

A Study on the Modern Visual Translation of Dunhuang Cultural Elements: Taking the “Tianhua Yunyou Hui” Series of Illustrations as an Example

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ABSTRACT: This graduation project, titled “‘Tianhua Cloud Journey Illustrations’ Design,” aims to innovatively translate and disseminate the cultural heritage of Dunhuang murals through modern illustration art. The design selects four classic mural narratives—“Midnight Escape from the City,” “The Deer King Jataka,” “Prince Sāci Feeding Tigers with His Own Flesh,” and “Prince Good Friend Entering the Sea for Treasures”—as its core themes. These are reimagined through a fusion of modern vector Memphis style and contemporary Chinese aesthetic language. Through scattered-point perspective compositions, subtle gradients of Dunhuang color palettes (azure, light vermilion, vermilion, indigo, etc.), and the refined reconstruction of visual symbols like the “Dunhuang Panda,” blue bird, and nine-colored deer, the designs create a narrative scroll transcending time and space. The design innovatively integrates aerospace elements and celestial imagery, metaphorically bridging the ancient “flying celestial” spirit with modern technological achievements in space exploration. This achieves an organic fusion of traditional culture and contemporary ethos. The final work unfolds across five sequential panels and extends into cultural and creative product applications. It explores visual expression pathways and innovative dissemination possibilities for Dunhuang culture within a contemporary context, offering a practical case study for revitalizing traditional culture and engaging younger audiences.

KEYWORDS - Dunhuang murals, new national style, cultural innovation, visual translation, spirit of the flying apsaras

I. INTRODUCTION

Dunhuang was originally a pivotal hub city along the Silk Road, facilitating the exchange of Eastern and Western cultural arts. Renowned worldwide for its celebrated Dunhuang murals, the city elevated mural art to its pinnacle, drawing vast numbers of visitors to admire and revere these masterpieces. Beyond their extraordinary artistic achievement, these murals narrate numerous humanistic tales with rhythmic cadence, subtly nurturing the Chinese people's character—cultivating a sense of righteousness and an appreciation for goodness and beauty. Today, the rapid advancement of the digital information age has elevated demands on illustration design for both information delivery and artistic aesthetics. Simultaneously, it requires visual elements to possess inherent meaning—design cannot exist without soul. As globalization and technological progress raise living standards, the influx of foreign cultures has become increasingly pronounced. This shift toward efficient, international, and intelligent lifestyles has created gaps in ecological awareness, ethnic cultural identity, and emotional resonance. In the 21st century, design must prioritize a human-centered approach. This shift, however, has created gaps in ecological awareness, national cultural identity, and emotional resonance. Design culture must shoulder the

responsibility of guiding consumer habits and lifestyles, contributing to the cultivation of cultural confidence among the Chinese people.

II. SOURCES OF TOPIC SELECTION

The font size for **heading is 11 points bold face** and **subsections with 10 points and not bold**. Do not underline any of the headings, or add dashes, colons, etc. As a source of inspiration, the Dunhuang murals stand as irreplaceable and irreproducible treasures within the world's artistic heritage. Their fluid compositions and captivating forms draw viewers in, while the profound cultural significance and educational value they embody hold immense importance. For centuries, the world's fascination with these murals has only deepened, and in return, the Dunhuang murals have enriched global art with their magnificent scenes and grand scale.

General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized that studying and preserving Dunhuang culture requires deep exploration of its philosophical ideas, humanistic spirit, value systems, and ethical principles. This effort promotes the innovative development of China's outstanding traditional culture while revealing the cultural spirit, cultural vision, and cultural confidence inherent in the Chinese nation. It provides support for upholding and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era. We should strengthen research and preservation of Dunhuang culture to offer wisdom and insights for addressing contemporary challenges, enhancing cultural confidence, and serving the Belt and Road Initiative.

Amid rapid economic growth, people increasingly seek fulfillment in cultural and spiritual dimensions. China has placed greater emphasis on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in recent years, while the cultural and creative industries continue to flourish. **Error! Reference source not found.** As a vibrant chapter in the world's artistic treasury, Dunhuang remains an enduring wellspring of inspiration spanning millennia, tirelessly narrating tales from centuries past to the world.

This project will take the “Tianhua Cloud Travel Illustrations” as its research and design subject. Employing scattered perspective techniques and transcending temporal and spatial constraints, it will draw inspiration from the inexhaustible artistic treasure trove of Dunhuang. Four renowned and captivating stories from Dunhuang murals will serve as the framework for modern visual reinterpretation. Aerospace elements are integrated to symbolize the inheritance and evolution of ancient flying celestial civilization. Over centuries of historical shifts, economic growth, and global cultural exchange, the “flying apsaras” depicted in Dunhuang murals have evolved. Yet both the ancient apsaras of Dunhuang culture and the modern “flying apsaras” of technological civilization embody shared human aspirations across eras. **Error! Reference source not found.** The fusion of ancient and modern apsaras represents both the realization of ancient utopian visions by contemporary humanity and the continuation of ancient pioneering spirit. This convergence of past and present creates a resonance spanning millennia. The advancement of China's aerospace technology has elevated our nation to the ranks of “space powers.” The visual intersection of this achievement with Dunhuang culture represents both a collision of eras and the enduring legacy of Chinese spiritual civilization.

III. CURRENT STATE OF RESEARCH

The rapid advancement of economics and technology has brought convenience while also presenting greater challenges for illustration design. Each era possesses its own distinctive trends in popular styles, shaped by individuals deeply rooted in their times. Amidst the current wave of mobile media, the future direction and trends of illustration will become increasingly diverse. **Error! Reference source not found.** The following is a research analysis of modern illustration studies in China:

The recent surge in “traditional culture enthusiasm” within China underscores that the most crucial aspect of developing national cultural soft power lies in tracing back to its roots. As a natural treasure trove of world culture, Dunhuang has consistently been a subject of keen interest among designers both domestically and internationally. Illustrations inspired by Dunhuang patterns, for instance, have captivated scholars worldwide

throughout history with their distinctive formal beauty and cultural depth. Many contemporary illustrators and designers draw inspiration from these motifs, reinterpreting them in innovative ways.

Take renowned Chinese illustrator Shanzhe as an example. From his early works like *Black and White Pictorial Intentions* and *Luo Huangji* to his current projects like *Viewing Mountains and Seas* and *Hundred Ghosts of China*, he has continuously explored, refined, and sought diverse modes of expression. He infuses his own interpretations into each mountain spirit and sea monster, conducting thorough research before putting brush to paper. This approach leaves ample room for the reader's imagination, resulting in visually stunning final works.



Fig. 1 Shanzhe Illustration: “White Deer”

In recent years, academic circles have gradually expanded research on Dunhuang illustrated patterns into multiple dimensions: First, from a macro perspective, scholars primarily conduct holistic studies, examining the themes and forms of Dunhuang patterns through verification and investigation, and analyzing them through classification and systematic organization. Second, at the micro level, scholars focus on specific periods, types, themes, contents, and styles. They conduct comparative studies on the chronological classification and categorization of Dunhuang patterns to reveal their developmental and evolutionary patterns. Additionally, the academic community explores the aesthetic value of Dunhuang patterns within traditional Chinese art from historical and cultural-historical perspectives. This series of studies provides essential professional perspectives and methodologies for deeply understanding Dunhuang patterns, appreciating their cultural context, and uncovering their heritage value.

To transform ancient culture into a new value system, domestic efforts have integrated Dunhuang themes with modern digital illustration, achieving fresh interpretations. The diverse expressive forms of digital illustration art possess distinct interactivity, selectivity, and higher execution efficiency. Through cultural innovation and regeneration, it effectively facilitates a process of cultural meaning generation and aesthetic value enhancement. Domestic designs predominantly employ New Chinese Style digital illustration as their expressive medium. For instance, theoretical research on the Dunhuang mural narrative painting *The Deer King Jataka* includes analyses of stylistic characteristics, artistic value, and ideological depth. Simultaneously, it conducts comparative analyses of the creative language—such as composition, color palette, and artistic conception—within the illustrations, integrating them with the current state of innovative research in New Chinese Style illustration. This process organizes the figures and environmental imagery from Dunhuang murals as source material.

Shi Weixiang, an art theorist at the Dunhuang Academy, spearheaded the creation of a database centered on Dunhuang textual materials. Hailed by peers as Dunhuang's “living encyclopedia and living archive,” he was among the earliest scholars to apply art sociology to study Dunhuang cave art and a pioneer in Dunhuang studies. He posits that Dunhuang art embodies rich artistic principles, containing aesthetic experiences alienated from historical life. This perspective warrants further exploration, as Shi Weixiang firmly believed Dunhuang art constitutes a profound discipline requiring more objective and rigorous analysis of the deep humanistic meanings embedded within the murals.

He Changqun's "The System of Dunhuang Buddhist Art" stands as the first Chinese scholarly article on Dunhuang cave art, playing a pioneering role in both domestic and global Dunhuang studies. During the 1940s, painters such as Wu Zuoren, Guan Shanyue, Li Xiong, Wang Ziyun, and Zhang Daqian successively visited Dunhuang for fieldwork and conducted extensive copying and cataloging efforts. Additionally, the art specialists of the "Northwest Scientific Expedition" led by Wang Ziyun undertook in-depth copying and research of Dunhuang murals and patterns, later exhibiting their copies in Chongqing. Beyond copying murals, Zhang Daqian's team numbered the caves and advocated for establishing specialized research institutions. As the volume of copies and exhibitions grew, scholars increasingly authored articles and monographs introducing and critiquing Dunhuang art.

Based on this analysis, the "Celestial Cloud Wanderings" illustration design ultimately adopts a New National Style approach to explore the profound humanistic essence within Dunhuang murals.

IV. CREATIVE PROCESS

4.1 Design Positioning

Through investigative analysis, we observe rapid technological advancement and the integration of diverse technological tools. This design aims to develop illustration concepts aligned with the essence of the new era across visual, spiritual, and conceptual dimensions, with derivative applications. It seeks to revitalize the rigid portrayal of Dunhuang flying apsaras, bringing this cultural heritage further into public awareness and daily life. By arranging the illustrative language of this project, we innovatively reinterpret Dunhuang's visual imagery, extracting its finest elements to enhancing the visual experience to resonate with consumers' emotional needs and forge a vibrant cultural identity. Centered on a vector-based New Chinese Style aesthetic, it captures the attention of younger audiences, fully embodying the design philosophy, ideology, spirit, and aesthetic to convey unique cultural value and promotional significance.

Against this backdrop, the "Celestial Cloud Wanderings" illustration design takes the narrative plots and profound moral implications within Dunhuang murals as its backbone. Employing scattered perspective, it reimagines these stories in a modern form. Using Dunhuang's diverse visual symbols and language as its substance, the design fuses culture with contemporary expression. It integrates aerospace elements to extend the ancient spirit of "flying celestials," By merging ancient and modern elements and creating diverse cultural forms, it establishes multifaceted designs whose concepts, thinking, styles, and aesthetics possess unique cultural value and communicative significance. This is crucial for advancing multicultural development and promotion. Thus, cultural diversity demonstrates special value and meaning in design, warranting in-depth exploration.

4.2 Design Concept

"Tianhua Cloud Journey Painting" spans ancient and modern eras in its visual language, taking four renowned mural narratives with profound educational significance as its research subjects. It reimagines their visual impact by integrating contemporary stylistic elements. Employing scattered-point perspective, the design transcends temporal and spatial constraints, weaving aerospace and celestial elements into the composition. This fusion symbolizes both the inheritance and evolution of ancient flying civilization while expressing profound aspirations for China's future in aerospace exploration.

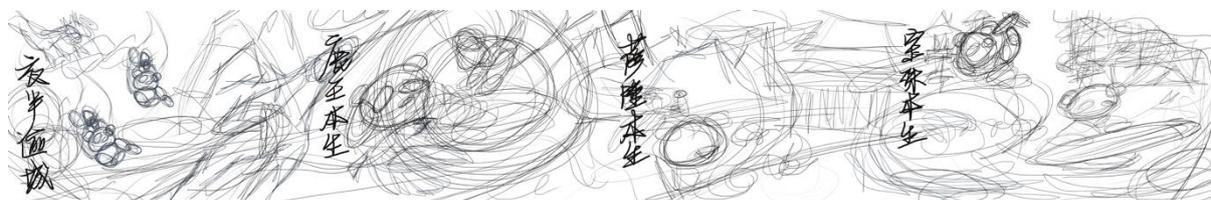


Fig. 2 Graphic Design Draft

4.3 Graphic Design

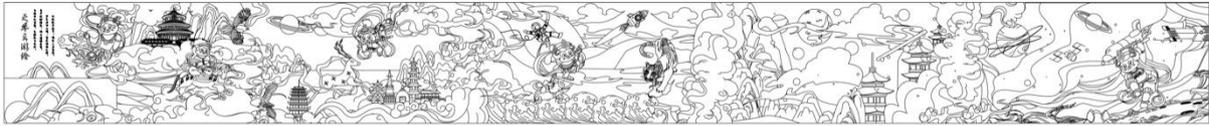


Fig. 3 Graphic Design Draft

This design employs vector illustrations in the Memphis style for characters and elements, drawing upon fundamental graphic and color elements from both Dunhuang and aviation perspectives. Five sequential illustrations leverage the rich artistic expression of illustration design to emphasize cultural significance.

4.4 Color Design

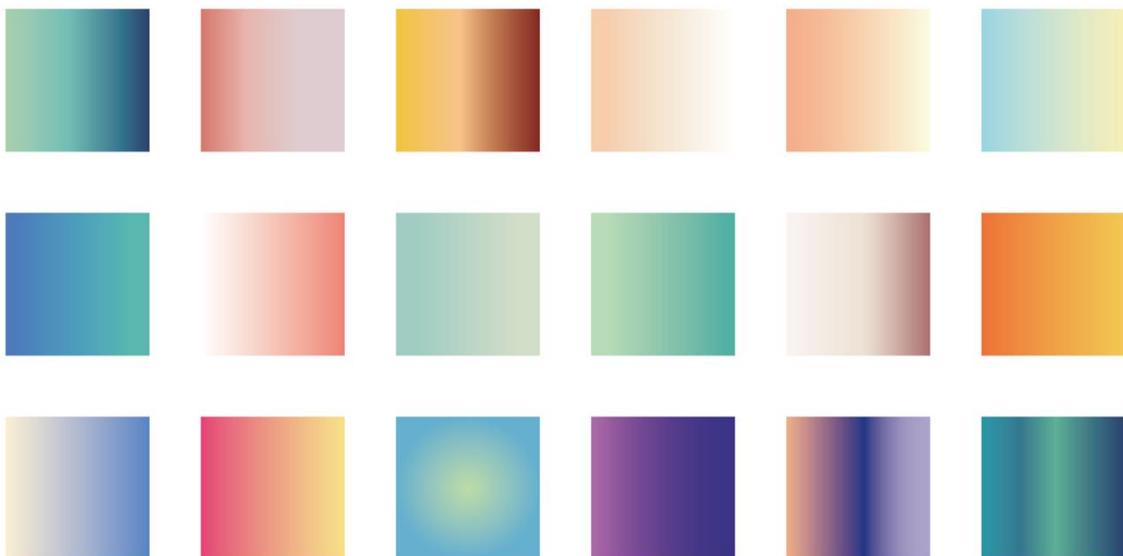


Fig. 4 Lightweight Gradient Color Palette

The work comprises five small panels forming a continuous composition. Dominant hues include azurite blue, light vermilion, cinnabar red, and indigo blue, applied with subtle gradations. Secondary pigments include ochre, cinnabar, red lead, malachite green, azurite, lapis lazuli, umber, and ultramarine. The overall palette adheres to the Dunhuang color scheme.

4.5 Layout Design

The “Tianhua Cloud Journey” illustration design employs a horizontal composition throughout. At the scroll's opening, the title is introduced in a graceful calligraphic font. Individual panels utilize scattered perspective, allowing flexible temporal and spatial arrangements. The central motif, the “Dunhuang Panda,” appears evenly distributed across the scenes, while visual elements like the Azure Bird, Nine-Colored Deer, White Tiger, and pagoda serve as decorative accents. Auspicious clouds serve

as a unifying thread throughout the composition, harmoniously segmenting the narrative while integrating the entire visual narrative into a cohesive whole.

4.6 Work Showcase

Design Specifications



Fig. 5 Midnight Wall-Climbing

First, I chose the tale of the midnight escape over the city walls—the story of the crown prince who, inspired by divine revelation, abandoned his throne and beloved wife, mounted his horse, and left the kingdom to pursue a life of monastic devotion.



Fig. 6 The Birth Story of the Deer King

Secondly, the tale of the Deer King's previous life—a story of ingratitude—artfully conveys simple Buddhist truths: sacrificing one's life for righteousness, universal compassion for all beings, and the karmic consequences of good and evil. It masterfully articulates these principles while perpetuating an ancient and enduring moral code and code of conduct for a nation.



Fig. 7 The Crown Prince of Sāci Sacrificed Himself to Feed the Tiger

Next is the tale of Prince Sārdhu sacrificing himself to feed the tiger. In ancient India, the third son of the king of the kingdom of Dharmapura, Prince Sārdhu, saved a young tiger by offering his own flesh to the beast.

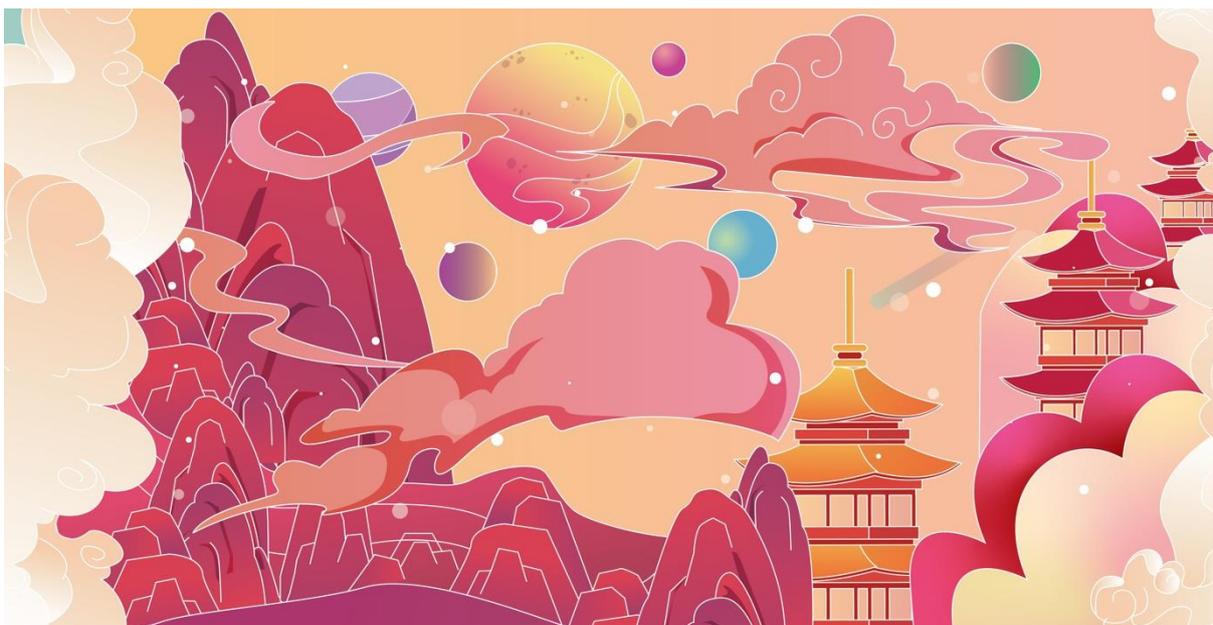


Fig. 8 Stellar Sea Dunhuang

Then comes the fusion of cosmic landscapes and Dunhuang scenery—dotted sand dunes, leisurely drifting clouds, majestic ancient pagodas, ever-shifting sand formations, and vast starry skies... It moves those accustomed to the bustling city traffic, while also evoking beautiful imaginings of the night sky.



Fig. 9 Prince Shanyou Enters the Sea to Retrieve Treasures

Finally, the tale of Prince Shanyou's quest for treasures in the sea unfolds. Unable to bear witness to the suffering and hunger of sentient beings, Prince Shanyou resolved to aid the people's livelihood, sacrificing his life to venture into the ocean in search of treasures for their benefit. Dominated by shades of blue, accented by occasional bright hues, the composition evokes a profoundly serene and tranquil atmosphere.

In crafting the visual narrative of “Celestial Splendor: Cloud Journey Paintings,” the design team captured the essence of the tales and the distinctive visual language of Dunhuang. Integrating aviation motifs, they employed a cohesive visual language through continuous imagery, inviting viewers to find inspiration within the scenes. Each individual composition adopts a scattered-point layout, transcending temporal and spatial constraints while maintaining a harmonious, layered arrangement. The rich visual content delivers a profoundly satisfying viewing experience.

Overall Rendering

Below is the overall rendering of this design. Mountain ranges and stone caves, flowers and trees with flowing springs, winding ancient mountain paths, pagodas bathed in clouds and rosy skies, and cosmic starry skies—all are sketched and colored within this painting, presenting a visual feast characteristic of Dunhuang.



Fig. 10 Overall Rendering

Application of the Work



Fig. 11 Application Series

V. CONCLUSION

Through comparative analysis of illustration design both domestically and internationally, it is evident that the integration of traditional culture with artistic illustration design represents an innovative trend in contemporary social development. It also serves as a medium for interpreting and expressing national culture. By creatively transforming and innovatively developing China's outstanding traditional culture, we continually promote the cultural spirit, cultural temperament, and cultural confidence inherent within it, providing robust spiritual support for upholding and advancing socialism with Chinese characteristics.

The "Tianhua Yunyou Hui" illustration design incorporates traditional cultural symbols into its visual composition, responding to the demands of the era, cultural exchange, and the Belt and Road Initiative while presenting a contemporary interpretation. This approach renders the imagery clearer and more natural, aligning closely with readers' perceptions and needs. During the design process, extensive research into Dunhuang culture through various historical documents revealed the profound artistic achievements of this heritage, deepening our understanding of the importance in disseminating China's outstanding traditional culture.

The innovative value of the "Tianhua Cloud Travel Illustrations" design lies in its ability to integrate illustration art with storytelling, thereby preserving outstanding traditional culture. By extracting visual information and cultural elements, the design delves deeply into the philosophical ideas, humanistic spirit, value concepts, and ethical norms embedded within Dunhuang's cultural heritage and historical relics. Its dissemination method not only resonates deeply with readers but also makes significant contributions to cultural transmission and exchange on a broader scale. It enables viewers to gradually absorb outstanding concepts through osmosis, fostering the distinctive cultural spirit and cultural ethos of the Chinese nation. This strengthens the public's confidence in our culture, grounded in the creative transformation and innovative development of China's outstanding traditional culture, thereby promoting its better, clearer, and more formal expression.

Dunhuang culture stands as a masterpiece of global civilizational integration, rooted in traditional Chinese culture while continually absorbing the essence of other regional and ethnic cultures. Over its millennia-long evolution, Dunhuang culture has consistently pioneered innovation, blossoming into a rich tapestry of diversity. This culturally diverse yet unified tradition embodies the essence of Chinese heritage while radiating the brilliance of ancient Indian, Persian, and Greek civilizations, emerging as a distinctive and globally acclaimed regional culture.

In the present era, whether Dunhuang studies can become a new trend in world art is a question worthy of deep reflection. Yet I believe that as long as designers fully utilize resources, continuously explore new materials, experiment with novel methods, ponder fresh questions, broaden their horizons, strengthen interdisciplinary exchanges, and innovate by building upon tradition, the ancient and profoundly meaningful art of Dunhuang can be revitalized. In the new century, Dunhuang art can retain its youthful vitality and pioneer new artistic realms.

VI. Acknowledgements

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