Manjushri, Samantabhadra, and Avalokiteshvara. These three Bodhisattvas represent wisdom, action, and compassion—the main virtues advocated in Huayan doctrine.

Manjushri, representing wisdom, is usually depicted riding a lion and holding a treasure sword, symbolizing the dispersion of ignorance (i.e., lack of knowledge, confusion) with wisdom. In the political metaphor of the mural, Manjushri's wisdom symbolizes the Emperor's concept of ruling the country with intelligence, indicating that the Emperor manages the state based on wisdom and discernment (Meilin, 2016).

Samantabhadra, representing action and vows, is depicted riding an elephant, symbolizing his steadfast and pure actions. The active spirit of Samantabhadra reflects the Emperor's achievements and constructions, suggesting that the Emperor should actively do good deeds for the benefit of the nation and its people (Meilin, 2016, pp. 42-44).

Avalokiteshvara symbolizes compassion and the relief of suffering, presented in a kind and compassionate image, often associated with cool objects such as water and the moon. Avalokiteshvara's compassion symbolizes the Emperor's care for his subjects, indicating the benevolence and people-oriented qualities that an ideal ruler should possess (Meilin, 2016, pp. 44-49).

3.1.3 Relationship between the Mural and Legitimacy of Imperial Power

The symbolic meanings within the mural reinforce the legitimacy and idealized image of the Emperor's rule. In the social and political context of the time, linking the images of Buddhist Bodhisattvas with imperial power not only enhanced the moral image of the Emperor but also conformed to the widespread ideals of compassion and wisdom in Buddhist doctrine. The Emperor was depicted as a Bodhisattva-like being, highlighting his sacred role and authoritative status in maintaining social harmony and order.

The author uses the "Huayan Three Saints" as a case to uncover how the Dunhuang murals artistically represent the relationship between Buddhist doctrine and the legitimacy of imperial power. This symbolic painting not only visually displays the core teachings of the Huayan School but also strengthens the image of the Emperor as an ideal ruler on a political level, thereby conveying messages of social control. This not only reflects the aesthetic value of the artwork but also demonstrates its function and significance in the social and political fields.

3.2 The Thousand Buddha Transformations in Mogao Cave No. 57

The "Thousand Buddha Transformations" mural in Mogao Cave No. 57 is a famous Dunhuang artwork considered to be an important representation of the sacralization of imperial power. In analyzing this theme, the author focuses on the diversity and solemnity of the Buddha images to explore how they reflect the reverence for

imperial power.

3.2.1 Diversity of Buddha Images

The Buddha images in the "Thousand Buddha Transformations" are presented in a rich variety of forms, with each image having its unique posture, expression, and ornamentation, creating a vast and complex religious and symbolic world. This diversity reflects, to some extent, the comprehensiveness and universality of imperial power. As the supreme ruler of the state, the Emperor was endowed with multiple roles and responsibilities, including military, religious, legal, and cultural aspects. The diversity of the Buddha images can be seen as a symbol of the Emperor's multifaceted functions, reflecting his wisdom and capability in various fields (Haipeng, 2024).

3.2.2 Solemnity of Buddha Images

The Buddha images in the mural are presented in a solemn, majestic form, reflecting the exalted status of Buddhism in society at the time. Similarly, imperial power also required this dignified and solemn image to maintain its dignity and authority. Through the solemnity of the Buddha images, the mural conveys reverence and veneration for the Emperor, suggesting that the Emperor's power is sacred and inviolable. Here, the sanctity of Buddhism is transferred to imperial power, strengthening the religious foundation of the ruler's legitimacy (Ruoyu, 2021).

3.2.3 Reverence and Sacralization of Imperial Power

In these murals, the Buddha images are often depicted in a central position, surrounded by Bodhisattvas, Arhats, Heavenly Kings, and other religious figures, further emphasizing Buddha's central position, corresponding to the Emperor's central role in the nation and society. Furthermore, the Buddha images in the murals are usually engaged in teaching activities; they are not just static decorations but are endowed with the mission of spreading the Dharma and guiding sentient beings towards goodness. This is similar to the role of the Emperor, who is not only the ruler of the country but also a cultural and moral leader.

Overall, the diversity of the Buddha images symbolizes the multifaceted functions of the Emperor, while the solemnity represents the Emperor's sacred and inviolable authority. This artistic representation not only conveys the support of Buddhist faith for imperial power but also reflects the strategy of imperial power using religious symbols to consolidate its legitimacy and authority. This example illustrates the deep underlying meanings of Dunhuang murals in understanding the social structure and operation of imperial power at the time.

4. The Relevance of Dunhuang Murals to Contemporary Social Control

The symbolic meanings of Dunhuang murals are understood and applied in today's context and are not only reflected in cultural heritage and artistic creation but also provide profound insights into the context of modern social control.

4.1 Cultural Heritage and National Identity Construction

Firstly, the symbolic meanings of Dunhuang murals are used to strengthen cultural identity and national identity construction. The repeated Buddhist stories, Taoist immortals, and Confucian classics in the murals are reinterpreted in modern China, becoming a source of national cultural pride. The elements of the murals are often used in public art decorations and architectural designs, giving public spaces historical continuity and cultural depth. Additionally, the government and cultural institutions promote and exhibit Dunhuang murals, deepening the public's understanding of Chinese traditional cultural heritage and promoting national cultural cohesion, contributing to national stability and shared identity recognition.

4.2 Inspiration for Artistic Creation

Modern artists, designers, and filmmakers often draw inspiration from the symbolic meanings of the Dunhuang murals in their creative processes. The intricate details of the murals, such as costumes, colors, and character postures, are reproduced and recreated in modern design and visual arts. This not only revitalizes traditional culture in modern society but also provides modern art with a unique, nationally characteristic aesthetic expression. As a medium, art has a powerful influence, widespread dissemination, and profound impact, communicating different types of cultural information through various media like painting, music, drama, etc., conveying emotions, values, and ideas, allowing for a deeper understanding of culture itself, creating strong social cohesion, impacting people's views and behaviors, and thus transforming the social landscape and cultural atmosphere—this is an innovative application of art in political propaganda. Today, art continues to be used as a means of spreading political ideas, shaping national images, and enhancing citizens' patriotic fervor. By analyzing the historical uses of Dunhuang murals, we can better appreciate the potential power of art in political

communication, which is significant for enhancing the artistry and impact of modern political propaganda.

4.3 Educational Dissemination and Shaping of Social Values

Symbolic meanings in Dunhuang murals have a significant role in education, particularly in historical and moral education. Educators use explanations of mythical stories and historical events depicted in the murals to impart traditional cultural knowledge and social values to students. The murals provide insights into religious beliefs, social hierarchies, and everyday life of the past, serving as a bridge between history and the present. They help younger generations develop respect for traditional culture and an understanding of social norms. The behavior and positions of figures in the murals, such as the monarch and his subjects, reflect traditional beliefs, including the supreme authority of the monarch.

One notable mural, titled "Sutra of the Ten Kings of Buddhism," showcases the monarch and his subjects actively participating in the recitation of the sutra, demonstrating their deep reverence for traditional beliefs. The monarch is positioned at the center of the painting, surrounded by subjects, emphasizing the monarch's absolute power as depicted in Confucian texts. Another mural in Dunhuang, known as "Shakyamuni Buddha Preaching," depicts Shakyamuni Buddha delivering a sermon with devoted officials and monks attentively listening. The figures in this mural evoke a sense of longing for religious myths and stories, symbolizing reverence and remembrance of the Buddha's teachings.

"The Transformation of the Nirvana Sutra" is a mural that depicts the death of Shakyamuni Buddha and highlights the concept of "Parinirvana" or final release from suffering. However, the mural in Cave 322 incorporates a story of the Buddha rising from the coffin to teach his mother, emphasizing the importance of filial piety in feudal society. This story depicts the Buddha paying respects to his mother by emerging from the golden coffin to enlighten sentient beings. The mural emphasizes the significance of filial piety and reflects the integration of Buddhist education with traditional Confucian thought in China.

These murals emerged during the reign of Empress Wu Zetian, a period characterized by conflicts between Confucianism and Buddhism. The Tang Dynasty witnessed a significant debate between these two belief systems, often intertwined with political struggles. Confucian scholars criticized Buddhism for its perceived lack of loyalty, filial piety, and cultural assimilation. During Empress Wu Zetian's rule, Buddhism was favored over Confucianism, leading to resistance from Confucian scholars. In response, Buddhism had to adapt to the Chinese context by incorporating certain Confucian moral standards into Buddhist teachings, a process known as Sinicization. The mural "The Transformation of the Nirvana Sutra" in Cave 322 serves as a historical testament to the Sinicization of Buddhism during this period.

"The Transformation of the Nirvana Sutra" not only propagates Buddhist teachings but also emphasizes the Confucian value of filial piety, making it a means of moral education. This reflects the inclusive nature of Buddhism and its influence on Chinese society.

4.4 Contemporary Social Control Metaphors and Reflections

In the context of contemporary social control, the symbolic meanings in Dunhuang murals provide metaphors for reflecting on the ways of social control in the information age. Today's highly developed social media and mass media contrast sharply with the Dunhuang period. Murals, as a significant avenue for social control and the dissemination of values at the time, have similar techniques and strategies for visual communication and ideological guidance to modern media. Through deep analysis of the symbolic meanings in the murals, we can extract strategies for effective communication and value guidance in modern society.

4.5 Innovative Perspectives

The symbolic meanings in Dunhuang murals can also be understood and applied from the following innovative perspectives today:

First, digital reproduction and virtual reality technology: Using virtual reality, augmented reality, and other digital technologies to present the symbolic meanings of Dunhuang murals in a more intuitive, interactive way to the public, thus extending and deepening their educational and cultural heritage functions.

Second, a medium for cross-cultural exchange: Through international exhibitions and research on Dunhuang murals, they act as a bridge for cultural exchange between China and the world, promoting global recognition and exchange of traditional Chinese culture.

Third, psychology and psychoanalysis: Combining the symbolic meanings of the murals with modern psychological theories to explore how images impact people's psychology and emotions, with potential applications in fields such as advertising, branding, and psychotherapy.

Fourth, ecological civilization and sustainable development: The depiction of natural landscapes in the murals and the presentation of the concept of harmonious coexistence can serve as visual materials and intellectual resources for advocating ecological civilization and sustainable development in modern society.

5. Analysis of Modern Media and Traditional Murals

5.1 Contrasts and Commonalities

In comparing the Dunhuang murals and modern media as agents of social control, a distinction in their mechanisms and contexts emerges. The murals, rooted in ancient Chinese Buddhist art, served as overt tools for moral and religious education, leveraging beliefs in supernatural forces and karmic retribution to regulate behavior. In contrast, modern media, operating within the frameworks of globalization and capitalism, exercises a more nuanced and multifaceted control, shaping consumer culture and lifestyles through the dissemination of information and the promotion of commodities. While the murals emphasized direct moral guidance and religious rules, modern media operates through implicit influence, guiding public discourse, values, and behavior habits. Both media, however, share a common goal in exercising guidance and control over social members, albeit through different symbols and narrative forms, reflecting the complexity of social power structures and ideologies in their respective historical and cultural contexts.

The Dunhuang murals are paradigms of ancient Chinese Buddhist art, most notably exemplified in the Mogao Caves. These murals not only manifest religious art but also reflect the ethical concepts and social control mechanisms of ancient society. The "Samsara Charts," for instance, illustrate the concepts of karma and the six realms of existence, demonstrating how Buddhist doctrines were employed to guide human behavior. This representation is not only a reflection of religious faith but also a tool for the ruling class to maintain social order. The murals convey an authoritative moral message that individuals should adhere to certain behavioral norms, lest they face unfavorable rebirths. This religious and ethical education serves a powerful function in social control, leveraging beliefs in supernatural forces and the fear of future karmic retribution to regulate behavior.

In the context of globalization and capitalism, modern media is not only a vehicle for information dissemination but also a promoter of commodities and lifestyles. Social media platforms, for example, use algorithms to push specific content, shaping users' information consumption and behavior habits. This design can influence public discourse, values, and lifestyles, thereby establishing a form of implicit social control.

The historical context of the Dunhuang murals is ancient China, particularly the period of Buddhist dissemination and development in the country, where the primary social control mechanisms were moral education and religious faith. In contrast, modern media is situated in the information age, where the speed of information creation and dissemination far surpasses that of previous eras. Media channels such as advertising, television, film, and social networks have shaped consumerist values, guiding individuals towards material pursuits and personal success. This form of social control, while less direct in moral education than the ancient murals, influences behavior and thought indirectly by creating convergent consumer desires and lifestyles.

The evolution of social control, from the Dunhuang murals to modern media, reflects the transformation of social organization. Traditional societies emphasized the stability of the collective and the whole, with individuals obtaining social identity through uniform religious and moral education. In contrast, modern societies emphasize individualism and diversity, yet this does not signify the absence of social control; rather, it manifests as a more covert and complex mechanism achieved through market mechanisms, consumer enticement, and ideological penetration. In summary, both the Dunhuang murals and modern media, within their respective historical and cultural contexts, exercise guidance and control over social members through different symbols and narrative forms. The social control exerted by the Dunhuang murals is more direct and explicit, emphasizing moral norms and religious rules, while modern media control is more subtle and multifaceted, achieving control by shaping consumer culture and lifestyles, reflecting the complexity of social power structures and ideologies.

5.2 Content Creation and Dissemination

In terms of content creation and dissemination, modern media usually involves more individuals and organizations, with more diversified content. In contrast, mural creation is generally completed by a few artists, with more unified and authoritative content.

5.3 Audience Participation

At the level of audience participation, modern media provides interactivity and participation, while murals involve one-way reception by the audience. However, there are also commonalities in conveying social control information. Both modern media and traditional murals can be influenced by political and social forces, reflecting specific ideologies and cultural values. Both can serve as propaganda tools to shape and reinforce

social norms and behavioral codes.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary of Dunhuang Murals as Tools of Social Control

Dunhuang murals functioned as sophisticated tools of social control, blending political messaging with moral education. Their study innovates by offering modern propaganda new artistic strategies and insights into art's role in societal change, deepening our understanding of ancient art's relevance to contemporary political and social dynamics.

6.2 Contribution and Academic Value of the Research Paper

This study uses an interdisciplinary approach to show how Dunhuang murals served as tools for social and political control, offering a new perspective for analyzing cultural artifacts. The research findings contribute to the understanding of the role of art in shaping social consciousness and provide historical insights into modern social control mechanisms.

6.3 Suggestions for Future Research on Dunhuang Murals

This research promotes interdisciplinary collaboration to explore the social and scientific significance of Dunhuang murals, fostering a comprehensive understanding and knowledge integration. It aims to deepen the theoretical understanding of social control through art, highlighting the influence of religious and political power across cultures. Additionally, thorough examination and organization of primary sources, combined with field research, will reconstruct the social context and explore the motivations behind mural creation under social control.

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