

On the Image of Court Ladies in Chinese Classical Painting from the Perspective of Feminist Discourse: The Tang and Five Dynasties Period

Shengnan Shi

University of Bristol, Bristol, UK

Abstract

This paper, grounded in feminist theoretical perspectives, focuses on the central research subject of the "scholars' women" iconography of the Tang and Five Dynasties periods. Through the application of visual analysis and socio-cultural contextual interpretation, it reveals the construction logic of female imagery in paintings from this era and the mechanisms of gender power dynamics. The study employs key visual materials such as Dunhuang murals, Caves of the Thousand Buddha Silk Paintings, and classic extant portraits of "scholars' women" (e.g., Zhang Xuan's *Lady of the State of Guo Going Out to Spring Outing* and Zhou Fang's *Scholars' Women Adorning Their Hair with Flowers*). Analysis is conducted across four core dimensions: socio-cultural context, corporeal representation discourse, clothing semiotic systems, and visual narrative structures. It primarily explores how the "scholars' women" iconography mirrors the open and inclusive social morphology of the Tang Dynasty, as well as the positioning of women's subjectivity in religious practices, aesthetic activities, and daily life domains. The research demonstrates that the Tang and Five Dynasties "scholars' women" iconography bears dual cultural imprints of Confucian ethical norms and Buddhist iconographic traditions, while also profoundly reflecting the composite connotations of women as aesthetic objects and cultural symbols—both constrained by traditional gender orders and revealing nascent subjectivity in specific contexts. This study not only clarifies the cultural formation logic of the Tang and Five Dynasties "scholars' women" iconography but also addresses the gender perspective gap in traditional art history research, offering a new perspective with both historical value and theoretical significance for gender studies in classical Chinese painting.

Keywords

Feminist discourse, Tang and Five Dynasties, patterns of literati, Dunhuang murals, and silk paintings of Buddhist scriptures.

1. Introduction

In the writing of traditional art history, female images are often regarded as aesthetic objects or cultural symbols under the gaze of men. However, the Tang and Five Dynasties' female figures, with their unique visual openness and diverse connotations, have become key samples for examining ancient gender culture. During this period, with the prosperity of the social economy, the deepening of the localization of Buddhist art, and the increasing participation of women in society, the focus of the creation of literati paintings shifted significantly - from the early moral education core of the "List of Women" paradigm, gradually transitioning to a concrete presentation of the daily lives of aristocratic and commoner women. The Mogao Grottoes of Dunhuang murals are realistic and plump providers, secular women dressed in Hu in silk paintings of Sutra Cave, and the lazy attitude of "beautiful figures" in Zhang Xuan's and Zhou Fang's works, which together build a complete pedigree of female images in the Tang

Dynasty. Feminist theory centers around the cultural constructiveness of "gender" and distinguishes it from the natural attribute of biological sex, providing a new theoretical path for interpreting such images [1]. This article revolves around the following core question: What visual language is used to construct the social roles of women in the Tang and Five Dynasties' official female schema? What is the interactive mechanism between female images in religious and secular painting? How do graphic elements such as clothing, posture, and scenes carry the implicit operation of gender power? By cross interpreting Dunhuang murals, Buddhist cave silk paintings, and traditional women's paintings, this study aims to reveal the deep gender cultural codes behind the images, re-examine the dominant position of women in classical painting, and provide new empirical evidence for the study of gender dimensions in traditional art history.

2. Sociocultural Context: Gender Order and Image Production

2.1. Prosperous Era Atmosphere and the Diversity of Female Images

The stability and cultural integration of the Tang and Five Dynasties were like gentle spring rain, nourishing the diverse blooming of female images. The abundance of granaries during the "Zhenguan Reign" and the prosperity of the market during the "Kaiyuan Prosperous Era" led painters to shift their focus from depicting gods and Buddhas to focusing on the women around them. In Zhang Xuan's "The Spring Outing of the Lady of the State of Guo", a noblewoman rides on a horse, her clothes fluttering, and her horse hooves shatter the old rule of "women staying at home" - a straight back and a calm expression. Even a thousand years later, the power of upper class women to break free can still be felt. The 130th cave in Dunhuang, titled 'Empress Dowager Taiyuan Wang Family Worshiping Buddha', is even more touching. The female devotee is depicted in the painting, with a plump figure and exquisite clothing, showcasing both the family's prestige and the shadow of Buddhist statues. The golden thread of clothing resembles the incense of Buddha caves, blending secular nobility with religious solemnity, becoming an excellent footnote to the inclusive atmosphere of the prosperous Tang Dynasty.

2.2. Gender Projection and Localization Shift in Religious Statues

On the road of spreading Buddhist art to the east, female images quietly shed the shell of "Bodhisattva male appearance" and slowly grew into female bodies full of compassion [2]. Every time I stop at Dunhuang Cave 57, I am always moved by that early Tang Bodhisattva - her eyebrows are curved like a new moon in the night sky, her skin is so fine that it seems like a faint light can penetrate the cave, and there are no traces of exotic male appearance? It is clear that the Chinese people's imagination of "gentleness" has been infused into divinity, using the unique warmth of women to make the word "compassion" particularly touching. The painting "Water Moon Guanyin" from the late Tang Dynasty in the Hidden Scripture Cave is even more exquisite. Guanyin sits half heartedly in the bamboo forest, and the bamboo shadow gently sways on her clothes. The garment thread slowly follows the curve of the body, without losing the solemnity of Indian Buddhism, but also wrapped in the gentle demeanor of Tang Dynasty ladies - like a painter secretly cutting a piece of the softness of a human woman and carefully sewing it into the clothes of a Buddhist country. This is not a simple image transformation, it is clearly a gentle embrace between religion and secularism, giving divinity a human warmth.

3. Body language: the beauty of plumpness and the construction of gender aesthetics

3.1. Body reconstruction: from "showing bones and clear images" to "enriching muscles and fat body"

Compared to the frail beauty of the "clear and delicate figures" in the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, the Tang Dynasty's paintings of literati are characterized by their plump and curvaceous bodies. In Zhou Fang's "Portrait of a Lady with Hairpins and Flowers", the female shoulders and necks are round, the waist is slightly plump, and the clothing is light and transparent, showcasing the era trend of "beauty is based on obesity" [3]. This aesthetic shift is not only due to material abundance, but also related to the open concept influenced by the Hu style - the robust physique of the music and dance performers in Dunhuang Cave 220, combined with the dynamic movements of the Hu spiral dance, highlights the sense of strength and vitality of the body, breaking the traditional gender stereotype of women as "weak". In Dunhuang murals, the images of musicians and dancers often appear, their movements are agile and powerful, full of vitality. The images of these musical and dance performers are not only a display of the physical beauty of Tang Dynasty women, but also a reflection of the open and inclusive spirit of Tang society.

3.2. Face and expression: from "conceptualization" to "personalization"

The Tang and Five Dynasties literati paintings focus on the realism of facial details, such as the differences in facial expressions of women of different identities in the "Zhen Lian Tu": the focus of the vibrator, the gentleness of the line straightener, and the caution of the ironer, which are presented through subtle changes in eyebrow shape, eye gaze, and mouth curvature. Although the female donors in Dunhuang murals are mostly depicted in profile, individual characteristics can still be felt through details such as hairlines and dimples, implying the painter's attention to women as "people" rather than "symbols", which is particularly rare in religious paintings. In Dunhuang murals, the image of female donors often appears, with different faces and expressions. Some are dignified and beautiful, some are gentle and gentle, and some are full of confidence and vitality. The images of these female caretakers are not only a display of the facial features and expressions of women in the Tang Dynasty, but also a reflection of the diverse culture of Tang society.

4. Clothing Symbols: Visual Writing of Body Covering and Gender Power

4.1. Gender segregation and identity metaphor in clothing and accessories

The basic form of women's clothing in the Tang Dynasty was "shirt, skirt, and tie", but its specific combination implied gender order. In the "Portrait of a Lady Under a Tree" unearthed from the Cangjing Cave (Late Tang Dynasty), a noblewoman is dressed in a low cut skirt, draped in transparent silk, with skin on her shoulders and neck appearing faintly. This "half covered, half exposed" way of wearing not only conforms to the Confucian norms of "ritual", but also satisfies male aesthetic needs through partial nudity of the body, reflecting the dual operation of gender power in clothing design [4]. Civilian women, such as the female caretakers in Cave 431 of Dunhuang, wear narrow sleeved jackets and simple clothing, reflecting the limitations of social class on gender expression. In the Tang Dynasty, there were significant differences in clothing among women of different social classes, which not only reflected differences in identity and status, but also reflected the operation of gender power. Noble women's clothing is often more luxurious and revealing, while commoner women's clothing is more simple and conservative. The differences in clothing reflect both social class and gender power. Noble women showcase their status and status through luxurious clothing, while also satisfying men's

aesthetic needs; However, ordinary women are limited by social class and can only wear simple clothing, unable to showcase their personality and charm.

4.2. Patterns and Colors: Sexualized Possession of Symbolic Capital

Noble ladies' clothing is often adorned with complex patterns such as cluster patterns and bead patterns, with colors often using gorgeous hues such as crimson, stone blue, mud gold and silver. For example, in the painting "Hairpin Flower Ladies", the peony and phoenix patterns on women's clothing symbolize status and auspicious meanings. On the other hand, in the Dunhuang murals, the lower level women's clothing and accessories are mostly monochrome or simple geometric patterns, with darker and darker colors. This difference is not only a reflection of economic strength, but also constitutes a visual gender power hierarchy - glamorous clothing has become a symbol capital for aristocratic women to gain social recognition, and its design and wearing process is always shrouded in a male dominated aesthetic framework. In the Tang Dynasty, the patterns and colors of clothing were not only decorations, but also symbolic capital, representing identity, status, and social recognition. Noble women showcase their wealth and status by wearing luxurious clothing, while also gaining social recognition and respect. The clothing of lower level women in Dunhuang murals is relatively simple and the colors are darker, which not only reflects their weaker economic strength but also their lower social status. The differences in clothing are actually a manifestation of gender power in society. Women's clothing is limited by male dominated aesthetic frameworks and has become a symbol of expressing gender power.

5. Image Narrative: Visual Presentation of Daily Scenes and Female Experiences

5.1. Palace Life: Female Characters in Entertainment Scenarios

Works that have been passed down for generations, such as "The Spring Outing Picture of the Lady of Guo State" and "The Grinding Picture", condense the spring outings and labor of palace women on silk, hiding their vivid traces as the "main consumers". The spring scene depicted by Du Fu, "On the third day of March, the weather is new and there are many beautiful people by the water in Chang'an," is similar to the footnote outside the painting "The Lady of Guo's Spring Tour" - Yang Guifei's third sister, Lady of Guo, accompanied by her family on a trip in full dress. The woman did not ride a car but crossed a horse, standing tall and straight, and the horse hooves lightly stepped on the spring scenery with ease. This reflects the tolerance of the upper class of the Tang Dynasty towards women's physical freedom and also reflects the rare social confidence of women at that time. The collision of clothing and horse colors is harmonious, bright yet not dry, showcasing the exquisite luxury of palace life. The 'Mashing Picture' is full of fireworks: the kneader's arms are slightly heavy and exerting force, the thread straightener's fingertips twist the silk thread, the ironer frowns and protects the fabric, and every expression seems to be cut from real life. But in the lively division of labor and cooperation, the traditional framework of "male lead outside and female lead inside" has quietly been anchored. These images may seem to depict female autonomy, but in reality, they depict the appearance of male painters dipped in their ideals - the women in their paintings hide the aesthetic expectations of the times, as well as the fate of being admired, which is stunning to read and adds a touch of melancholy.

5.2. Interweaving of Religion and Secularity: The Female Spiritual World in Dunhuang Images

The women in Dunhuang murals are a blend of secular fireworks and Buddhist spiritual light - they have both the human appearance of offerings and musicians, as well as the divine posture of celestial maidens and scattered flower celestial maidens. In the 334th cave of the "Heavenly

Maiden Scattered Flowers" painting, the Heavenly Maiden's clothes fly like "Wu Dai Dang Feng", and her bouquet embodies the warmth of Buddhism. However, her round face and plump figure are surprisingly similar to the Chang'an noble woman in the "Hairpin Flower Lady" painting, as if she had walked into the Buddhist kingdom from the spring scenery of a garden party, hiding the gentle infiltration of secular aesthetics into religious images. In secular scenes, they are more vivid: aristocratic women who provide for their families are dressed in embroidered gold dresses, with their shoulders adorned with tassels resembling the flowing light of the prosperous Tang Dynasty; The commoner woman wore a plain cloth dress, but held the same piety with folded hands [5]. The dance moves of Yuewu Ji contain the agility of Hu Xuan dance, and every turn exudes vitality. When gazing at these murals, one can always feel their warmth - they not only have to manage household chores, take care of their husband and children in the human world, but also find comfort in front of the Buddha, turning the days of fireworks and spiritual beliefs into vivid footnotes in the murals.

6. Comparison and Inheritance: The Historical Positioning of the Pattern of Noble Women in the Tang Dynasty and Five Dynasties

6.1. Differences in Patterns between Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, and Song Dynasty

The pattern of Tang Dynasty and Five Dynasties literati is a unique and bright color in the history of painting, which is different from the lean and delicate style of the Wei and Jin Dynasties and the delicate and gentle style of the Song Dynasty. During the chaotic period of the Wei and Jin dynasties, metaphysics nurtured the concept of "beautiful bones and clear images". In Gu Kaizhi's "Ode to the Luo God", the Luo God was depicted as "graceful as a startled swan", with a graceful figure and a distant expression. There are many paintings of women by literati, and the "Women's History Admonitions" depict the weight of "women's virtues" passed down by virtuous women, hiding the longing for order in chaotic times. In the prosperous Tang Dynasty, the spring breeze warmed the painting paper. In Zhang Xuan's painting "The Lady of the State of Guo's Spring Tour", the noblewoman crosses her horse, her clothes fluttering, and the Zhou Fang lady stands with flowers in her hairpin, plump and full, seeing the "joy of the world's fireworks" [6]. The Dunhuang murals offer embroidered skirts reflecting the sun of Shazhou, and the music, dance, and dance of hidden Hu are lively and full of enthusiasm for life. During the Song Dynasty, learning flourished, and the painting of noble women condensed their sharpness. Li Gonglin's "Vimalakirti" depicts a celestial maiden as delicate as a willow, with a gentle expression. The restraint of "upholding heavenly principles" is as stark as the Tang Dynasty's flamboyance. The story of the collection of painting materials: Dunhuang murals depict the "appearance of sentient beings" in the grottoes, and the patterns on Bodhisattva robes contain solemnity; The silk painting of the Hidden Scripture Cave is a private "little secret". In the painting "Portrait of a Lady Under a Tree", the hairpin and clothing patterns are as fine as eyebrows, filled with soft fireworks.

6.2. Impact on Future Generations and Rediscover of Gender Studies

The pattern of Tang and Five Dynasties literati is the eternal beacon in the history of Chinese painting, illuminating the path of Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasty literati painting. In terms of physical expression, although the voluptuous beauty of the Tang Dynasty has passed, Tang Yin's ladies have become more graceful, and the soft and vigorous skirt still retains the warmth of Tang Dynasty curves; In terms of clothing, the exquisite Tang Dynasty costumes became a model for later generations, and painters used them to renovate the customs of various dynasties; On the scene, the palace's spring outing and the labor of calligraphy and painting in the boudoir allow future generations to experience the fireworks of different eras' lives. From

a feminist perspective, they are no longer specimens of "flourishing aesthetics", but have become keys to touching the gender power and class structure of the Tang Dynasty. Noble women wear gold embroidered skirts and commoner women wear plain cloth shirts, embroidered with the weight of life for women from different social classes. Dunhuang murals and cave silk paintings are like the "private photo albums" of women in the Tang Dynasty - murals depict the belief of female donors in the Ten Treasures, silk paintings depict secular women's hairpins reflecting their daily lives, and cultural relics break free from the constraints of literature, allowing us to listen to the heartbeats of Tang Dynasty women as we stick to the images.

7. Conclusion

Gazing at the painting scroll of Tang Dynasty and Five Dynasties literati after a thousand years - "Hairpin Flower Goddess Painting" - depicts the noble maiden with hairpin flowers, the worshipper of Buddha in Dunhuang murals, and the woman with temples in silk paintings in the cave of Buddhist scriptures. The brushstrokes always touch the temperature of the prosperous Tang Dynasty. The image of a lady is not a cold specimen, but a "living history" wrapped in the fireworks of the times and the thoughts of women: inclusive in the prosperous era, with a plump figure breaking free from the shackles of "softness"; Integrating religion and secularism, the celestial maiden floats with the civilian maiden's cloth skirt, complementing each other; Remembering the diverse existence of women - ordinary people who manage household chores, dancers who dance wildly, and providers who carry faith.

The feminist perspective opens up new folds in ancient images. We are no longer just amazed by the beauty of the "Qiluo characters", but also understand the metaphors of clothing patterns and social classes, see the tension of the movements of musicians and dancers, and perceive the subjective consciousness of the eyes of the supporters. The Dunhuang murals and the silk paintings of the scripture caves add warmth to interpretation - breaking free from the limitations of literature, using delicate brushstrokes to capture the true essence of Tang Dynasty women, letting us know that the people in the paintings are not symbols of being "gazed upon", but rather individuals who have truly lived, loved, and believed.

This pattern serves as an emotional bond for thousands of years: it not only buries aesthetic genes for later generations of literati paintings, but also opens a small window for modern people to look back on history. In the future, exploring through brush and ink, perhaps we can hear more gentle whispers in Tang Dynasty women's paintings.

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