

# The Connection between Dunhuang Grottoes Painting and Thangka in the Middle and Late Tang Dynasty

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**Abstract:** From 786 to 848 AD, Mogao caves newly excavated 57 caves, plus Yulin Grottoes No.15 and No.25 in Anxi County, The Western 1000-Buddha Cave No.15, a total of 60 caves, mural themes are richer than the previous generation in the past 60 years, the Dunhuang mural paintings have been painted the most, the image of mandalas has increased, and many new portrait paintings, screen paintings and Tubo costumes have appeared. The Sutra-illustrations in the Dunhuang murals are similar to the Thangka composition, and the mandala diagram is closely related to the Thangka theme. Dunhuang grotto painting in the middle and late Tang Dynasty is closely related to Thangka, and the painting has a deep origin.

**Keywords:** Middle and late Tang Dynasty; Dunhuang Grottoes; Grotto paintings; Thangka

## 1. Introduction

From 786 to 848 AD more than fifty caves were excavated in Mogao caves<sup>[1]</sup>, plus the 15 caves and 25 caves of Yulin Grottoes in the same period, and the 15th cave of the West Thousand Buddha Caves, which was the period of Tubo occupation of Dunhuang in the middle and late Tang Dynasty, and the Dunhuang grottoes showed artistic characteristics different from other periods. In view of the many studies of portraits and styles in the paintings of Dunhuang grottoes in the middle and late Tang Dynasty, Yan Wenru, Shi Weixiang, Duan Wenjie, Li Qiqiong, Fan Jinshi, Zhao Qinglan and others in the 1980s and 1990s discussed in detail the demarcation, background, style and technique of the grotto murals, and a large number of Dunhuang researchers and doctors such as Sha Wutian, Zhao Xiaoxing, Ning Qiang, Lu Li, Li Ling, and Sangji Tashi continued to enrich the art research of Dunhuang Grottoes in the middle and late Tang Dynasty.

## 2. Overview of Dunhuang Grottoes Painting in the Middle and Late Tang Dynasty

There are many Dunhuang grottoes in the middle and late Tang Dynasty, and in 1994, Fan Jinshi and Zhao Qinglan published "Phased Research on Mogao caves during the Tubo Occupation Period" detailed the early and late Tang Dynasty Tubo occupation of Dunhuang caves, a total of 57 Mogao caves excavated during this period, of which Cave No.235 is actually Cave No.234. The specific stages are as shown in Table 1<sup>[2]</sup>, and the actual number of caves in the table is 56, plus the 15th and 25th caves of Yulin Grottoes in the same period, and the 15th cave of Dunhuang West Thousand Buddha Caves. In addition, there were 38 caves that were rebuilt when Tubo occupied Dunhuang in the middle of the Tang Dynasty. The numbers are: 23, 26, 32, 33, 42, 44, 45, 47, 49, 91, 115, 116, 117, 126, 129, 166, 176, 179, 180, 185, 188, 199, 202, 205, 212, 216, 218, 220, 225, 285, 286, 320, 335, 340, 379, 384, 386, 392<sup>[3]</sup>. Dunhuang grotto painting in the middle and late Tang Dynasty is very rich, the grotto mural themes at this time have 5 categories, namely portrait painting, warp painting, historical painting, provider portrait, decorative pattern class, the mural theme is more abundant than the previous generation, mandala image increased, and many new Bodhi paintings, screen paintings and Tubo costume provider images appeared.

*Table 1: Phased table of Mogao Caves during the Tubo occupation of Dunhuang in the Tang Dynasty*

	typical cave	Insert into the cave	Year Cave	Era
early	93,111,112,132,133,150,154,181,183,184,190,191,193,197,198,200,201,222,447,470,472,473,474,475	81,151,155,224		In the 740 of the 8th century to 9th century
late anterior segment	143,144,141,145,147,157,158,159,169,231,232,237,238,240,360,369,468	136,142,235,363,367,368	365,231	Early 9th century to around 839
late backend	7,358,359,361			In the 840 of the 9th century

In the Dunhuang murals of the middle and late Tang Dynasty, many Tubo figures appeared, including Zanpu's guards wearing tiger skins and heavenly kings, providers, and real life scenes and secular customs of the Tang Dynasty.

During the Tubo period, there were cave paintings by Zampu: such as the Zampu statue in the east wall of Cave No.159 of Mogao caves "Zampu of Buddhist pilgrims during the Tubo period", the statue of Tubo Zampu in the north wall of Mogao caves No.158 "Emperor Raising Sorrows", and the Tubo Zampu statue in Cave No.237, Cave No.360 and other cave changes in Mogao caves.

The murals wearing the image of Tubo "big insect skin" include: the attendant wearing a tiger skin jacket and mink apron behind Zangpu in Cave No.231 of Mogao caves, the statue of the Northern Heavenly King wearing tiger skin in Cave No.205 of Mogao caves, the samurai wearing tiger skin coats and wearing tiger skin hats in Cave No.367 of Mogao caves, the King Kong Lux wearing tiger skins in Cave No.250 of Mogao caves, and the inscription of the provider of Cave No.144 of Mogao caves "The daughter of Governor Cangcao of Guazhou who joined the army in the gold and silver room to tell the daughter of Tiger Pi Kanggong...Single-minded cultivation" Chinese inscription exemplifies Tubo's unique "big worm skin" official title system attire [4].

Tubo costumed offering portraits: Cave No.220 of Mogao Caves has 2 statues of worshippers kneeling in Tubo costumes, and Tubo costumed offering portraits in caves No.225, No.359 and No.361. Murals depicting scenes of life in the Tubo period, such as the intermarriage "wedding" in the north wall of Cave No.25 of Yulin Grottoes "Maitreya Sutra Tubo Wedding Map", shows the harmonious customs and customs of the people.

There are many studies of Tibetan characters, backgrounds, and clothing characteristics, such as: H.E. Richardson, Karmay Heather, Dr.Amy Heller, Duan Wenjie, Li Qiqiong, Sha Wutian, Zhao Xiaoxing, Wei Jianpeng, Ma De, Yang Qingfan, Xie Jing, etc. In the murals of the Tubo occupation of Dunhuang in the middle and late Tang Dynasty, many figures and costumes wearing Tubo costumes appear, revealing the cultural exchange and artistic integration of the Dunhuang caves during the Tubo reign.

The Thangka is a kind of Chinese painting that emerged in the seventh century, the modern Thangka and the Dunhuang Tibetan Scripture Cave excavated flag painting, similar in shape.

Compared with the Tang Dynasty silk banner paintings "Lotus Hand Guanyin" and "Guanyin Bodhisattva" excavated from the Tibetan scripture cave in Cave No.17 of Dunhuang, and the Tang Dynasty "Lotus Hand Bodhisattva" banner paintings excavated from Jiru Lakang Monastery in Shannan, Tibet, the figures and styles of the two are very similar. Similar statues exist in large numbers in Dunhuang murals in the Tang Dynasty, and the influence of Dunhuang art on Thangka art is obvious, which is directly related to the formation of later Thangka, [5] The Thangka that is also a painting art is closely related to Dunhuang cave painting and has deep roots.

The Dunhuang Grottoes during the Tubo occupation period of the Tang Dynasty were shaped along the previous dynasty, and the mural themes were richer than those of the previous generation, and the Sutra-illustrations and mandala images increased. During the reign of Tibet, Dunhuang murals were mainly Sutra-illustrations, and the compositions and mandala images in these Sutra-illustrations were closely related to thangkass.

### **3. In the Dunhuang grottoes painting of the middle and late Tang Dynasty, the Sutra-illustrations are linked to the thangka**

Maitreya Sutra-illustrations

The Sutra-illustrations in the Dunhuang murals are the story illustrations. The murals of the Dunhuang Grottoes during the Tubo occupation period in the middle and late Tang Dynasty were mainly Sutra-illustrations, which increased a lot compared with the previous period and had new developments. During this period, the number of Sutra-illustrations of Dunhuang murals was more than the previous generation, and the classics of each school were continuously introduced to Dunhuang, and the subject matter increased, with a total of 169 shops of 17 kinds of warp changing themes, 26 shops of Amitayur-Hhyana Sutra, 20 shops of Medicine Master Sutra Change, 20 shops of Maitreya Sutra Change, 17 shops of Amitabha Sutra Change, the above four meridian change charts, and the Reward Sutra Changing Chart, the Golden Guangming Sutra Transformation Chart, the Diamond Sutra Transformation Chart, the Huayan Sutra Transformation Map, the LengJia Sutra Transformation Chart, the Heavenly Question Sutra Changing Chart, and the Siyi Brahma Question Sutra Changing Chart 7 kinds of new themes in this period<sup>[6]</sup>. There are more and more themes of scripture changes in the grotto murals, from one shop to three or four shops. For example, there are 9 types of scripture paintings in Cave No.159 of Mogao caves, and 12 types of scripture paintings in Cave No.231 of Mogao caves. The size of a single mural of the same size area varies with the layout changes as it becomes smaller. One wall is divided into upper and lower parts. The upper part is painted with 2 to 4 warp drawings, and the lower part is painted with several screen paintings that echo the upper warp drawings and play an explanatory role. In general, in the middle and late Tang Dynasty, the number and size of the paintings became larger, and the size became smaller. It was not as large and atmospheric as the whole wall of the murals in the prosperous Tang Dynasty, but the structure was more rigorous and the style was more delicate.

### ***3.1. Comparison of the Three-stage Composition of the Dunhuang Grottoes in the Middle and Late Tang Dynasty***

In the middle and late Tang and Tubo occupation period, the fresco techniques became more and more mature. The composition of Jingbian paintings was mainly a three-stage structure, with the main figure as the center, forming a standardized style of primary and secondary order, which was the characteristic of the era of Jingbian paintings at this time. Variation paintings of Guan Wuliang Shoujing, Pharmacist scriptures, Amitabha scriptures, and Maitreya scriptures accounted for a large proportion of the murals in the caves during the Tubo rule.

Viewing the Boundless Life Sutra and changing the scriptures depicts the heavenly scene of Immeasurable Life. In the middle is Immeasurable Life, Bodhisattva, etc. Surrounded by people sitting on the Seven Treasures Platform, this is the middle section. At the front stage, everyone dances and music, there is a pool in front of the stage, in the pool, mandarin ducks, Crane, lotus flower, boy among flowers, this is the lower part. The upper part of the painting has pavilions and pavilions, the uppermost sky has a Bodhisattva living in auspicious clouds, and the Mogao caves No.112, No.148, No.172 and other caves all have the view of the immeasurable longevity scriptures. The Guimei Museum in France collects a silk painting "Viewing the Changes of the Infinite Shoujing" unearthed in the Dunhuang Cangjing Cave in the late Tang Dynasty. The height is 141cm and the width is 84.2cm.

In the painting of the Pharmacist Sutra, the pharmacist is in the center, and the Sunlight Bodhisattva, Moonlight Bodhisattva, and saints live around the central platform. The upper part is the middle section. The front stage is the dancers, the 12 generals and the bodhisattvas. This is the upper section, such as the "Pharmacist's Classic Changed Map" on the north wall of Cave No.148 and Cave No.112 of Mogao caves. The content and composition of the silk painting "Pure Land of Medicine in Disguise" on the No. 17 Tibetan Sutra Cave are consistent with the murals.

The Amitabha Sutra is similar to the Infinite Life Sutra and the Medicine Master Sutra, and the main deity is Amitabha.

The composition of the Maitreya Sutra is also divided into three parts. The middle part is the gathering scene of Maitreya and the Bodhisattva, the King of Heaven, and the Lishi. The upper part is the Tiangong where Maitreya's gods live.

The middle section of the painting is centered on the main deity, surrounded by bodhisattvas and people, with dancing and music below, and stories such as the preface and filial piety in the "Great Convenience", and the top of the painting is a landscape, interspersed with various types of landscape Stories, such as "The Changed Picture of the Classic of Repayment" on the north wall of Cave No.112. The silk painting of the Book of Repayment in Disguise is the same as the mural.

The painting depicts the scene of Sakyamuni in the King's House on Mount Qiju. In the painting, with Sakyamuni as the center and surrounded by many figures closely, with the platform dancers and

accompaniment in front occupying the middle and lower part of the picture. There are many, the upper part of the scriptures is the building and the people on the cloud, such as the “Golden Bright scriptures” on the north side of the east wall of Cave No.158.

The first 4 types of sutras are the most frequently used murals during the Tubo occupation period in the middle and late Tang Dynasty. The 6 types of sutras are all three-segment types. The scenes are grand. The center is centered on the main deity, surrounded by many Bodhisattvas. Among the disciples, the main deity best reflects its highest status and identity, followed by the Bodhisattva, followed by the Heavenly King and the Lishi. The lower part of the picture is the dancers and accompaniment. The dancers in the Dunhuang frescoes in the middle and late Tang and Tubo occupation period are graceful and natural. For example, the dancers rebounding the pipa are the most representative images in Dunhuang. Two platforms are drawn on both sides or in front, each with a main statue and many figures, and the lower section also has people arranged in sequence. The upper section is mainly for the attic building, the people on the cloud, the sky and so on. This three-stage composition, with the main deity as the center, constitutes a standard composition with distinct primary and secondary positions, which is similar to the concept of size and hierarchy of characters in Yan Liben's “Bulian” and “Pictures of Emperors of Past Dynasties” of the Tang Dynasty. The composition of the Three Realms is very similar.

The three-stage composition in the thangka is also very grand, including heaven, earth and hell. The main deity in the middle is the largest in size and the most prominent. This is the middle room. The lower part of the thangka paints the wilderness of hell, with images of Rakshasa ghosts, demons, demons, dakinis, and supporters. The upper part paints the sky, the deity and its retribution body, incarnation, and bodhisattvas are equal to the clouds. For example, Langkajie's thangkas “Elysium” and “Blessed Fields of the Path of Bodhi” in the 17th century belong to the composition of the Three Realms, with hundreds or thousands of figures, which are densely arranged.

### ***3.2. A comparison of the central composition of the Dunhuang Grottoes in the middle and late Tang Dynasty and the central composition of the Thangka***

In the middle and late Tang and Tubo occupation period, there is another type of frescoes in the Dunhuang Grottoes as the center composition. Cave No.161 of Mogao caves, the center of the cave is an altar. There are still statues of donors in Tubo costumes on the altar. We can see its age. The top of the cave is a shop of Avalokitesvara mandala, and each of the four batches has a shop of Avalokitesvara mandala. The east wall is a group of Luoia Mountain Guanyin, the south of the door and the north of the door are the Guanyin scripture change, the Bodhisattva 12 groups, the west wall, the south wall, and the north wall are the eleven-sided Guanyin mandala, the Manjusri scripture change, the Puxian scripture change, surrounded by 28 groups of Bodhisattvas, around the top of the cave, the caisson well with thousands of hands and thousands of eyes, and 10 groups of Guanyin Sutras. This cave is a grotto built by Zhang Yichao to commemorate his teacher Facheng<sup>[7]</sup>. The whole cave mural is divided into countless small pictures. Each group of pictures is dominated by a Bodhisattva, which is located in the center, the largest in size, and the main body. Each small image is a center composition method.

The silk paintings unearthed from the Dunhuang Jingjing Cave as the center composition include the silk paintings “Amitabha: The Eight Great Bodhisattvas” and the “Dharma Talks under the Tree” numbered ch.0074 by Stein, and the silk paintings of the British Museum numbered ch.0032. “The Variation of the Medicine Master Sutra”, a piece of “Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva with Thousand Hands and Thousand Eyes” collected by the Guimet Museum in France. On the second floor of the central hall of the Jokhang Temple, the Tubo period murals “The Great Sun Tathagata and the Lion's Roar Avalokitesvara” and “Six-armed Avalokitesvara” are the central composition. The Guanyin of the Arms takes the six-armed Guanyin as the main deity, surrounded by Bodhisattvas, Feitian and Dragon Maidens.

The most common composition in the thangka is the central composition, the main statue is centered, occupying the largest size, the characters and scenes are distributed around the perimeter, the storyline is unfolded on the left and right of the main figure, and the rich and complex characters and scenes occupy a small position, and the primary and secondary are clear. In the thangka, the main figure of the central composition can be bodhisattvas, vajras, protectors, gurus, etc. For example, the main figure Guanyin sits cross-legged on a lotus flower in the Thangka “Guanyin and its incarnation of the lotus hand bodhisattva statue” excavated in Blackwater City, the main figure Guanyin sits on the lotus flower, in the middle position, surrounded by various small statues of bodhisattvas. The 17th-century Lang Kajie's thangka “Shakyamuni” is painted in the center with Shakyamuni as the main figure, surrounded by many small people.

#### 4. The mandala diagram in the Dunhuang grottoes in the middle and late Tang Dynasty is linked to the thangka

In the middle and late Tang Dynasty, many new mandala themes were added to the Sutra-illustrations, such as the more eight bodhisattva mandalas, the thousand hands and thousand eyes of Guanyin, the thousand hands and a thousand bowls of Manjushri, the Ruyi wheel Guanyin, the non-empty Guanyin, the eleven-sided Guanyin and other bodhisattva statues.

In 753 AD, the Hexi Jiedu made Ge Shuhan invite him to go to Hexi, and Guanyin Bodhisattva images prevailed in the Dunhuang Grottoes. After the Tubo occupation of Dunhuang in the middle and late Tang Dynasty, the cave Guanyin statue generally continued the system of statues of bodhisattvas in the Central Plains<sup>[8]</sup>. In the ancient Tibetan texts, it is recorded that in the 8th century, Samye Monastery was the center of the construction of four major grottoes in the southeast, northwest and northwest, of which Mogao cave No.161 is the northern grotto of the four major grottoes, and the Tibetan literature records of Cave No.161 explain the reason for the large number of Mandala Guanyin images in the Dunhuang Grottoes in the middle and late Tang Dynasty<sup>[9]</sup>.

Mogao Cave No.161 are painted with Guanyin images, directly above the algae well there is a shop of "Thousand Hands and Thousand Eyes Guanyin", Guanyin sits on the lotus seat, 8 main arms in front, the rest of the hands form a circle in the back, each hand is painted with eyes, becoming a thousand hands and a thousand eyes Guanyin statue, four batches of each Guanyin a shop, and then 50 groups of bodhisattvas are covered with caves, many bodhisattvas are densely arranged, and the weather is grand.

In addition to the cave No.161 of Mogao caves, the north wall of the cave No.14 of Mogao caves has 3 Guanyin Sutras of "Jinggang Pestle Guanyin", "Ruyi Wheel Guanyin", "Thousand Hands and Thousand Bowls Manjushri", Guanyin holding a vajra pestle on the lotus seat in the middle of the "Jinggang Pestle Guanyin", behind the head, backlit, a canopy above the pillar behind the screen, surrounded by bodhisattvas, celestial dances, music, and hair care Vajra sits on both sides.

"Ruyi Wheel Guanyin Diagram" Guanyin has 6 arms, sitting on the lotus flower on the side of the head, holding the head with one hand, holding the wheel high in the other, holding the seal with both hands on the chest, putting both hands on the side, with a canopy on the top of the head, surrounded by the four heavenly kings, the protector of the Vajrayogini, etc. The two bodhisattvas in the pool under the lotus seat;

"Thousand Hands and Thousand Bowls Manjushri" Lord Manjushri Bodhisattva Thousand Hands Holding a Thousand Bowls, Thousand Bowls There are a thousand people, a thousand hands surround the back into a circle, the Bodhisattva has a canopy on top of his head, there are flying heavens, bodhisattvas, dependents, protectors on both sides, under the lotus seat is Mount Meru, the mountainside is coiled with 2 Dragon Kings, under the mountain is the sea, and in the middle of the sea are 2 Asura Kings and Night Forks. The three Guanyin paintings are all central compositions, such images are full of mystery, and the Dunhuang characters appear to be mild-mannered.

There are also such pictures of silk paintings unearthed from the Dunhuang Tibetan Scripture Cave during the reign of Tubo, such as the British Museum's collection of "Thousand Hands and Thousand Eyes Guanyin Bodhisattva Figure", whose main figure is a thousand-handed, thousand-eyed Guanyin disc sitting on the lotus platform, Guanyin 11 songs, 40 large hands on the side, surrounded by 5 circles of dense hands, each palm is painted with a glance, surrounded by six arms Ruyi wheel Guanyin, six arms not empty Guanyin, six arms Heavenly King, six arms of fire head steel wearing tiger skin, sun bodhisattvas sitting on the goose flock, moonlight bodhisattvas sitting on the horse herd, etc. The silk painting figures are clear and the lines are smooth, Bright colors. The British Museum's collection of the silk painting "The Transformation of the Medicine Master" by Stein No. ch.0032, the inscription shows that it was painted by Bai Yang in 836 AD, and there is a thousand-handed and thousand-eyed Guanyin Bodhisattva in the middle of the lower section, which is somewhat damaged.

This image is called "mandala" or "golden corridor" and "manza" in thangkas, the word "mandala" is transliterated, meaning "mandala", "gathering", and the mandala diagram refers to the picture of people gathering. Mandala art is divided into 4 categories, the form of painting portraits is called painting mandala, only painting the artifacts in the hands of bodhisattvas is called Samadhi mandalas, only writing letters is called seed mandalas, and three-dimensional sculptures depicting bodhisattvas are called karma mandalas<sup>[10]</sup>. Mandala diagram is a unique form of expression in Thangka art, and the Guanyin Mandala, Vajra Mandala, Arhat Mandala, and Ten Self Mandalas often appear in Thangkas.

The eight bodhisattvas mandalas, thousand hands and thousand eyes Guanyin, thousand hands and

thousand bowls of Manjushri, Ruyi Wheel Guanyin, Bukong Juansuo Guanyin, eleven-sided Guanyin diagrams, etc. in the Dunhuang Grottoes paintings belong to the category of painting mandalas, ch.0032 silk painting “Medicine Master Sutra Transformation Map” in the “Brief History of Tibetan Buddhist Art” of Boguo and Tudan Cairang, called “Thousand Hands and Thousand Eyes Guanyin Mandala”, and the silk painting of the non-empty Guanyin in the Museum Guimet is called “Non-empty Guanyin Mandala”<sup>[11]</sup>. The mural on the east wall of the main room of Yulin Grottoes No.25 and the silk painting of ch.0074 Lu Shena and the Eight Great Bodhisattvas, called “Amitabha Eight Great Bodhisattvas”, “Great Sun Rulai and the Eight Great Bodhisattvas” or “Eight Great Bodhisattva Mandalas”, Mogao Caves No.161 is called Guanyin Mandala. In 1985, the Shijiawan Brick Factory in the eastern suburbs of Luoyang unearthed a mandala prints from 927 AD, with an eight-armed statue sitting on a lotus platform, Tibetan characters in the outer circle box, and utensils on all four sides.

After the Tang Dynasty, there are many mandala-style mandala images in the Dunhuang grottoes murals and Tibetan scripture cave silk paintings, the British Museum has the numbers ch.00376, ch.00377, ch.0034, Museum Guimet EO.1167 Vajrasattva Mandala, EO.1131 Lotus Eight Mandalas<sup>[12]</sup>. The cave No.77, No.462, No.464 and No.465 in the Western Xia period in the murals of Mogao caves all have mandala art styles, such as the mandala of cave No.465, the north wall of the 3 caves of Mogao caves in the Yuan Dynasty, “Thousand Hands and Thousand Eyes Guanyin”, and the Yuan Dynasty court weaving Daweide King Kong Mandala Thangka.

Mandala thangka also painted a type of outer circle inner square pattern form of mandala thangka, very common, originally derived from the Indian circle, square earthen platform, such as “Kalachakra Mandala” composition to square, circular layers of set, the outermost circle painted with water, flame patterns, the second layer of painting Kong, water, lotus patterns, representing the sea, wind wall, fire wall, Kongo wall, lotus wall, moat, the middle square represents the city wall, eaves, the most central figure, the composition is complex. The Sixteen Arhats Mandala depicts sixteen arhats surrounding Shakyamuni in the middle of the circular mandala, and the images of Adixia, Zonggeba, and Tara are painted outside the circular water wall, and the circular mandala occupies a prominent position in the picture, and the composition of the immeasurable life mandala and the Guanyin mandala is similar. The Ten Freedom Mandalas are mandalas consisting of 7 letters and three graphics.

## 5. Conclusions

In the middle and late Tang Dynasty, there are more Guanyin images in Dunhuang Sutra-illustrations, which have many similarities with the Mandala Thangka, and the image of Dunhuang painting is directly related to the development of the Mandala Thangka in the later period, and the two are closely related. Dunhuang culture in the middle and late Tang Dynasty is rich and colorful, presenting special artistic characteristics of the times, art in the Dunhuang area of mutual influence, mutual integration, Dunhuang grottoes through the change of painting content, composition and Thangka are inextricably linked, Dunhuang mural mandala image and Thangka are closely related, Dunhuang art on Thangka influence is obvious.

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