

Integrating Tradition with Modernity: A Study of Feminine Figure in Tang Dynasty on Dunhuang Mural Paintings

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Abstract

This study focuses on exploring the aesthetic elements embodied in the feminine figures of Tang Dynasty Dunhuang murals and their transformation and inheritance in contemporary fashion design. It examines how Tang Dynasty aesthetics can engage in an ongoing dialogue with modern fashion elements within the framework of contemporary costume design, with an emphasis on feminist expression in clothing. The study also aims to address issues such as alleviating aesthetic anxiety among modern women. This exploration not only contributes to the continuous discourse on modern fashion design but also underscores the potential of historical aesthetics to enrich contemporary design narratives. The research aspires to provide a fresh perspective on cultural heritage and innovation, advocating for the global presentation of the unique charm of Chinese contemporary fashion design. In doing so, it seeks to promote the dissemination and exchange of Chinese culture in today's interconnected world.

Keywords: Feminine figures, Dunhuang mural paintings, Tang dynasty, Contemporary costume design

Introduction

The Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang represent a vast and profound artistic treasure trove, dazzling in its brilliance and inclusiveness. It serves as a significant testament to the dialogue, exchange, and interaction of different civilizations along the ancient Silk Road. The costumes depicted in Dunhuang murals embody rich cultural heritage, with aesthetic value and artistic characteristics evident in their structural design, color combinations, and compositional forms. Although the mural content primarily revolves around Buddhism, the portrayed figures are diverse and encompass a wide range of subjects, leading to a variety of intricate and exquisite costume art (Liu, 2011). Among them, the feminine figures and their costumes in Tang Dynasty Dunhuang murals stand out for their vibrancy and distinctiveness, making them some of the most representative materials for studying the costume culture of Dunhuang's artistic heritage.

The costume culture of the Tang Dynasty is an integral part of its civilization, celebrated for its vibrant

colors, numerous styles, innovative adornments, and elegant grandeur. It reflects a highly integrated aesthetic concept (Xie, 2021), characterized by its graceful simplicity, flowing ease, and emphasis on artistic expressions through lines, styles, and colors. These elements convey the gentle and reserved beauty of women while exuding the harmonious and balanced charm of Eastern aesthetics. The aesthetics of Dunhuang costumes are regarded as treasures of Chinese culture, with their inclusive style and eclectic nature holding profound significance in contemporary Chinese aesthetics.

Objective

1. Exploring Aesthetic Concepts Expressed in Feminine Figures in Tang Dynasty Dunhuang Murals

Collect and analyze depictions of feminine figures in Tang Dynasty Dunhuang murals to uncover their underlying aesthetic principles and philosophical

perspectives, revealing insights for modern fashion design.

2. Integrating Aesthetic Elements of Dunhuang Murals into Modern Fashion Design

Extract representative elements from the aesthetics of Tang Dynasty Dunhuang murals through research and analysis. Incorporate these aesthetic and thematic elements into contemporary fashion design, fostering a dialogue between historical and modern aesthetics.

3. Evaluating the Impact on Current Aesthetic Trends and Feminist Expression in Contemporary Fashion Design

Explore and assess the potential of integrating Dunhuang aesthetic concepts to influence modern aesthetic trends and feminist expression. Analyze how this integration can enrich and expand the diversity and inclusivity of modern fashion design.

4. Establishing New Design Methods and Theoretical Frameworks

Develop a novel design methodology or theoretical framework to guide designers in incorporating historical and cultural elements into modern fashion design. This framework aims to provide new perspectives for addressing contemporary aesthetic anxieties and feminist expression, encouraging the design community to reevaluate the value of traditional aesthetic elements in modern design while advancing design practice and education.

Method

This study establishes a solid foundation for its objectives by determining research goals, planning research phases, and moving from fragmented and vague data to in-depth field interviews, investigations, and extensive literature review. The focus is on understanding Dunhuang costume culture and the Tang Dynasty's feminine figures, supported by the collection of a wealth of first-hand textual and visual materials. The main research methods include:

1. Literature collection method

Extensive reading of literature, books, and seminal works from related disciplines was conducted. Relevant papers and folklore documents were accessed through libraries at various regional levels. Additionally, online resources such as CNKI and academic websites were

utilized to gather relevant studies. This process involved learning from and building on the excellent research of predecessors to develop a strong theoretical foundation.

2. Field investigation method

Local customs and traditions were deeply explored through site visits and interviews with Dunhuang scholars. Records were taken through notes, photographs, and interviews, documenting the historical origins, geographic context, and cultural significance of the Dunhuang Grottoes. Visits to the Mogao Grotto Museum and special caves provided invaluable first-hand materials. At the Dunhuang Academy, access to unpublished research documents yielded significant insights into Tang Dynasty costumes depicted in the murals.

3. Case analysis method

Tang Dynasty costumes and feminine figures depicted in Dunhuang murals were collected and systematically analyzed. Their forms, colors, and craftsmanship were studied to provide aesthetic and philosophical interpretations. The analysis focused on clothing structure, body shape, color schemes, designs, and materials to summarize and consolidate the aesthetic characteristics of Tang Dynasty Dunhuang murals.

The mural samples were chosen based on the following criteria: (1) clear preservation status with minimal damage, ensuring visibility of garment details; (2) accurate dating to the Tang Dynasty, confirmed through archaeological research; (3) representation of diverse female figures such as Flying Apsaras, donor portraits, and court ladies; (4) inclusion of rich costume elements such as drapery, headwear, and accessories; and (5) cultural and artistic representativeness within the Dunhuang mural corpus.

4. Design practice method

Based on the insights gained from the study of Tang Dynasty feminine figures in Dunhuang murals, contemporary costume design works were created, combining the collected data with the researcher's personal experiences and characteristics to develop a modern visual language.

Other methods include observation, experimentation, exploratory research, naturalistic

research, qualitative research, one-on-one interviews, ethnographic research, case studies, expert opinion collection, practice-based research, and design thinking methods.

Result/Finding

1. Research findings on the characteristics and aesthetic-philosophical significance of tang dynasty feminine figures

The Tang Dynasty is widely regarded as the most confident and empowering era for women in China's millennia-long history. While modern fashion often credits French brand Chanel for pioneering women's adoption of menswear, Tang Dynasty women were already donning foreign clothing, menswear, and equestrian outfits over a thousand years ago. Their openness and self-confidence positioned them as trendsetters in global fashion centuries ahead of their time.

The feminine figures depicted in Dunhuang murals from the Tang Dynasty often appear with upright posture, rounded and voluptuous physiques, and exude a strong aura of confidence and vitality. These traits are rare in the history of Chinese female aesthetics. The murals showcase the artistic talent, painting skills, and aesthetic sensibilities of Tang Dynasty painters. The beauty of women's costume designs reflects the aesthetic essence and cultural richness of traditional Chinese attire. The diversity, ethnic integration, and philosophical underpinnings in these murals further highlight their cultural significance. The unique formal beauty of the Tang Dynasty costumes in Dunhuang murals preserves and exemplifies the artistic and subtle beauty of traditional Chinese clothing.

The female figures in Tang Dynasty Dunhuang murals exhibit a globally exceptional cultural hybridity, with its distinctiveness becoming particularly evident in contemporaneous cross-cultural comparisons. In contrast to the static depictions of secular aristocracy in Central Plains court paintings (such as the languid postures within enclosed courtyards in Zhou Fang's *Court Ladies Wearing Floral Headdresses*), Dunhuang creatively synthesized multicultural elements within a religious narrative framework:

The Flying Apsaras imagery transformed the dynamic essence of Indian yakshi figures into flowing ribbon motifs conforming to the Central Plains "Wu

Daozi-style wind-swept drapery" aesthetic, achieving this through cloud-like linear rhythms (e.g., the apsaras in the ceiling niche of Cave 321's west wall). Meanwhile, secular donor portraits (such as Procession of Lady Song, the wife of a Dunhuang governor, in Mogao Cave 130) retained ethnic attire elements like Uyghur-Tibetan gold-woven robes and piled-up hairstyles, while reconstructing bodily contours through Central Plains-style iron-wire drawing, establishing a "barbaric style with Han essence" visual paradigm.

This uniqueness is further deepened through dialogue with Western Regions art. Compared to the Hellenistic-inspired three-dimensional "U-shaped shading method" preserved in Kizil murals of Qiuci (e.g., the Musical Deities in Cave 38), Dunhuang transformed chiaroscuro into a decorative, flattened linear system. Exemplified by the "Most Beautiful Bodhisattva" in Cave 57, while retaining Western Regions features like a prominent nose and deep-set eyes, the figure achieves dual expression of divine sanctity and secular aesthetics through Central Plains-style vermilion dot makeup and gold-leaf layered jewelry. Crucially, Dunhuang's female imagery carries cultural functions transcending pure artistry: While Tang-style court ladies in Japan's *Shōsōin Standing Women under Trees* serve merely as decorative motifs, Dunhuang's female figures function as a tripartite testament to Silk Road trade, religious transmission, and gender power dynamics—manifested as gender-ambiguous bodhisattvas, performing musicians (e.g., the reverse-pipa player in Cave 112), and pious donors (e.g., Cave 107's inscription "The courtesan Shanhe dedicates this with wholehearted devotion").

This study employs a categorization analysis method to systematically organize and classify the characteristics of feminine figures in Tang Dynasty Dunhuang murals. Detailed analyses were conducted from six perspectives: body, costume, movement, color, material, and accessories. The aim is to identify and summarize the aesthetic attributes inherent in Tang Dynasty feminine figures. Based on extensive visual and material evidence, the figures were grouped into six categories for in-depth analysis.

1.1 Body

The elegant postures and dance movements of the feminine figures in the murals, accompanied by

enigmatic smiles and expressions of wisdom, reflect the serene and refined rationality of Dunhuang art.

The S-shaped curves in the murals utilize dynamic lines to showcase the human body and objects. The figures display soft, graceful expressions, fluid gestures, and a harmonious balance of motion. Their poses create a rhythmic beauty, characterized by curved lines seeking circularity, and a balance of gentleness with strength, expressing the natural ebb and flow of bodily movement.

The female musicians and dancers exhibit diverse, noble, and elegant postures, combining the vitality and boldness of Western region dances with the subtle, graceful, and light elegance of the Han culture from Central China. This blend highlights the cultural exchange between East and West, embodying the Confucian ideal of harmony and moderation, which opposes sharp conflicts and rigid dichotomies. The imagery evokes a sense of unity between people, time, and space, presenting a model of integrated form and sound.

A notable example is the dancer holding a pipa behind her back, tilting her body slightly to the right, with her right leg bent and toes pointed, and her left leg extended diagonally. Draped in long scarves, she dances to melodious music, raising her legs and arms gracefully as her pants flutter in rhythm, forming a captivating S-shaped curve. The scene conveys a calm and expansive worldview, reflecting traditional Chinese Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist philosophies. It expresses the mystery of time—what is termed the “eternal moment”—and captures the beauty of transcendence across time and space, exuding composure, confidence, and wisdom.

In the Tang Dynasty, female body shapes transitioned from slender and delicate to fuller, healthier forms. The murals depict figures with well-proportioned, graceful physiques, rounded faces, dignified and serene expressions, and a harmonious balance of strength and gentleness. These representations combine spiritual freedom, religious rationality, and compassion, reflecting the integration of

Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist influences and the fusion of diverse cultures.

Moreover, the depiction of bodhisattvas became increasingly secularized and feminized, moving away from an idealized body to one free of anxieties about physical appearance. These portrayals resonate with a liberated aesthetic, transcending gender norms and embracing non-binary beauty. This shift reflects a profound freedom in artistic expression and highlights the timeless appeal of natural, subtle beauty in Chinese culture. (See Figure 1)

1.2 Costume

During the High Tang period, society was characterized by openness and freedom, enabling women to break free from the constraints of feudal traditions and experiment boldly with fashion. Clothing styles transitioned from short and narrow cuts to designs that were both wide and long, exuding an aesthetic of grandeur and ethereal elegance. As women's physiques became fuller during this era, the waistline of garments rose higher, shifting the visual focus upward and creating the illusion of a taller and more upright figure. This was a key reason for the popularity of high-waisted long skirts in the Tang Dynasty.

One of the most iconic features of this period's clothing, often depicted in murals, is the “pibo” (long scarf). It came in two primary styles: one with a broader width but shorter length, draped over the shoulders like a cape, and the other narrower and ribbon-like, flowing gracefully with movement. These styles reflect the awakening of women's self-awareness during the Tang Dynasty and their pursuit of confidence and beauty.

It was also common for women to wear menswear or Hu-style clothing. Inspired by the attire of nomadic peoples, Tang women adopted Hu-style outfits, characterized by narrow sleeves, wide robes, and one-piece dresses suitable for horseback riding. This fashion trend emphasized a beauty that transcended traditional notions of femininity, celebrating a gender-neutral and androgynous aesthetic that highlighted individuality and freedom. (See Figure 2)











Group s no.	Defin e	Anaysis			Specific Manifestation	Aesthetics & Philosophy
		Cave No.	Original paintings	Line sketch design exercise by researcher		
Group 1	Body (Pos ture)	Cave 154			<p>-Elegant S-curve Posture: Fluid body lines forming graceful S-shaped curves</p> <p>-Enigmatic Expression: Subtle, wise smile with all-seeing serenity</p> <p>-Dynamic Movement: Limbs extended in harmonious dance poses, scarves/flowing fabrics enhancing motion</p> <p>-Cultural Fusion: Pipa-playing dancers blending Eastern/Western aesthetics</p> <p>-Full-figured Beauty: Plump yet proportionate physique, rounded faces, dignified gentleness</p> <p>-Secular Femininity: Increasingly earthly, graceful Bodhisattva depictions</p> <p>-Artistic Transition: Shift from slender to robust, detailed to simplified elegance</p>	<p>-Aesthetics of the S-Curve: Embodies the serene and rational essence of Dunhuang art, showcasing the beauty of linear rhythm</p> <p>-Unity of Strength and Grace: Achieves harmony through fluidity, expressing natural body movements</p> <p>-Doctrine of the Mean: Reflects Confucian ideals of balance and harmony, avoiding extremes</p> <p>-Taiji Symbolism: Draws from the philosophical imagery of China's Yin-Yang duality</p> <p>-Multidimensional Fusion: Unifies visual and auditory elements, merging humanity with time and space</p> <p>-Harmonious Life Philosophy: Presents an open-minded worldview, pursuing unity between heaven and humanity</p> <p>-The Eternal Moment: Captures time's mystery, transcending temporal boundaries</p> <p>-Poise and Wisdom: Exudes calm confidence through feminine grace</p>
		Cave 57				
		Cave 112				
		Cave 57				
	Body (Shap e)	Cave 335			<p>-Plump Elegance: Full-figured yet graceful physique with balanced proportions</p> <p>-Serene Beauty: Rounded face, healthy glow, dignified poise blending strength/softness</p>	<p>-Strength-Grace Unity: Perfect harmony of power and aesthetics</p> <p>-Spiritual Radiance: Fusion of religious rationality and compassionate ethos</p> <p>-Trinity Convergence: Interpenetration of</p>

Figure 1 Analysis diagram: Body
Source: Author (2024)







G r o u p s n o .	D e f i n e .	Anaysis		Specific Manifestation	Aesthetics & Philosophy
		Cave No.	Original paintings	Line sketch design exercise by researcher	
G r o u p 2	C o s t u m e	Cave 144			<p>-Evolution of Attire: Transitioned from form-fitting/short styles to flowing, elongated silhouettes, embodying ethereal elegance</p> <p>- Silhouette & Waistline: Fuller feminine figures with raised waistlines created vertical proportions, popularizing high-waisted gowns</p> <p>- Dual-style Pibo:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wide-short: Cape-like drape• Narrow-long: Ribbon-style flutter <p>- Gender-fluid Fashion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Masculine attire adopted by women• Modified Hu-style garments (narrow sleeves/wide robes/connected skirts) became trendsetting <p>Essence: Tang golden-age fashion achieved functional-aesthetic unity through structural liberation and multicultural synthesis</p>
		Cave 159			
		Cave 17			

Figure 2 Analysis diagram: Costume
Source: Author (2024)

1.3 Movement

The female figures in the murals exude joy and optimism, with exaggerated gestures, well-proportioned bodies, and vivid expressions. The interplay between the natural flow of the body and the decorative ribbons of their attire follows the S-shaped curve of a Taiji diagram, creating a rhythmic, ascending trajectory. This transforms static dance poses into dynamic life, imbuing the artwork with a soul and conveying a beauty of anti-gravity and defying definition.

From the perspective of Chinese painting, the rhythm and harmony of flying poses are seamlessly integrated with the artist's brushwork. This evokes styles such as the ancient floating silk strokes of Han silk paintings, Gu Kaizhi's spring silkworm spinning silk, Cao Zhongda's robes clinging to the body like water, and Wu Daozi's flowing ribbons in the wind. These techniques epitomize the use of lines to convey spirit, capturing the essence of life's dynamic rhythm and embodying the aesthetic ideals of Chinese art. Abstract, expressive, and rich in rhythm, the lines prioritize artistic conception and spiritual resonance as central to creation.

The flying ribbons of the celestial beings (*feitian*) display ever-changing movements, symbolizing freedom and vitality. Their motions range from swift to slow, rigid to soft, embodying diversity and liveliness. The flowing ribbons create a poetic sense of lyricism, blending dynamic rhythm with the visual harmony of line-based forms, showcasing the fluid beauty of dancing ribbons.

Through the interplay of dots and lines, contrasts in color intensity, and variations in movement speed, the artwork conveys a musical rhythm and dance-like aesthetic. The viewer perceives not the muscular details or proportional bodies but the soaring and dancing lines. These lines celebrate humanity, challenge traditional political systems and ethical norms, and narrate a spiritual and intellectual ideal. They reflect a harmonious balance between emotion and reason, presenting a vision of beauty that transcends physical form. (See Figure 3)

1.4 Color

The murals predominantly use soft hues such as pale green, ochre, yellow, vermilion, and mica powder. Faces and features are shaded with ochre tones, creating

a strong sense of dimensionality. The skin tones are lightly applied with simple, delicate coloring, imbuing the artwork with an elegant and refined secular charm. The color palette emphasizes “vibrancy without vulgarity, subtlety without thinness,” showcasing a harmonious beauty rooted in the Chinese philosophical concept of “unity of heaven and humanity” and the traditional aesthetics of color harmony.

The attire of Buddha figures and bodhisattvas is often dominated by gold and red, symbolizing magnificence, solemnity, nobility, and elegance. Gold, in particular, conveys grandeur and opulence. These symbolic, intentional colors draw viewers into a sacred, transcendent Buddhist world, playing a role in religious edification and invoking a spiritual resonance.

The colors of clothing are primarily vermilion, pale green, and pale blue, exuding elegance amidst the opulence. Accessories feature colors such as gold, blue, and green, with the painted details of garments remaining vivid and fresh. Some clothing even employs contrasting colors as the main tone, enhancing the richness and visual appeal of the overall composition. (See Figure 4)

1.5 Material

The patterns on Tang Dynasty women's clothing broke away from the traditional notion of divine inspiration, instead incorporating realistic depictions of flowers, grasses, fish, and insects. Patterns on noblewomen's attire often featured floral designs with lively compositions, balanced spacing, and vibrant colors. The motifs on floor-length skirts were primarily floral clusters, represented by designs such as treasured floral motifs (*Baoxiang*) and pearl roundels (*Lianzhu*). These three-dimensional patterns on textiles broke the two-dimensional visual space of the fabric, creating a striking visual impact that highlighted the opulence and graceful aesthetic of Tang Dynasty women.

Traditional Tang Dynasty fabrics included colored brocade, specialized palace brocade, embroidery, gold and silver painting on silk, embroidered paintings, and printed and dyed textiles. The patterns, dyeing, and embroidery techniques of Tang Dynasty clothing showcased the technical artistry of costume design, reflecting its rich aesthetic and cultural heritage. (See Figure 5)







Group s no.	Define	Anaysis		Specific Manifestation	Aesthetics & Philosophy
		Cave No.	Original paintings	Line sketch design exercise by researcher	
Group 3	Move ment	Cave 159			<p>- Joyful Vitality: Exaggerated movements with perfect proportions and lively expressions radiate optimism</p> <p>- Tai Chi Lineage: S-shaped curves mirroring the Tai Chi diagram create rhythmic flow, transforming static art into living energy</p> <p>- Ink Rhythm: Flying postures embody the dynamic essence of Chinese brushwork traditions</p> <p>- Silk Legacy: Inherits 2,000 years of linear artistry - from Han Dynasty silk paintings to Wu Daozi's flowing robes</p> <p>- Spiritual Lines: Masterful brushwork transcends physical form, capturing life's rhythm through pure linear expression</p> <p>- Dancing Drapery: Fluttering fabrics create poetic undulations, blending variable speeds with yin-yang softness</p> <p>- Visual Music: Interwoven dots/lines and color gradations produce symphonic movement</p> <p>Core: These paintings achieve the Chinese aesthetic ideal where line becomes life force itself</p> <p>- Linear Elegance: Ribbons' flowing beauty crafted through masterful brushwork</p> <p>-Expressive Abstraction: Translucent lines conveying mood and rhythm as core themes</p> <p>-Kinetic Poetry: Song-like cadence in dance-inspired gestures</p> <p>- Humanist Rebellion: Challenging rigid systems through artistic liberation</p> <p>-Spiritual Narrative: Visual storytelling elevating ideological realms</p> <p>-Harmonic Ideal: Perfect balance between emotion and reason</p> <p>-Unbounded Aesthetics: Freedom incarnate Gestural transcendence Gravity-defying movement Rhythm as universal language</p> <p>Essence: These elements form a revolutionary visual philosophy breaking all constraints</p>
		Cave 158			
		Cave 39			

Figure 3 Analysis diagram: Movement

Source: Author (2024)







Groups no.	Define	Anaysis			Specific Manifestation	Aesthetics & Philosophy
		Cave No.	Original paintings	Line sketch design exercise by researcher		
Group 4	Color	Cave 159			<p>-Elegant Color Palette: Primarily malachite green, ochre, gamboge, cinnabar, and mica powder with delicate flesh tones, creating refined worldly aesthetics</p> <p>-Color Philosophy: "Vibrant yet restrained, translucent but substantial" principle</p> <p>-Sacred Chromatic Code:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gold-red Buddhist robes symbolize solemn magnificence• Gold specifically denotes transcendence <p>- Costume Color System:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dominant tones: Vermilion/celadon/pale blue (elegance)• Accessories: Gold/azure/emerald (vivid)• Strategic color contrasts for visual impact <p>- Dimensional Rendering: Ochre shading enhances facial volumetry</p> <p>Essence: A symbolic color architecture facilitating secular-to-sacred visual transition</p>	<p>-Harmonious Aesthetics: Emphasizes color unity, reflecting the Chinese philosophy of "harmony between heaven and humanity"</p> <p>-Symbolic Meaning: Colors carry religious significance, aiding spiritual transformation</p> <p>Core: Blending natural harmony with sacred symbolism to foster spiritual connection</p>
		Cave 12				
		Cave 468				

Figure 4 Analysis diagram: Color
Source: Author (2024)

1.6 Accessories

The decorative accessories in Tang Dynasty murals primarily include shoulder sashes (luoye) , jeweled crowns, and necklaces (yingluo).

The shoulder sashes from the High Tang period featured intricate and luxurious patterns, with flowing fabrics in colors such as red, orange, pink, blue, and green. Some had contrasting colors on each side and were adorned with various motifs.

Jeweled crowns came in diverse forms, including lotus-pattern crowns, flame-pattern crowns, bird-head crowns, Buddha- incarnation crowns, sun and moon crowns, and lotus crowns, showcasing the opulence and artistic sophistication of Tang Dynasty accessories.

Yingluo necklaces, which combined chokers, necklaces, bead strings, and longevity locks, served both ornamental and religious purposes. Their designs varied: Short necklaces, including choker- style and beaded short yinglu, and Long necklaces, including diagonal-style, X-shaped, and U-shaped designs.

Made with gemstones, pearls, and fresh flowers, these accessories displayed vibrant colors and high decorative value. They reflected the aesthetic principles of decorative beauty, layered beauty, and balanced beauty, emphasizing the elegance and grandeur of Tang Dynasty adornments. (See Figure 6)







Group s no.	Define	Anaysis			Specific Manifestation	Aesthetics & Philosophy
		Cave No.	Original paintings	Line sketch design exercise by researcher		
Group 5	Material and patterns	Cave 25			-Pattern Innovation: Shifted from divine totems to naturalistic motifs (flora/fauna/aquatic life) - Aristocratic Aesthetics: · Floral designs composite blossoms/linked- medallions · Balanced density compositions · Vibrant color schemes -Textile System: Polychrome brocades/palace silks/embroidery/ metal-leaf painting/dyeing Essence: Tang attire patterns completed the secularization of decorative art	3D Motif Effects: Breaks dimensional constraints with striking visual impact • Regal Aesthetics: Embodies Tang women's dignified yet dynamic beauty • Artisanal Excellence: ✓ Intricate pattern design ✓ Masterful dyeing techniques ✓ Exquisite embroidery craftsmanship (Essence: The fusion of dimensional artistry and technical mastery defines Tang costume splendor)
		Cave 172				
		Cave 231				

Figure 5 Analysis diagram: Material and pattern
Source: Author (2024)

2. Design practice

Building upon the previous classifications and aesthetic analysis, this section selects three key features— Body, Movement, and Material— and systematically transforms the aesthetic characteristics of female figures in Dunhuang murals into contemporary fashion design. By integrating the Oriental aesthetic spirit embodied in the Dunhuang murals with modern design language, the study explores a new path for the contemporary expression of traditional culture.

(1) Extraction and Transformation of Aesthetic

Features

Body:

Through an in-depth observation of the female figures in Dunhuang murals, such as Flying Apsaras and donor portraits, the study extracts their soft, elongated, and dynamic body features. In the design process, these characteristics are reinterpreted using streamlined silhouettes, oversized shapes, and garment construction techniques to emphasize the flow of body curves and movement, expressing the natural elegance and grace of the female form.(See Figure 7)







Gro ups no.	Define	Anaysis			Specific Manifestation	Aesthetics & Philosophy
		Cave No.	Original paintings	Line sketch design exercise by researcher		
Gro up 6	Acces series	Cave 57			<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Core Adornments: Braided belts, jeweled crowns, and Yingluo form the three major decorative systems in Tang murals- Braided Belt Features:<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interwoven colors (red/orange/pink/blue/green)• Dual-colored reversible design• Intricate patterned decorations- Crown Typology:<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lotus/flame/bird-head designs• Buddha-figure/sun-moon/composi- Yingluo Styles:<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Short: Choker/pearl-strand versions• Long: Diagonal/X-shaped/U-shaped arrangements- Materials: Gemstones/pearls/fresh flowers in vibrant combinationsEssence: Multi-layered adornments unify religious symbolism with decorative aesthetics	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Ornamental Beauty: Intricate patterns with sumptuous color combinations- Layered Beauty: Strategic stacking of adornments in spatial harmony- Balanced Beauty: Precise symmetrical compositions with calculated visual weightQuintessence: The perfect embodiment of Tang dynasty's three core aesthetic principles in decorative arts
		Cave 196				
		Cave 217				

Figure 6 Analysis diagram: Accessories
Source: Author (2024)



Figure 7 Study of the body and movement of female figures in Dunhuang mural paintings
Source: Author (2024)

Movement:

Key symbolic elements, such as pibo (long flowing scarves), cross-collar blouses, and pleated long skirts found in the murals, are transformed into modern structural design details. For instance, the pibo element is restructured as shawls and scarf-like shapes in Look 4, while modern silhouettes are introduced to enhance both wearability and fashion appeal. Flowing hemlines are combined with fitted tailoring to create a balanced visual effect of “movement within stillness.”

Material:

To recreate the lightness and translucency of garments seen in Dunhuang murals, the designer collaborated with an innovative textile company to develop a sustainable new fabric. This fabric blends pineapple leaf fiber (PALF) with corn-based polylactic acid (PLA) through mechanical processing to form a non-woven base. Its lightweight, soft, elastic, and biodegradable qualities closely echo the mural imagery of “floating ribbons and gauzy robes,” while aligning with contemporary sustainability values. (See Figure 8)

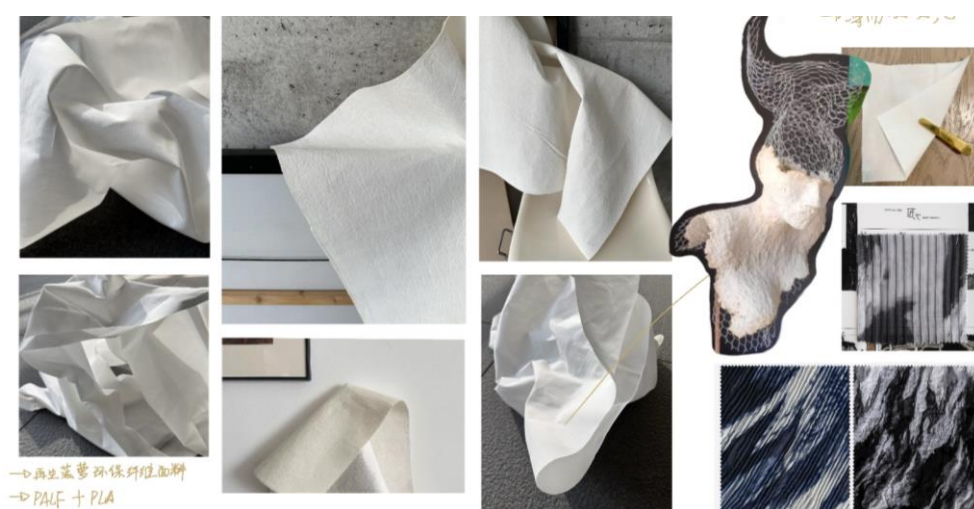


Figure 8 Analysis of material

Source: Author (2024)

(2) Expression and Application of Contemporary Design Language

In terms of visual language, the designs emphasize the use of lines to express the beauty of freedom and rhythm (See Figure 9). Abstract linear patterns were developed based on the dynamic motion of flying figures and the flowing garments in Dunhuang murals, transforming their visual rhythm into graphic language. These patterns are not only applied to textile prints and embroidery but also extended to accessory design and the visual system of the display space, thereby strengthening the narrative coherence of the overall collection. (See Figure 10)

The overall design style integrates a “free body,” “rhythmic lines,” and “natural materials,” conveying a feminine image that lies between classical and contemporary—both serene and dynamic. It reflects the independence, confidence, and aesthetic sensibility of

modern Eastern women. The design goes beyond merely recreating the beauty of Dunhuang; it aims to carry forward the spirit of Eastern culture from a contemporary perspective and to construct a fashion expression path rich in cultural depth.

Discussion

This study explores the application of Tang Dynasty female imagery in fashion design, attempting to use lines to express freedom and rhythmic beauty while embodying the Eastern philosophical concepts of “the unity of strength and softness” and “the unity of heaven and humanity.” The design inspiration draws from traditional Chinese aesthetic concepts, which hold central positions in Confucianism, Daoism, and classical Chinese art theory. The design process emphasizes balance, natural flow, and the intrinsic harmony between form and spirit. These philosophical ideas not

only serve as a guiding framework for the design but also play a role throughout the entire process, from silhouette construction to material selection, ensuring that the garments not only possess visual beauty but also carry cultural resonance.

The design draws inspiration from the images of Tang Dynasty women in Dunhuang murals, symbolizing freedom and liberation, and embodying the desire of women to break free from traditional male

gaze, pursue aesthetic autonomy, and transcend gender or predefined boundaries. The design centers on rhythmic lines, utilizing innovative eco- friendly pineapple fiber fabric, and further enriching the fabric's texture through post- production techniques such as hand- painting and beadwork, creating a unique visual effect. The result is a fashion collection that seamlessly blends grand scale with individualistic vitality (see Figure 11).

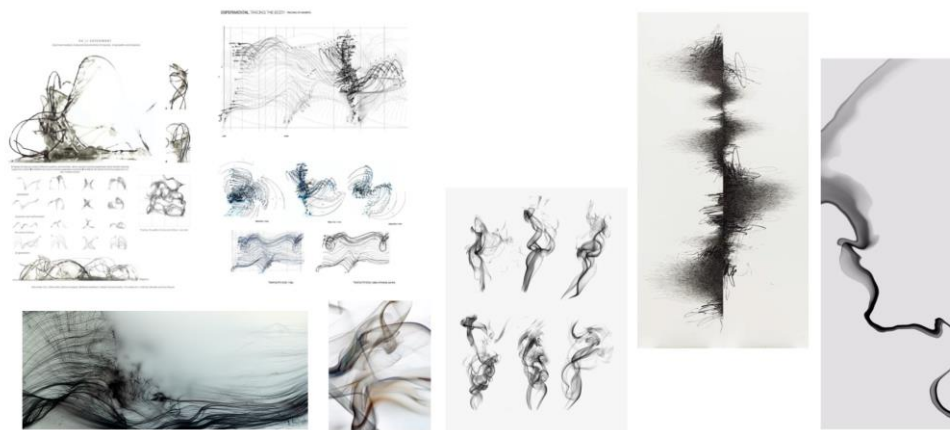


Figure 9 Study of the movement of line and the line beauty

Source: Author (2024)



Figure 10 Pattern design

Source: Author (2024)



Figure 11 Fashion Rendering

Source: Author (2024)

The completed works will be showcased in public exhibitions, aiming to promote Dunhuang culture and facilitate cultural exchange through Dunhuang art.

Suggestion

1. Value to the fashion design industry

The design field, traditionally dominated by a male perspective, has lacked attention to women's perspectives and identities. The knowledge, strategies, and guidelines derived from this research can enrich the inspiration pool for fashion design, enhancing its cultural foundation and fostering a more inclusive approach.

2. Value to art heritage preservation and research (Government/Public Organizations)

By utilizing modern fashion design as a medium, this study protects and revitalizes Dunhuang aesthetics and culture. Transforming Dunhuang artistic elements into contemporary design language gives new life to ancient art and presents it to the public through modern forms and expressions. Sustainable heritage preservation requires continuous integration with other media.

3. Value to women

Research on feminine imagery contributes to self-liberation and the awakening of female consciousness. It serves as a medium for self-reflection, offering new

pathways for women's empowerment, boosting self-confidence, and promoting the expression of female strength. This helps women overcome aesthetic anxieties and misconceptions.

4. Value to art theorists

This research expands the body of Dunhuang studies, providing scholars with richer resources and references while offering new research directions. It provides substantial arguments, research methodologies, and design paradigms that can serve as valuable benchmarks, promoting rigorous and in-depth academic inquiry.

Conclusion

This study emphasizes the significant influence of Dunhuang aesthetics on contemporary fashion culture. The transformation of Tang Dynasty feminine imagery into modern fashion design not only enriches the current fashion market but also deepens the understanding of Chinese traditional culture. It highlights the unique value of Tang Dynasty feminine imagery in fashion design and advocates for body liberation for contemporary women. This research offers a new perspective on cultural heritage and innovation, promoting the unique charm of Chinese fashion design on a global stage and fostering the dissemination and exchange of Chinese culture in today's interconnected world.

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