

Discuss how the Mogao Cave 275 was the product of Silk Road Cultural Interaction.

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Abstract: This study examines Mogao Cave 275 in Dunhuang, constructed during China's Northern Liang Dynasty (397–495 CE), as a prime example of cultural exchange along the Silk Road. The cave's location in a fragile mountainous area dictated the use of murals, statues, and distinctive architectural styles, reflecting diverse influences from Central Asia, India, and Persia. Through an analysis of the Maitreya Buddha statue, its posture, and iconography, the paper highlights parallels with Gandharan and Xinjiang art, while also tracing Chinese architectural features in the Que-style niches. Additionally, donor portraits in ethnic attire capture Silk Road communities' cultural diversity and intermingling. By focusing on these elements, the study reveals Mogao Cave 275 as a symbol of Silk Road multiculturalism, integrating religious and artistic traditions across Eurasia.

Keywords: Dunhuang; Mogao Caves; Mogao Cave 275; Silk Roads; China; India; Central Asia; Persia; Cultural Interaction; Multiculturalism; Maitreya Buddha; Buddhism; Art History; Iconography; Northern Liang Dynasty

Mogao Cave 275 was one of the earliest groups of cave shrines built in Dunhuang under the reign of the North Liang Dynasty (397 – 495 CE), a regime of the Sixteen Kingdoms period in China. Unlike the geographical conditions in Northern Indian Subcontinent regions like Gandhara, where rich rocky resources are available for stone or schist carving, the mountain structure where the Mogao Caves complexes were built was very fragile and crumbly. Thus, murals with different themes and wooden armature scriptures have become the main form of artistic expression within the Mogao Cave Complexes in Dunhuang. This paper will analyse the cultural elements from murals, sculptures, and cave architecture to discuss how Cave 275 acted as a product of the multiculturalism of the Silk Road in the Dunhuang region.



Figure 1, The Cave 275, Northern Liang Dynasty (397-495CE). Statues and wall painting in Grotto. Mogao Caves, Dunhuang, China. Fan, Jin shi. *The Caves of Dunhuang*, 49.

1. The statue of Maitreya Buddha:

In the west wall of cave 275, there is a dominating figure of the cave: a 3.34 m high seated statue of Maitreya Buddha, shown in Figure 1. He is sitting on a throne with a cross-ankle position, and there are two lions next to him. He is wearing a three-sectioned crown on his head, representing the three mountain peaks on the central sectioned disk containing a small Buddha figure. Although one of his arms was damaged and missing, his two hands were likely positioned in the gesture of Varade and Abhaya Mudra. According to Fan Jinshi, such a combination of hand gestures was used in both regions of Gandhara and China as a gesture of preaching Buddhist teachings. Fan also believed that other

than the hand gesture, other iconographic of Maitreya Buddha, such as the cross-ankle posture, the three-disked crown, the triangular seated back and the accompanying two lion figures, are reminiscent of Kushan artistic depiction of the monarch. The lions were first introduced to China from Persia in the 3rd century BCE. They were associated with preaching Buddhist teachings or acting in a protective role in Buddhism. The comparable statues shown in Figures 2 and 3 show similar iconographic characteristics found in other regions that dated much earlier.

According to Marianne Yaldiz's studies, the earliest visual representations of Maitreya can be traced back to the Kushan Art of Gandhara and the Mathura region. The relief in Figure 2 is a representative example of this art style.



Figure 2 Future Buddha Maitreya. Gandhara, 3rd century. Stale. Museum of Asian Art, Berlin, acc.no.1 87. Yaldiz, "Maitreya in Literature and in the art of Xinjiang," 66.

Figure 2 shows a relief from the 3rd century CE that depicts a statue of Maitreya. He sat on the throne with a triangular seated back, in a cross-ankle posture like the statue of Cave 275 in Dunhuang, and was surrounded by several audiences. His left hand was holding a flask in his left hand instead of in the gesture of Varade, while his right hand was in the gesture of Abhaya, representing the preaching of the law, similar to the Dunhuang case. On his body, he was wearing decorations such as Paridhana (lower garment), Uttariya (shawl), ornaments, and Yajnapavita (Brahmanical sacred thread). Unlike the later depiction of wearing the crown in Mogao Cave 275, this Gandharan Maitreya was carved with a Ushnisha on his head, and his hairs were scattered on the shoulders.



Figure 3 The mural of Maitreya. 4th -5th century. Mural painting. Kizil Cave 38, Xinjiang, China. Yaldiz, "Maitreya in Literature and in the art of Xinjiang", 72.

Another art sample comparable to the Mogao Cave 275 was the mural of Maitreya in Kizil Cave 38, shown in Figure 3. It is also known as the "Cave with the Musicians" of Kizil Cave Complex, located near Kucha, Xinjiang, China. This cave was built during the 4th -5th century and portrayed in a very similar artistic style to the Dunhuang Cave 275. Although the mural was partially damaged, it still could be recognisable that the Maitreya's hand gestures (left hand held outward and fingers pointing downward resemble the Varade mudra, while

his right hands are forming a circle to resemble the Vitarka mudra) are reminiscent of the “gesture of preaching” of Maitreya in the Mogao Cave 275. Several figures, like the scene in Figure 2, surround the Maitreya. Such a portrayal may be based on the narrative of Maitreya preaching the teaching to other deities in his palace in Tushita Heaven. In terms of iconography, unlike some figures wearing the robes next to the Maitreya in the Gandharan portrayal in Figure 2, almost all Buddhist figures from Kizil Cave 38 (including Maitreya) are half-naked, wearing the decoration of shawls and bracelets, and the Three-dished Crowns. All these features demonstrated a solid resemblance to the artistic style of Maitreya in Mogao Cave 275.

2. The architecture style:

Mogao Cave 275 contained several niches on the north and south walls, which were inlaid with several bodhisattvas figures. Their iconographic features of hand gestures, cross-ankle posture, and the three-peaked crown show remarkable similarity with the main Maitreya Buddha of Cave 275. About the niches, one thing noteworthy is they were built in the style of Chinese architecture of Que-lou (Chin. 阙楼), as shown in Figure 4.



Figure 4 Que-style niches on the south wall in Mogao Cave 275. North Liang Dynasty. Cave 275, Mogao Caves, Dunhuang. Fan, Jin shi. *The Caves of Dunhuang*, 49.

During the Qin and Han Dynasties, the Que, as a type of ceremonial architecture, is often related to the Daoist and other cults of immortality at that time. It acted as the spiritual gate that separated the world of living and the underworld. Also, it could act as the pass that enables the deceased to ascend from the underworld into the heavenly realm and communicate with the deities. The exemplars could be the combined imagery of Xi-wang-mu, also known as the Mother Queen of West, a female deity who mastered the elixir of immortality) and the doubled Que Gate on the gold-glided copper medal excavated in Wu-shan County, Chong-qing, and on the pedestal of Money Tree statue excavated in the Eastern Han dated Hexi cliff tomb (M2:4) in the Mian-yang, Sichuan (Figure 6.). According to Zhang Shanqing, the appearance of Que-style niche among the earlier Chinese cave shrines during the fifth century was closely associated with the artistic interaction between Buddhist statue-making and figure-making of Xi-wang-mu. Thus, it is reasonable to speculate that Chinese craftsmen created the Que-style niche of Mogao Cave 275 based on their familiar art style of the figures of Xi-wang-mu and Que in Inner China.



Figure 5 The combined imagery of Xi-wang-mu and the doubled Que style Gate on the gold-glided copper pedal. Eastern Han Dynasty, 25-200 CE. Gold-glided on copper pedal. Wu-shan county, Chong-qing, China. Zhang, “He-xi Shi-ku”, 70.



Figure 6 The combined imagery of Xi-wang-mu and the doubled Que-style Gate at the pedestal of the excavated Money Tree statue. Zhang, “He-xi Shi-ku”, 70.

3. The portrayal of donors with various ethnic groups:



Figure 7 The figure of donors who dressed in Steppe people clothing. North Liang Dynasty (397 – 495 CE). Sketch copy from the murals. The bottom murals of the south wall of Cave 275, Dunhuang, China.

The South Wall of Cave 275 depicted the images of donors (Figure 7.). On the reliefs, these male donors wear kerchiefs on their heads and are dressed with narrowed-sleeved Zhe-style dresses on their upper body. The clothing of Zhe was functionally identical to the modern “short overcoat with a round collar or a crossed collar”, and it had “short sleeves and buttons that overlapped or ran down the left side.” The dress style of the Zhe clothes of these male donors may indicate their non-Chinese ethnic identity. Unlike the traditional Han Chinese dressing style of “Right-overlapping,” which refers to a dressing style of letting “a coat’s front panels overlap at the chest, with the left panel pressing on the right, and are knotted beneath the right armpit,” these male donors are wearing their Zhe in the style of “Left-overlapping,” which means “a style of their right panel are rest on their left one and then tight together on their left armpit.” Such dressing style may indicate these donors’ identity as steppe people or possibly the Xiong-nu, reminiscent of the donor figures on the west wall’s mural in Mogao Cave 268, also built during the reign of the Northern Liang Kingdom. Within the portraits of these figures on the wall, they are divided into groups of left and right, as shown in Figure 8. The donors on the bottom left of Figure 7, dressed in the tunic and trousers, were likely the Xiong-nu people, whereas the donors on the right (the one circled) dressed in loose robes were possibly the Han Chinese.

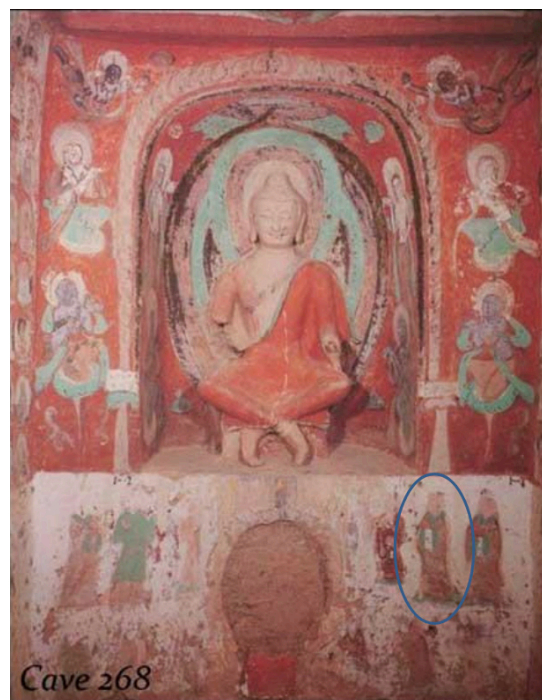


Figure 8 The donors of Xiong-nu (bottom left) and Han Chinese(bottom right, blue circled) of Cave 268. Northern Liang Dynasty. Murals.

Mogao Cave 268, Dunhuang, China. Elaine Buck, the “Buddhism under Imperial patronage”, 29th January 2024.

Thus, considering this, the cave itself was constructed during the Northern Liang Dynasty under the reign of the Juqu Clan (Chin. 沮渠), a descendant lineage of the Xiongnu. Thus, it is reasonable to speculate that the ethnic group of donors could be non-Chinese steppe people or even the Xiongnu.

From the above observations, it may be concluded that the Mogao Cave 275 demonstrates cultural interaction in multiple areas’ artistic styles, iconographic features and architectural styles from various ethnicities such as Han Chinese, Steppe nomads, Central Asians and Indians.

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