

Discovering the Assimilation Phenomenon of Dunhuang Murals from the Tang Dynasty in Contemporary Chinese Dance Works by Taking the Dance Encountering Dunhuang as an Example

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Abstract

Dunhuang Dance, a renowned school of Chinese classical dance, has become a vital tradition in the country's artistic heritage through its profound cultural roots and distinctive performance style. Rooted in Dunhuang murals, it showcases celestial music dances, folk performances, and ethnic motifs like Hu Xuan (a circular dance), Hu Teng (a vaulting dance), Zhezhi (a branch-dancing sequence), and the Feather-Robe Dance. Performances often feature traditional instruments like pipa (a Chinese zither) and silk ribbons. This art form not only embodies the essence of traditional Chinese dance but also integrates religious symbolism and romanticism, making it an integral part of China's cultural legacy. The article analyzes the contemporary dance work Encountering Dunhuang, exploring how Dunhuang murals from the Tang Dynasty have been assimilated in contemporary Chinese art, thereby prompting reflections on the preservation of cultural traditions.

Keywords: Dunhuang Dance, Dunhuang Mural, Assimilation, Traditional Culture, Inheritance

Encountering Dunhuang draws inspiration from the images of dancing figures in the murals of the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang. It recreates the dynamic beauty depicted in the murals through rapid spinning dance moves and flowing costumes. This dance was co-created by choreographer Ou Siwei and composer Zhang Qu, with both the music and movement design incorporating the rhythmic characteristics of the music and dance from the Western Regions. Female dancer Hua Xiaoyi wears elaborate Dunhuang-style costumes during her performance. The visual fluidity formed by the neon ribbons and spinning movements, along with the graceful dance postures that shift and transition in the video, has been described by the audience as an aesthetic integration of history and technology. This dance was featured

in the 2022 Spring Festival Gala of Hunan Satellite TV in China and has become one of the classic stages for the dissemination of Dunhuang culture.

Dunhuang dance emphasizes the presentation of body curves, forming "three-curved lines" and "S-shaped curves" through movements such as twisting the torso, pushing the hips forward, and leaning the body. The hand gestures are also rich and varied, such as the "playing (a wind instrument)" style and the "lotus" style. Different hand shapes represent different identities and emotional implications. Moreover, the arms are soft and graceful, with angular bends (at the wrists and elbows), and the dance is performed barefoot with the feet in hooked, tilted, or twisted positions. All these elements together constitute its unique dance postures (Jin, 2011). The systematic development of Dunhuang dance began with the dance drama *The Silk Road and the Flower Rain* (He, 2009), and the creation of *Encountering Dunhuang* continues this tradition. Its movement design absorbs the classic postures such as the "S-shaped curve" and "playing the pipa behind the back" summarized by Gao Jinrong, the founder of the Dunhuang dance teaching system (Zhao, 2017), while incorporating the breath control techniques of modern dance, thus forming a performance style that combines hardness and softness. This inheritance and innovation endow the work with a sense of historical depth and make it conform to contemporary aesthetics.



Figure 1. The dance *Encountering Dunhuang*. A partial view of dancers demonstrating musical instrument props and dance postures within grotto art installations. The lead female performer is Hua Xiaoyi, and the group dancers are students from the Department of Chinese Classical Dance of Beijing Dance Academy. The choreographer is Ou Siwei. 2022.



Figure 2. The dance Encountering Dunhuang. The overall scene of dancers displaying musical instrument props and dance postures in the grotto art installations.



Figure 3. The mural "The Transformation of the Medicine Buddha Sutra", Mogao Cave 220, Dunhuang, Tang Dynasty.

The opening scene of the dance Encountering Dunhuang is extraordinarily ingenious. Female dancers stand in a "grotto" installation art carved with mottled rock patterns and caisson reliefs. Taking the iconic "S-shaped three-curved lines" (figure 1 and figure 2) posture from Dunhuang murals as the core of rhythm, they tilt their shoulders and necks slightly, with waists as graceful as willow branches, achieving a delicate balance between static sculptural sense and dynamic rhythm. As their fingertips flow, they pick up the pear-shaped soundbox of the pipa, the gold-gilded clapper of the tambourine, the crescent-shaped resonance arm of the harp, the round soundboard of the ruanxian, and the narrow drum body of the waist drum. Every type of musical instrument and its holding posture can be traced back to the images of musician dancers in Cave 220 of the Mogao Grottoes (figure 3). When the female dancers turn around and stretch their arms in the grotto with interlacing light and shadow, their sleeves brush against the flying ribbons among the rock patterns, and the metal ornaments of the musical instruments in their hands echo the gold powder lines on the Dunhuang murals from afar. It is as if those pipa players with reversed postures, ruanxian players holding the instrument horizontally, and donors playing the harp, which have been frozen in the murals, have broken through the barriers and been reborn after a thousand years through the body language of contemporary dancers. They vividly interpret the beauty of Dunhuang's music and dance as a silent poem and a three-dimensional painting.



Figure 4. The pose of rebounding the pipa in the dance Encountering Dunhuang.



Figure 5. The image of a dancing performer playing the pipa behind the back. Cave 112 of Mogao Grottoes. Tang Dynasty.

In the first half of the dance performance, the pipa serves as the core prop in the hands of female dancer Hua Xiaoyi, with every pluck of the strings and arm-raising movement harmonizing exquisitely with it. Among these, the dance pose in figure 4 traces its origin to the most famous "playing the pipa behind the back" dance image in the Tang Dynasty Dunhuang murals (figure 5). In the mural, the dancing performer leans her upper body slightly forward to the right, stands with her left leg bent, bends her right knee and lifts her thigh high, with her foot hooked upward and her thumb raised forcefully. She wears a long silk scarf over her shoulders, carries the pipa behind her head in a reversed position, presses the strings with her left hand, and plucks them with her right hand curved behind the soundbox. Encountering Dunhuang assimilates this static mural image into a series of flowing postures in the dance. The classic posture of playing the pipa behind the back is no longer a single frozen pose but is connected through modern dance techniques such as spins and somersaults, creating a vivid visual impact.



Figure 6. The double person silk dance in the mural "The Transformation of the Western Pure Land" . Cave 220 of Mogao Grottoes. Tang Dynasty.

Then, as the stage lights shift from warm yellow to cyan-green, the actress also turns lightly, withdrawing from the sonorous rhythm of the pipa dance and immediately immersing herself in the soft and graceful interpretation of the silk dance. The silk dance images in Dunhuang murals are also highly distinctive, with diverse forms of presentation. There are duets, such as the double silk dance on the south wall of Cave 220 in the Mogao Grottoes from the early Tang Dynasty (figure 6), where two dancing performers stand on a small round carpet in a "leg-sucking" posture, waving silk scarves symmetrically with one hand up and the other down, their dance postures being the same but mirrored left and right. There are also quartets, as seen in the sutra transformation paintings (figure 3). Dancers, with long silk scarves draped over their shoulders and around their arms, dance gracefully on small round carpets (dance mats) under the lamp wheels and trees. A pair of dancers on the left rotate symmetrically in opposite directions, while a pair on the right, dressed in armor-like beautiful costumes and standing back to back, perform with vigorous and agile movements, embodying the style of dynamic dance and showcasing diverse choreography and styles.



Figure 7. The image of Dunhuang silk dance in the dance Encountering Dunhuang.



Figure 8. An image of silk dance in the mural The Transformation of the Medicine Buddha Sutra. Mogao Cave 220. Dunhuang. Tang Dynasty.

Dunhuang silk dance uses long silk as its main prop. The long silk either wraps around the arms or is waved about, just like the image of the second dancer from the left on the central stage of Cave 220 in the Mogao Grottoes (figure 8), which expresses a sense of flying through the use of a pibo (a long silk scarf worn over the shoulders). After refinement and processing, this has been assimilated into the long silk dance poses in contemporary Dunhuang dance (figure 7), enhancing the agility and elegance of the dance, creating an ethereal and transcendent artistic conception, and making the dynamic moments of the static murals vividly displayed.

When dancers drape long silk fabrics to imitate the flying ribbons of Feitian (celestial beings), they incorporate the "wave" movement from modern street dance. This fuses the softness and elegance of traditional silk dance with modern body control techniques, preserving the visual imagery of "Wu Dai Dang Feng" (the dynamic effect of Wu Daozi's paintings where robes seem to flutter in the wind) from the murals while enhancing the fluidity of movements. Traditional Chinese musical instruments such as the pipa, bili (a double-reed wind instrument), and tambourine, used as props, are no longer merely for performance but have become extensions of dance movements. The physical tension when dancers hold the pipa echoes the expressions of musician figures in the murals, and through modern choreography, the instruments are integrated as part of the body. Moreover, the grotto art installations in the dance simulate the mottled texture of Dunhuang murals using modern LED projection technology. Dancers move against a backdrop of interwoven virtual and real murals, transforming the two-dimensional scenes of sutra paintings from Tang Dynasty murals into a three-dimensional immersive experience, thus creating a visual dialogue between tradition and modernity (Wang & Jin, 2022).

As a representative work of contemporary Dunhuang school dance, Encountering Dunhuang is highly typical in its extraction of visual and cultural elements from the Dunhuang murals of the Tang Dynasty. The classic images in the murals, such as "playing the pipa behind

the back" and "silk-dancing musicians", have been assimilated through dance. Thus, the classic posture of playing the pipa behind the back is no longer a single frozen pose, instead, it is connected through modern dance techniques like spinning and somersaulting, creating a visual impact as if the murals have come to life.

As an inevitable phenomenon in cultural exchange, assimilation is both a challenge—it may dilute the purity of tradition—and an opportunity—it can inject new vitality into tradition. In *Encountering Dunhuang*, the assimilation of elements from Tang Dynasty Dunhuang murals is not a simple transplantation of symbols, but a modern translation of cultural genes. It interprets the soul of ancient dancers through modern body language, transforming traditional symbols from religious carriers into a medium of cultural memory. The creative practice of *Encountering Dunhuang* confirms that the inheritance of traditional culture is not a replication of the past, but a process of letting historical genes flow in the contemporary context. Contemporary inheritance should embrace changes with an open mind. On the premise of adhering to the spiritual core, tradition should engage in dialogue with the times through assimilation, ultimately realizing the ideal of inheritance where changes occur without losing the essence, and innovations have roots to trace.

Theoretically, this study conceptualizes "cultural assimilation" in artistic practice as an active and generative process of "modern translation of cultural genes" rather than a passive replication of traditional symbols, thereby advancing the understanding of this concept. Existing scholarship on Dunhuang dance has predominantly focused on its historical genealogy, stylistic taxonomies, and pedagogical frameworks, while discussions of cultural inheritance often oscillate between preservationist orthodoxy and innovation-driven iconoclasm. This study, by contrast, unpacks the operational mechanisms of assimilation—specifically, how static mural elements (postural vocabularies, instrumental iconography, spatial configurations) are reanimated through modern choreographic techniques, digital technologies, and narrative structuring—thereby offering a nuanced theoretical framework for understanding tradition as a dynamically evolving cultural signifier. By differentiating between superficial symbolic transposition and deep-seated cultural gene transmutation, it enriches theoretical debates on cultural continuity, particularly within the field of classical dance, where the dialectic between authenticity and innovation remains a persistent scholarly preoccupation.

Contextually, the research holds significant implications for contemporary cultural practice and policy. In an era characterized by digital globalization and the imperative for "creative transformation" of intangible cultural heritage, this study demonstrates how traditional artistic forms can retain their spiritual core while forging meaningful engagement with contemporary audiences. The case of *Encountering Dunhuang*—which successfully synthesizes mural aesthetics with street dance "wave" movements, LED projection technologies, and contemporary scenographic design—provides a replicable model for other traditional cultural forms (e.g., folk dance, historical pictorial art) seeking to transcend temporal and spatial constraints. Furthermore, by illuminating how religious iconography in Dunhuang murals is transposed into universal cultural memory, it addresses a critical challenge in cross-cultural communication: the translation of region-specific heritage (such as Dunhuang culture) into globally resonant narratives without diluting its ontological rootedness. For scholars, practitioners, and policymakers engaged in cultural preservation,

this research underscores the heuristic value of "intentional assimilation"—an approach that honors historical depth while critically engaging with present-day aesthetic modalities and technological tools, thereby ensuring traditional culture functions as a living, evolving component of collective identity rather than a static relic of the past.

In essence, this study bridges theoretical lacunae in the understanding of cultural dynamics within artistic inheritance and offers actionable insights for the revitalization of traditional culture in contemporary contexts, rendering it a valuable contribution to both academic discourse and practical cultural innovation.

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