

Inspiration of the Silk Road Fantasy: On the Application of Dunhuang Cultural Elements in the Scene Art of the Film "House of Flying Daggers"

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Abstract: The Mogao Caves in Dunhuang, as a precious crystallization of the intermingling of diverse civilizations along the Silk Road, embody the unique aesthetic traits of the collision and coexistence of Western Regions' customs and Central Plains' civilizations. Their ethereal and fantastical painting language and graceful and dynamic sculptural style embody the aesthetic core of the intermingling of multiple cultures, providing rich and precious artistic nourishment for the creation of Chinese film and television art. When director Zhang Yimou was shooting "House of Flying Daggers" around 2004, he used Dunhuang culture as a strong support for the overall artistic atmosphere of the film, and ingeniously incorporated Dunhuang cultural elements into the film's scene art design, allowing the audience to feel the visual charm of the film's scene art as if they were walking into that colorful era.

1. Introduction

The film "Ambush on All Sides" tells the love story of two constables, Chief Liu and Chief Jin, and a courtesan, "Little Sister", during the late Tang Dynasty. The movie unfolds a touching plot of love and hate entanglement and life and death around the three main characters. The director, inspired by the fantasy of the Silk Road, incorporated elements of Dunhuang culture into the film to create the setting of the Tang Dynasty, demonstrating Zhang Yimou's refined artistic sentiment. However, the director did not simply copy and replicate the murals, the buildings of the Sutra repository, the sculptures, etc. of the Mogao Caves, but transformed the static grotto art into the presentation of dynamic tragic scene images. In addition, the Dunhuang cultural elements presented in the film transform totemic symbols, which were originally used for religious ceremonies and religious prayers, into narrative symbols that fit the themes of love tragedies and power struggles in the film. Therefore, we can explore the ingenious application of Dunhuang cultural elements in the film from four perspectives: the construction of architectural forms, the shaping of character images, the connotations of patterns and designs, and the main color schemes of the film, and enjoy this visual feast of Silk Road illusion together.

2. Dunhuang cultural elements hidden in the architecture: The metaphor in the spatial layout of "Peony Pavilion"

2.1 Characteristics of the spatial structure of the "Peony Pavilion"

The most prominent and luxurious scene in "Ambush on All Sides" is the song and dance performance scene that is concentrated in the first twenty minutes of the film - Peony House. As a concentrated manifestation of the visual feast at the beginning of the film, the director quickly presents the background of the story and the relationships among the three main characters. More importantly, the spatial structure of Peony House conceals the director's carefully designed spatial structure in the style of the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang.

The Peony Pavilion was built by the film's art director, Huo Tingxiao, on a 1:1 scale in Studio 1 of Beijing Film Studio. It took two and a half months and cost more than 2 million yuan. Its form combines the spatial layout of Tang Dynasty teaching pavilions, circular railings and stages, and multi-level corridors and pavilions.

Notably, the director did not show the external architectural form of the Peony Pavilion in the film, but only the luxurious layout of its multi-layered corridors inside, which can't help but remind one of the grotto layout of the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang. The exterior is an ordinary mound or rock wall, located in Sanwei Mountain, but the interior is a different world, with elaborately carved beams and painted pillars, resplendent and magnificent. In combination with the classic case of Cave 331 of the Mogao Caves, as shown in Figure 1, the main room is a square floor plan, which is the main space for repentance. The cave roof is in the shape of a dou, with a peony flower painted in the center and a thousand Buddhas painted on four sides. There is an open niche with a sloping roof on the west wall of the main room, and multiple Bodhisattvas are placed in the niche. The director also ingeniously borrowed the form of the Dunhuang grottoes art style[1], as shown in Figure 2, in the center of the scene, the Peony Pavilion is also composed of a square main performance area, which also symbolizes the space of the grottoes' "main room"; However, at the very front of the performance area is a section of the VIP seating area, which we can see from the shape of the cloister that surrounds the side in the picture. This structure with a corner in front of both cloisters indicates that the area is gradually shrinking forward, suggesting that the "main room" is facing the space of the "shrine" in front. The director also ingeniously set up a "screen wall" installation as tall as an archway in this area. A "screen wall" is a decorative partition wall in a traditional Chinese courtyard that is independent and against the wall, symbolizing warding off evil and bringing good fortune. Corresponding to the scene design in the film, this "screen wall" covered with peonies also symbolizes the Bodhisattvas in the shrines in the grotto, with divine light.

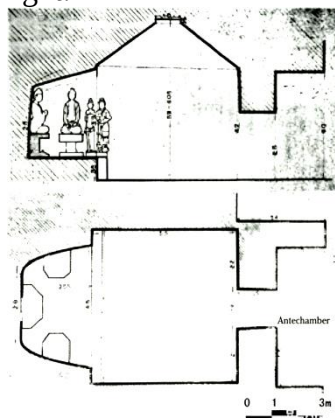


Fig.1. Mogao Grottoes 331 floor plan from <https://www.cnki.net>



Fig.2. Conceptual design of the Peony Pavilion scene from <https://www.cnki.net>

2.2 Metaphorical details of spatial installations

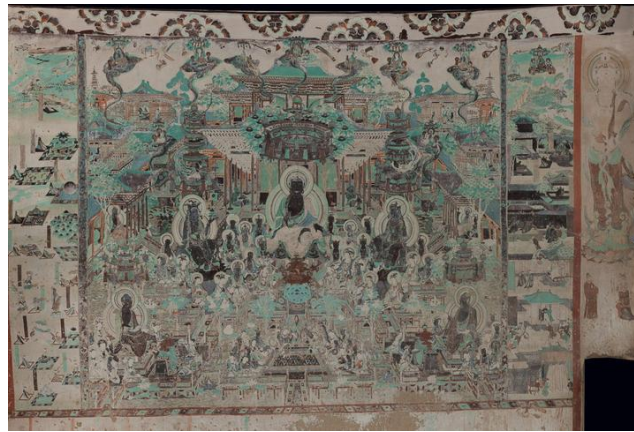


Fig.3. Murals on the north wall of Cave 172 of Mogao Grottoes from <https://www.cnki.net>

Looking at the entire layout of the Peony Pavilion, what catches the eye are rows of corridors and verandas surrounding it. The inspiration for these elements also comes from the Dunhuang murals, such as the scene of the celestial banquet in the northern wall mural "The Transformation of the Western Pure Land" in Cave 172 of the Mogao Caves, as shown in Figure 3. Three Buddhas are located at the core of the picture, enjoying the performance of the banquet with a kind and solemn demeanor. Surrounding the Bodhisattva and Buddha are the palaces of the Heavenly Court; On the stage below the Buddha are various performers such as flying fairies and musicians. Most of the figures in the picture are on the water platforms, which are connected by ladders, Bridges and corridors. Lotus leaves float in the vast expanse of water, on which human figures can be faintly distinguished. Some lotus flowers are fully open, some are just bearing fruit, corresponding to the concept of "nine grades of rebirth" in Buddhism[2]. As a result, director Zhang Yimou ingeniously shaped the entire Mudanfang scene into a greenish-blue tone and decorated it with various green vine carvings, which corresponds to the Western Paradise depicted in the Dunhuang murals, where green lotus leaves and various vine plants are everywhere. The scene he created is very extraordinary and full of spirituality.

In addition, the corridors and verandas in the Peony Pavilion symbolize the Bridges that connect order and propriety. In the frescoes of Cave 172, the performers' stage is separated from the area where the gods and Buddhas sit, and beneath the platform is a pool, with Bridges and corridors connecting the platforms. Director Zhang Yimou also drew on the perspective of this spatial layout, while the Peony Pavilion was decorated with double-layered corridors and cloisters to shape the

entire scene. In this way, the Tang Dynasty wine guests played by the extra actors could perform in the corridor, occupying a secondary position, while the protagonist "Little Sister" played by Zhang Ziyi could take the advantageous position in the middle to perform the spiritual dance, and the dignitaries could watch the performance from the front screen wall area. The director made the scene well-organized by adding corridors and verandas, with a clear distinction between the main and the secondary, and in line with the perspective layout in the Dunhuang murals.

In a special bathing room on the side of the Peony Pavilion, as shown in Figure 4, the director has arranged and decorated many purple beaded curtains around the sunken bath, which sway and shine with a purple glow, crystal clear. This scene mainly shows the intimate fight between "Little Sister" and Chief Inspector Liu in the bath. The two splash water from the bath and sprinkle it on the screen. The glittering water in the bath and the reflective purple pearl curtain make the entire scene particularly radiant and colorful. In the Dunhuang murals, prominent clay figurines are often placed between the four walls of the cave and at the junctions with the four slopes of the cave roof, which look like wooden strips. The result of this treatment is that the beaded patterns at the corners of the four walls and the four slopes of the cave roof are combined together, making the cave an organic whole, completely forming a tent-shaped palace building[3]. These circular "beaded patterns" are as dazzling as pearls and are often used as embellishments in Dunhuang murals to make the picture more vivid and charming. The director also ingeniously uses this element, with the purple swaying beaded curtain and the water of the bath as accompaniments, to give the entire scene a sense of intoxication, dreaminess and ethereality. At the same time, it implies that the love of the protagonist "little sister" is an illusory bubble.



Fig.4. Bathroom Room Scene(from House of Flying Daggers(2004))

3. Dunhuang cultural elements in character designs

3.1 Makeup and styling features of the female lead "Little Sister"

The protagonist "Little Sister", played by Zhang Ziyi, is a member of the Flying Dagger Sect and needs to frequently disguise herself as an undercover agent of different identities to spy on the intelligence of the imperial court. In Peony House, her disguised role is the top dancer "Little Sister", who needs to rely on her exquisite dancing skills to attract high-ranking officials and nobles, and gradually build close relationships with them to spy on the relevant intelligence. Therefore, Little Sister is the signboard of Peony House. To attract guests, she needs to be heavily made-up and dressed up gorgeously, as shown in Figure 5. Director Zhang Yimou also drew inspiration from the features of Tang Dynasty female donors in the Mogao Caves murals, such as the female donor figure in Cave 45 of the Mogao Caves. During the Tang Dynasty, in the struggle for the integration of the

three religions, Confucianism ultimately achieved a decisive victory, leading to the mainstream of women's aesthetic taste being "gentle and kind", along with the influence of freedom and equality, freedom and ease, and acting on one's own will, forming the unique aesthetic taste of women in the Tang Dynasty. In the film, the little sister's facial makeup is the classic Tang Dynasty "white makeup", with a thick layer of white lead powder as the base[4]. On top of the white makeup, the makeup artist applied a gradient of peach-pink blush to large areas of her cheeks, and added a diamond-shaped five-petal red flower hairpin in the middle of her eyebrows, which made her look very beautiful and charming, as if she were a flying celestial being stepping out of a mural. In addition, the director has carefully designed a high bun for her, paired with a gilded multi-layered stepping flower crown, which allows her to sway along with the steps of the dance, presenting a graceful posture as if she were flying down to earth.



Fig.5. Makeup and styling of the little sister from House of Flying Daggers(2004)

3.2 The rich poses of the little sister performing the "water sleeve dance"

The most eye-catching part of the film is the dance performed by the little sister for the Golden chief at the Peony Pavilion. In terms of costume design, the director deliberately added "water sleeves" to the little sister's costume. In ancient times, people would shake the ribbons on their costumes when participating in sacrificial ceremonies, celebrations and other activities to convey their inner emotions. This was the earliest form of "water sleeves". The soul of Dunhuang art is the flying silk, and the flowing and curling ribbons are the signature language of the murals. The crew transformed the flying silk ribbon in the mural into a three-meter-long water sleeve that could dance and fight[5]. In the film, the younger sister, dressed in a stone-green dance costume, performs the solo dance "The Immortal's Direction", and the protagonist's younger sister performs the water sleeve dance through delicate wrist and arm movements, presenting a variety of postures, sometimes circling and dancing, sometimes leaping and soaring. As she spins and dances in place, the water sleeves follow her body movements layer upon layer, as if she were a flying celestial hovering and dancing above the palace of the Heavenly court, scattering the petals she carries on the earth. The director used a wraparound camera to portray the girl's dance, presenting a 360-degree panoramic view of her graceful movements, as if she were a fairy descending from the heavens.

In addition, the performance of the water sleeve dance is soft yet strong. In the film, the girl first seduces the heart of the Golden consman through the water sleeve dance, then takes the golden consman's sword on the table with the water sleeve when he is not ready. When the golden consman discovers it, the girl instantly changes her dance and uses the water sleeve to wrap around the golden consman's sword as her invisible hand to prepare to stab him. This fantastical plot arrangement is a common approach by director Zhang Yimou, mainly to embody the traditional Chinese Taoist philosophy of the combination of hardness and softness, softness with strength, and the interplay of Yin and Yang, which is also the graceful and charming aspect of the flying apsaras in the Dunhuang

murals. The director's borrowing of Dunhuang cultural elements is just right, and the character image is also quite well shaped.

4. Dunhuang cultural elements in the patterns and designs

4.1 Treasure image pattern and entwined peony Tang grass pattern

It is notable that when the little sister performed her solo dance "The Immortal's Way" at Peony Pavilion, director Zhang Yimou deliberately used many panoramic shots to show the little sister's dance and the huge "treasure pattern" on the stage carpet, as shown in Figure 6. On the ceiling of the Dunhuang murals, there are many paintings of the "treasure image" pattern. The "treasure image" flower pattern combines natural forms such as flowers, vines, and curled leaves in its constituent elements, and through artistic refinement and recombination, it forms a unique decorative pattern. A single flower usually consists of three parts: the center, the petals, and the calyx, as shown in Figure 7. The shape of the flower often overflows the circular composition, presenting a dynamic balance of centripetal and centrifugal forces[6].

In the film, this huge gem pattern, as a sacred totem of the Buddhist system, also conceals director Zhang Yimou's thoughts on life and death, nirvana, and transcendence. A closer look reveals that the image pattern in the film is a huge circular mass composed of multiple entwined peony patterns, peony patterns and butterfly patterns. In the Tang Dynasty silk flower pattern, the peony pattern is one of the constituent elements, and its flower shape is full, precise, magnificent and grand. With the development of Tang art, combinations of peony patterns and animal patterns emerged, and the animal patterns were all in pairs. The combination of peony patterns and pairs of animal patterns symbolizes "peony wealth and honor" while expressing people's yearning for a happy life. The entwined peony Tang grass pattern appears as a signature mural decoration in Cave 322 of the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang[7]. Director Zhang Yimou also borrowed this pattern to shape the details of the Peony Workshop stage carpet, as shown in Figure 6, the entwined peony branches interweave with each other, the pattern is neat and symmetrical, and together with the butterfly pattern, they form a huge concentric circle, presenting the form of flower and leaf interlocking and recurring. It has a unique charm. And this seemingly exquisite pattern layout also hints at the love entanglement between the little sister and the chief constable Kim and the chief constable Liu: a long-lasting love that is deeply deceived, a fate that plays tricks and fate that is cruel. The little sister is like this entwined peony, blooming beautifully but withering quickly after blooming, which makes people sigh.



Fig. 6. Peonies stage carpet from House of Flying Daggers(2004)



Fig.7. Circular diagram of the flower of the phoenix from <https://www.cnki.net>

4.2. The deeper meaning of the butterfly pattern

Among the precious patterns of the Peony Pavilion stage carpet, there are 18 blue butterfly patterns forming a concentric circle, as shown in Figure 6. Little Sister dances gracefully in the middle of the concentric circle formed by the butterflies, and her blue dress and flowing water sleeves make her look like the leader of the group of butterflies, like the king of all butterflies. In the Dunhuang mural system, butterflies are usually a classic decorative pattern that coexists with important scenes such as Bodhisattvas, flying apsaras, and auspicious clouds, possessing the fine qualities of being extraordinary, light and transparent. But the butterfly pattern here also implies another meaning. On the surface, the butterfly pattern sets off the light dance and graceful figure of the little sister. In fact, it also alludes to the seemingly passionate and splendid love between the little sister and the golden constable, which is actually fragile, illusory and without foundation, as small and weak as this blue butterfly, floating with the wind.

Meanwhile, the butterfly patterns arranged in a circular pattern like concentric circles form a kind of "ambush on all sides" enveloping image. Eighteen blue butterflies are connected end to end around the little sister, forming a ring that she cannot break free from. The main character, the little sister, is tightly surrounded at the center of this concentric circle, which also precisely implies this seemingly magnificent and flower-filled Peony Garden. In fact, it is a cage that binds her body and mind. Because the little sister is an undercover agent, her real name is not mentioned throughout the film. She is just a pawn in the "Flying Knife Gate" gang in this tumultuous age, like the blue butterfly in this predicament, she has nowhere to escape and can only be manipulated like a marionette.

5. The specific presentation of the "Five-color view" in Dunhuang culture elements in the film

Huo Tingxiao, the art director of "Ambush on All Sides" on the Mudanfang stage, said: "We used 'Dunhuang colors' to tell a story about the undercover agent" [8]. He also emphasized the traditional Dunhuang five colors, which are based on the traditional philosophy of "five colors with five elements" each having its own cultural metaphor, and combined this metaphor with the narrative thread of the film, where white is reality, green is memory, blue is fantasy, and color becomes the core that drives the story. In the Dunhuang "Five Colors View" system, both the Buddhist doctrine of "five colors correspond to five Buddhas" and the world view of "Five Colors View" (cyan, red, yellow, white, and black correspond to the five elements) in traditional Central Plains culture are incorporated. As a result, in the film, director Zhang Yimou's design of the scenes in the early stage and the color grading in the later stage all reflect the concept of the Dunhuang "Five Colors View". [9]

5.1 Cyan tones (stone green, stone blue)

In the Dunhuang mineral pigment system, stone green and stone blue are the most expensive, purer, and highest-grade core colors, as they are often used in the depiction of the robes of Bodhisattvas, flying apsaras, and donors in Dunhuang murals. Cyan represents a peaceful and serene fantasy. In the film, the little girl starts wearing a dancing dress in stone green, replicating the color scheme of the flying apsaras in the Dunhuang murals, allowing the audience to quickly immerse themselves in a peaceful and serene fantasy and be attracted by the little girl's charming temperament. But the bluish-colored scenes and props in the film, seemingly gentle and pure like jade, are actually intended by the director to imply that beneath the bluish-green appearance lies, scheming and disguise, and this bluish-green just happens to trigger the audience's imagination.

5.2 Crimson tones (vermilion)

In traditional Chinese colors, red, originally meaning fiery red, originated from the ancient people's worship of the sun and fire, was one of the earliest colors worshipped by the Chinese ancestors, symbolizing dignity, solemnity and authority. In the Dunhuang murals, vermilion is often used to depict the robes of monks, symbolizing the breaking of attachments and distractions, representing light. In the film, the director shot the outdoor scenes on the Ukrainian grassland at the time of the transition from autumn to winter. There are several distant scenes with red-toned trees, and the red-toned plants and trees all over the mountains represent the intense love between the little sister and the golden constable, burning like a bright flame, but it is always an obsession. The love between the two is fleeting due to the reality.

5.3 Yellow (earthy yellow, ochre)

Earthy yellow and ochre are the original base colors of the Mogao Caves' cliffs, representing the all-encompassing and generous spirit of the earth, and are the most simple and authentic colors of Dunhuang culture. In Dunhuang murals, yellow is often used to depict the round light, face, skin and other parts of the Buddha statues and flying apsaras, as well as the brocade, headwear, jewels and other costumes of the figures. It can be seen that the yellow tone symbolizes light and wisdom, as well as the spirit of carrying all things with virtue. In a field of withering, earth-yellow wild chrysanthemums in the film, Captain Jin and his younger sister express their love for each other and perform intimate scenes in this earth-yellow wild chrysanthemum field, representing the purity and authenticity of their love.[11]

5.4 Black (Ink black)

Black is a common color used in Dunhuang murals to outline lines, define forms, and organize the picture(Fig.8). It represents order and rule, as well as the calm and rational quality of the subject. The most frequent appearance of black tones in the film is in the prison. When the little sister shows a flaw in the Peony Pavilion, Chief Jin and Chief Liu take her back to the yamen Prison. The scenes and props of the prison here are dominated by black tones, creating a solemn and dignified atmosphere. At the same time, the large area of black in the prison scene also represents the darkness and deception deep in human nature. The little sister is now dressed in a dark black prison uniform, and she is also shackled with heavy black chains, so the black tone that appears in the film also implies the little sister's difficult situation, and such a depressing and dark scene makes one breathless.[10]



Fig.8. The Little sister in Prison scene from House of Flying Daggers(2004)

5.5 White (snow-white)

The white tone is the core color in Dunhuang murals depicting the skin of Buddha statues and the void background, symbolizing purity and completeness, ethereality and transcendence of the mind, and is the highest visual expression in Dunhuang art (Fig.9). The large area of white in the film appears in the final "battle" scene, when it suddenly snows heavily in the sky and the battle between Chief Jin and Chief Liu lasts for a long time, and the snow quickly covers a large grassland, and the world is instantly white, and finally the little sister is stabbed to death by Chief Liu with a flying knife. This ending is rather abrupt. It's also the reason why director Zhang Yimou was criticized by the audience back then. But Zhang Yimou might have wanted to use such a holy scene as snow to express that the younger sister has qualities as pure as snowflakes, but in this cruel gang fight, the younger sister can only become a victim. Therefore, the white tone in the film also represents nothingness and extinction, represents a state of liberation.[11]

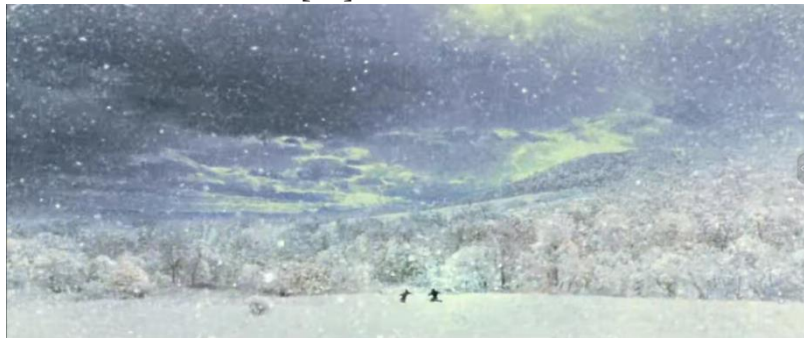


Fig.9. Confrontation scene in snow from House of Flying Daggers(2004)

6. Conclusion

"Ten-faced Ambush" undoubtedly offers the audience a visual art feast that blends scenes and emotions. Director Zhang Yimou transforms the ancient and elegant Dunhuang cultural elements into a flowing screen illusion, presenting the Dunhuang civilization that has been buried for a thousand years artistically to the audience through the form of film. The cultural elements of Dunhuang run through the narrative and visual art expression throughout the film, from the stage space of the "Peony Pavilion" built by imitating the style of the Dunhuang grottoes, to the character's temperament shaped by drawing on the artistic images of Bodhisattvas and flying apsaras in Dunhuang murals, to the expression of different environmental atmospheres presented by totem patterns and the "five-color View" of Dunhuang. It becomes an important carrier of love, hate and entanglement among the three main characters. Zhang Yimou's approach of blending the ancient and the modern

has created a distinctive Oriental art aesthetic in "Ambush on All Sides", and provides a good example for future generations on how to draw on traditional culture, reasonably transform traditional culture into the narrative language of films, and how to tell local stories well. When the thousand-year-old silk Road culture and the feuds of the martial arts world overlap on the screen, director Zhang Yimou brings a feast of fantasy to the audience while giving new vitality to the martial arts feuds and conveying to the audience the profound and distant romantic sentiment unique to Eastern aesthetics.

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