

The necessity of constructing Tibetan dance iconology

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Abstract: The most glorious era in the history of Tibetan dance in ancient times was the Tubo period, which left many precious dance images with Tibetan colors. Although there has been some attention paid to Tibetan dance images in current scholarship, these images have focused on the theme of "Fantan pipa" or on Dunhuang murals as the main focus, and more Tibetan dance images have not received much attention. Such as Tibetan thangka art, palace murals or some dance posture in Tibetan religious ceremony. The construction of Tibetan dance iconology is essential because it can promote the study of Tibetan dance education and Tibetan dance historiography.

1. The current situation of Tibetan dance iconology

The most glorious era in the history of Tibetan dance in ancient times was the Tubo period. At one time, the Tubo regime was so powerful that it controlled the Dunhuang area and could even compete with the Tang Dynasty at the time. It left behind many precious images of dance with Tibetan overtones. In addition, the dance elements in the Thang-ga created by the Tibetan people themselves are important objects for analysis in Tibetan dance iconology.

The first study of Tibetan dance images is Li Qijong's 1998 article, *On the Art of Dunhuang Murals in the Turfan Period*, in *Dunhuang Studies*. In this article, Li Qijong analyzes new themes in Dunhuang murals of the Turfan period, such as Da Fangbian Fo Bao'en Jing, Jing Guangming Jing, Jing Gang Jing, Hua Yan Jing, Leng Qie Jing, Bao Fu Mu Enzhong Jing, and Siyi Fantian Suowen Jing. It is in fact an interpretation of the sutras and a summary of the overall characteristics of Dunhuang wall paintings of the Tufan period. Subsequently, *the Dance Paintings of Dunhuang Cave Paintings*, edited by Wang Kefen, published in 2001, and *the Dunhuang Wall Paintings of Middle Tang* edited by the Chinese Dunhuang Wall Paintings Editorial Committee, published in 2006, provide a detailed overview of Dunhuang wall paintings from the Tubo period, but they are limited to a brief introduction to the cave paintings and no pictorial analysis.

In recent years, years there have been a number of articles that have consciously used pictorial studies to examine Dunhuang wall paintings of the Tufan period. *The Fantan Pipa: A Study of the Origin of the Artistic Image of Dancing in Dunhuang Murals*, published in *Dunhuang Studies* in 2020, Ge Chengyong compares the Fantan pipa in Dunhuang murals with the Fantan pipa on the stone coffin of Empress Wu Huifei in Chang An during the Tang Dynasty and the Fantan pipa on the Tubo silver pot in the Dazhao Temple in Lhasa. The lute in the Mogao Caves is a dance prop rather than an accompanying instrument. At the same time, this image appears in front of the main statue of Amitabha in Cave 112 of the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang, whose main function is to

"entertain the Buddha," the same nature as the ancient Greek ritual dance "to entertain the gods". It also reflects the aesthetic tendency of the Tang dynasty, when images of foreign styles were transformed by local aesthetics. Wang Xue's article, *An Examination of the Elements of Tubo Music and Dance in Dunhuang Murals-Centering on Long-Sleeved Dances in Turned-Neck Robes*, published in the Journal of Qinghai University for Nationalities in 2022, provides a detailed explanation of the identities of the dancers wearing turned-neck robes and their dances within the images of music and dance left in different periods of Tibetan history. The first is that the dance performed by the dancers with lapels and robes on the coffin panels in the tombs of the Tubo period in Qinghai is a "witch dance", and their identity should be that of a witch, and this dance in the funeral ritual is related to the native Tibetan Bon religion. "In Tubo culture, the soul is separated from the body after death. The burial ritual of uniting the souls and body is an important ritual for attaching the soul to the body, and the prerequisite for performing this ritual is to invoke the return of the departed soul, i. e. , 'returning of the soul'"[1]In the midst of the ceremony, music and dance are essential. The similarities between the dances in the Bon religion rituals and those in the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang stem from the fusion of indigenous Tibetan Bon religion and expatriate Buddhism during the Tubo period, especially the combination of Bon religion and Buddhist funerary rituals that led to the costume of witch of the Bon religion appeared in Buddhist wall paintings.

A study of the aesthetic characteristics and use of the Dunhuang Mogao cave guardian deity in Dunhuang dance, with the example of the Jialin Pinjia, published in Chinese Dance in 2022 by Feng Guang, examines the origin and specific role of Jialin Pinjia in Buddhism. According to Feng Guang, "Jialing Pinga appeared later in the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang, and the body of the bird is similar to that of a crane, with a flying shape or holding a musical instrument, and the Mythical Bird is very similar to the Chinese crane, which is estimated to be related to the Chinese Taoist feathering and ascension. "[2]At the same time, he also analyzes the image of Jalalpa in relation to contemporary dance creations and explores the intrinsic connection between dance murals and dance creations.

However, these studies have taken the Dunhuang murals as their main focus, and many of the dance images in the Tibetan mural figure thangkas, the dance murals in the Ali Torin Monastery, and so on can actually be seen as targets for Tibetan dance iconology studies.

2. Possibilities and Problems of Constructing Tibetan Dance iconology

The construction of iconology was originally derived from the interpretation of religious images, and the religious doctrine were an important support for iconographers in interpreting images. Tibetan artwork is highly Buddhist, with more obvious iconographic implications than artwork from many areas where Han Chinese live, and it is more likely that scripture can be found to explain these artworks.

For example, in Figure 1: Qing Dynasty Thangka picture in the art of thangka, there is a classic subject of "Miao Yin Tian Nv", which often appears in the art of thangka in the shape of holding a pipa. Originally, the goddess was a river deity worshiped by the ancient Indians, but later became one of the patron deities of Buddhism, in charge of wisdom and talent related to literature. Therefore, the goddess is herself a very proficient art deity. In Tibetan Buddhism, Myojin Buddha Mother is also in charge of Sanskrit, so most of the Tibetans who want to learn Sanskrit will believe in this god. This picture is a Tibetan thangka art survived from the Qing Dynasty, and the picture is divided into three parts. The upper layer is Brahma, who, according to legend, loves the sound of Miaoyin Tian Nv's lute. The middle layer is the Miaoyin Tian Nv, who is sitting on the lotus seat with a pipa in her hand. The head of the pipa is in the shape of a peacock, which matches the peacock of the mount of the Miaoyin Tian Nv. There are two other nymphs at the side, one playing

the flute and the other beating the drum, with delicate postures and a very vivid scene. Water ripples also appear on the top left and right sides of the entire thangka, also symbolizing the relationship between the Miaoyin Tian Nv and the river. Based on these original allusions, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the thangkas depicting the Miaoyin Tian Nv. Moreover, it is also possible to locate the identity of the goddess with a lute in her hand, fair skin, and associated with water and rivers through these original sources.



Figure 1: Qing Dynasty Thangka picture [3]

There are also subjects such as the four celestial Kings of Buddhism, the Dongfang Chiguo Tianwang, who also hold musical instruments in their hands. Its name comes from the Sanskrit word "Dhrta-rastra", which translates as Duoluoza, meaning "Anguo Tian" and "Zhiguo Tian". In Tibetan Buddhist art, the Chiguo Tianwang is often depicted holding a lute or a ruanqin. Therefore, the lute is the main tool for identifying the god. According to the legend, the Chiguo Tianwang is the master of music and is able to convert listeners to Buddhism with the sound of the lute in his hands, such as Figure 2. It can be said that he is a heavenly deity who uses music to teach all sentient beings. The picture below shows the image of the Chiguo Tianwang in Tibetan Thangka art.

More importantly, the spiritual culture of Tibetans developed far before its written records. The surviving dances in Tibetan regions can also be seen as an important part of their spiritual civilization. Therefore, some dynamic images can also be included in the research horizon of Tibetan dance iconology.

The native Tibetan Bon religions and Buddhism have greatly influenced the lives of Tibetans. For example, the study of the Tibetan dance "Qiangmu" is always inseparable from Tibetan Buddhism. Qiangmu includes the Vajra dance, "It is based on the Vajra dance of Indian Tantric Buddhism. The dance of this Vajra dance is characterized by a variety of mysterious 'handprints'. The so-called 'handprints' are a kind of hand posture in which the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas 'symbolize the present vow with the various phases of the ten fingers of the two hands', which is called 'Tantric Seal' in Tantric Buddhism. "[5]

The movements and props of the animal-like dances and drums in Bon religion also have intrinsic meanings. The "Reba", which is famous in Tibet, is a dance performance with drums and

drumsticks as the main props. In the ancient book of the Bon religion, *Golden Luminous Treasures*, the words are recorded: "The drums and 'Xiang' luminous treasures in golden burning are offered to you as decoration" "Some shook the 'Xiang' and some beat the drum." [6] All these records show that drums and incense are very important objects in the Bon religion rituals. This scene of dancing with drums in hand is also reflected on the rock paintings of Ritu, Tibet.

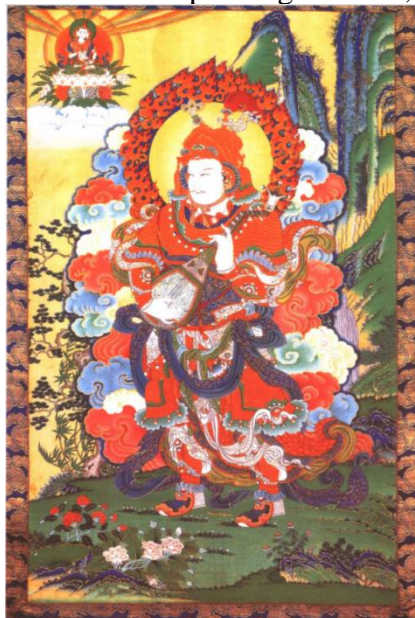


Figure 2: Image of Chiguo Tianwang [4]

In many of the rituals of the Bon religion, a large number of animals are slaughtered for sacrifice. Tibetan scholar Hoffman in his book, *Religion in Tibet*, recorded that "during the ritual, the shaman sprinkled the blood of the slaughtered animals all around, dancing while sprinkling the blood, chanting words under his breath, and from time to time, shaking the drum and dancing with his hands"[4]*The Old Book of Tang - Tuban biography* also contains: "Tuban people every three years will hold a big alliance meeting. At night, they would place wine and food on the altar and kill horses, cows and donkeys as sacrifices". However, with the introduction of Buddhism, the Buddhist concept of not killing animals and the rituals of the Bon religion have come into conflict, and such large-scale killing is no longer common. The Tibetan "animal-like dance" can actually be seen as a remnant of or a substitute for the killing ritual. Therefore, whether it is a static dance image remains or a dynamic dance form, its movements have a deep inner meaning. The dancers' every movement is permeated with their history and beliefs, which are worth exploring.

3. Conclusion

In general, it is very unfortunate that few studies on Tibetan dance images have been conducted today, when iconology has long penetrated into the study of Chinese art history.

However, it is essential to construct Tibetan iconography. As an essential part of dance teaching in China, Tibetan dance has an extremely important role in complementing and promoting dance education in China. Due to the transient nature of dance, plastic art has always been an important material for the study of dance historiography. Therefore, the construction of Tibetan dance history must be inseparable from the support of images. There have been many gaps in the history of Tibetan dance, and in this new era, new historical materials are needed to fill the previous gaps. In view of this, the construction of Tibetan dance iconography can also have a positive impact on the progress of Tibetan dance historiography. Although extremely difficult, the task of constructing

images of Tibetan dance must also be on the agenda.

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