

A Visual Analysis of the Map of Mount Wutai in Mogao Cave 61 and Its Significance

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Abstract. The map of Mount Wutai on the west wall of cave 61 in Mogao Grottoes is the largest extant landscape mural in the holy land of Buddhism, and it is also a visual model of the blending of multiple civilizations on the Silk Road. From the perspectives of art history and iconography, this paper analyzes the appearance of figures, the secular scenes, the architecture and the composition in the map of Mount Wutai. Combined with the historical context of the Cao family's Guiyijun, it reveals that the mural not only reconstructs a sacred landscape in Dunhuang by means of image, providing a space of visual pilgrimage for believers who cannot visit Mount Wutai in person, but also carries the political narrative appeal of the Guiyijun regime of pacifying the country and eliminating disasters. The research shows that as a cultural mirror, the map of Mount Wutai reflects the cross-regional pilgrimage network and the ideal order of multi-ethnic coexistence. It is a typical case of Dunhuang as a crossroads of multiple civilizations on the Silk Road.

Keywords: Dunhuang, Mogao Grottoes, Mogao Cave 61, the Map of Mount Wutai

1. Introduction

Since the middle and late Tang Dynasty, with the translation and dissemination of the Huayan Sutra, Mount Wutai in Shanxi has been recognized as a sacred site of Mahayana Buddhism. After Mount Wutai became a Buddhist center in East Asia, with the spread of a large number of miracle stories, the Mount Wutai Tour became an important religious practice for monks and believers to commune with the divine and accumulate merit [1]. However, Dunhuang is located in the northwest border and is far away from Mount Wutai. In addition, the situation in the late Tang and Five Dynasties was turbulent, so it was difficult for ordinary believers to go there personally [2]. Against such a background, it became an important religious demand at that time to build an alternative Buddhist holy land by drawing a huge topographic map in the grottoes and realize the visual pilgrimage. In order to meet this religious demand, the map of Mount Wutai appeared in the Mogao Grottoes [3].

Cave 61 of Mogao Grottoes, commonly known as "Wenshu Hall", was excavated during the reign of Cao Yuanzhong of the Five Dynasties. It was built between 947 and 951 AD and is one of the merit grottoes of the Cao family. Its west wall traverses the 13.45-meter-long and 3.42-meter-high giant map of Mount Wutai, with a total area of 46 square meters, including 195 cartouches, 199 buildings and 428 people [4]. This mural is not only an exquisite landscape figure painting, but also the earliest and most detailed Buddhist map in China. The map of Mount Wutai is not only a map of

Wutai holy sites, but also a map of cultural integration. It has witnessed the intersection and integration of different civilizations at the level of religion, art and social practice, and embodies the inclusiveness of Chinese culture [5]. Therefore, it is worth conducting a specific analysis.

There are many studies on cave 61 of Mogao Grottoes in the academic community, such as the application of new technologies for reconstruction and promotion [6]. Among them, research on the map of Mount Wutai mostly focused on the description of pictorial chronicles from the perspective of a single Chinese culture, such as identifying the names of temples, marking pilgrimage routes, and researching geographical buildings. Although these studies have a solid foundation, they seldom systematically summarize the image features of the map of Mount Wutai, and seldom ask a larger question: how do different nations and cultures coexist, talk and shape each other in this image? This paper attempts to break through this limitation and reinterpret the map of Mount Wutai from the perspective of image.

Taking the map of Mount Wutai as an example allows a better understanding of the important cultural heritage value of Mogao Cave 61 and its contemporary enlightenment. This study is helpful to understand the history of China's cross-regional and multi-ethnic cultural exchanges, so as to provide valuable experience for multi-cultural exchanges in the context of globalization.

2. Visual analysis

The map of Mount Wutai in Cave 61 is magnificent. By drawing three-dimensional space on the plane wall, a Buddhist world with both geographical reality and religious sanctity is constructed. Its characteristics can be analyzed from four dimensions: figures, scenes, architecture and composition. The richness of the visual content in the map of Mount Wutai can be seen from table 1.

Table 1. The visual types in the map of Mount Wutai

Classification	Image elements
Figures	Tributary envoys, pilgrims, monks, officials, common people, merchants, Buddhas, Bodhisattvas
Scenes	Geographic coordinates, folk scenes, Buddhist narrative scenes
Architecture	Large temples, pagodas, cities, bridges, hotels and other forms
Composition	Multiple perspective points, panoramic aerial view

2.1. Figures

The figures in the picture are rich, reflecting the warm pilgrimage atmosphere of Mount Wutai at that time. The picture shows the documentary nature of the image of multi-ethnic envoys, which is particularly prominent in the lower part of the picture. At the bottom of the picture are the figures of Hunan envoys, Silla envoys and Koryo envoys. In particular, the emergence of the Hunan envoys reflected the political interactions between Dunhuang and the regional regimes surrounding the Central Plains, including Chu under King Ma Xifan. In addition to the multi-ethnic envoys, there are many pilgrims in the picture, whose identity and dynamics deserve attention. The picture depicts a large number of pilgrims traveling on horseback, on foot, or carrying loads, ranging from patrolling monks in monk costumes to officials, common people, and merchants in secular costumes. This indicates that the identities of pilgrims were diverse. The proportions of these figures follow the religious logic of hierarchical scale. The images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are tall and solemn,

and they use the fluid orchid-leaf line, while the ordinary figures show the planarization characteristics similar to the silhouette. The movement characteristics of the pilgrims in the picture reflect their religious feelings. The pilgrims either worship with their hands folded, or worship in front of miracles. These images convey the religious attitude of believers who are not afraid of hard work, so that the viewer is inspired.

2.2. Scenes

The map of Mount Wutai not only shows the holy land of Buddhism, but also depicts a large number of secular life scenes, which is of great historical value to the study of ancient society.

This map marks the real geographical coordinates and records the moving route at that time to a certain extent. The map clearly indicates the real place names such as Taiyuan, Zhenzhou, Yongchang County, Taiyuan Xindian and constructs a specific path from Shanxi and Hebei to Mount Wutai [7]. This interweaving of geographical reality and supernatural scenes (such as the emergence of fingered citron and five-colored clouds) enables the mural to serve dual functions of map guidance and ideal narration. There have been many scenes on this mobile route. The picture is interspersed with scenes of caravan rest, trading and horse drinking [8]. These pictures and the records in Dunhuang documents confirm each other: the Mount Wutai pilgrimage route is also an important branch of the Silk Road, and religious pilgrimage and commercial activities often go hand in hand. The frequent presence of porters and merchants suggests the economic vitality of Dunhuang as a transit station, it is the prosperity of the Silk Road trade that provides the material basis for the large-scale opening of cave statues.

The description of life details in the picture also records the folk life in Dunhuang at that time. The next section of the painting records the scenery of villages and towns on the way to the Buddhist holy land, including realistic scenes such as grinding, weeding, carrying loads, driving, pounding rice, stopping at the inn. The description of these scenes combines the sacred religious narrative with the simple public life, making the mural not only a religious painting, but also a folk painting scroll.

2.3. Architecture

Known as a museum of ancient Chinese architecture, this drawing records the rich architectural regulations during the Tang and Song Dynasties more than 1000 years ago. This mural truly reflects the integration of multiple architectural traditions and multiple elements. There are 47 large monasteries, pagodas, cities, bridges, hotels and other forms, with a total of 199 sites. Referring to the layout of the Foguang Temple in the picture, architect Liang Sicheng found a wooden structure building of the Tang Dynasty, the East Hall of the Buddha Temple in Mount Wutai, which confirmed the high realistic value of the mural. Among them, in terms of shape characteristics, this drawing expresses a wealth of architectural information. The large-scale temples in the picture, such as Dajian'an Temple, present a rigorous axially symmetric layout, with a gate tower in front and a two-story corner tower at the corner, reflecting the standard courtyard configuration of Tang Dynasty temples. In addition, symbolic buildings such as the Holy Golden Bridge and Ashoka Ruixian Tower also appear in the picture, showing the mediating role of architecture in the construction of sacred space.

2.4. Composition

The Mogao Grottoes can be better understood from the perspective of image space, so the map of Mount Wutai can be seen from the perspective of image space [9]. The map of Mount Wutai reproduces the three-dimensional map with plane painting as the carrier in spatial processing, successfully realizing the juxtaposition of multi-dimensional space and time.

From the perspective of scattered points and panoramic bird's-eye view, the map of Mount Wutai adopts the traditional perspective of scattered points in Chinese paintings, covering the landscape of hundreds of miles in a painting. The painting is divided into three scenes: the foreground depicts the path of the town from below, the middle ground shows the towering mountains from above, and the background depicts the Buddha in the clouds from above, guiding the viewer's vision from the world to the Buddhist kingdom. In addition to using scattered perspective and bird's-eye view in the picture, the map of Mount Wutai also integrates the three-stage style of traditional Chinese landscape painting into the structure. The upper section shows the appearance of Bodhisattva and auspicious clouds flying to the sky, creating an ethereal artistic conception. The middle section depicts the core area of the five platforms, with the real body Hall of Manjusri Bodhisattva in Central Terrace as the visual center, and the other four platforms are symmetrically distributed around the center, forming the visual logic of fish-bone symmetry and creating a stable spatial order. The following section records the tour route and town customs leading to the Buddhist holy land.

On the whole, the map organically integrates natural mountains and rivers with cultural landscapes. The picture presents not only the lofty composition of Central Plains landscape painting, but also a plain landscape similar to the oasis in the western regions. It is worth noting that the painter carefully depicts the coexistence of farmland and pasture at the foot of the mountain. This picture of farming and nomadic juxtaposition is rare in pure landscape paintings of the Central Plains. This reflects the true ecology of the Hexi Corridor — agriculture and animal husbandry are interdependent, so this mural is not only a religious map, but also an image of the symbiotic state of multi-ethnic production methods. The mural connects the cities as far away as Zhengzhou in Henan and Zhengding in Hebei with Mount Wutai, forming a pilgrimage network spanning a vast geographical space. This composition conveys a cultural attraction that transcends ethnic boundaries: people from different regions and languages converge because of their common respect for the Manjusri faith. Under the historical background of the split of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms and frequent wars, the map of Mount Wutai actually created a unity in culture and thought, and religious pilgrimage became the emotional link of the multi-ethnic community.

3. The significance

The significance of the map of Mount Wutai goes beyond the artistic expression itself. It plays a central role in religious practice, local politics and cross-cultural exchanges.

3.1. Religious significance

The construction of the map of Mount Wutai is essentially a Buddhist holy land reconstruction of Mount Wutai in a specific space of Dunhuang. In terms of the development of religious art and the spread of Buddhist belief, the map of Mount Wutai witnessed how to construct the holy land of Mount Wutai in Dunhuang and further spread the belief of Mount Wutai.

First, an alternative pilgrimage space was constructed [10]. For Dunhuang people who believe that Manjusri Bodhisattva is stationed in Mount Wutai, but are inconvenient to visit because of the

mountains and rivers, cave 61 provides a place for visiting nearby. By viewing the visualized stories in the mural (such as the Buddha's meeting with Manjusri), the believers can complete the pilgrimage to the Buddhist holy land spiritually, and obtain religious comfort and a sense of relief from the accumulation of merit and the purification of obstacles. Second, to touch the image is to practice. The dense auspicious motifs (such as golden Buddha heads, Buddha hands and five-colored clouds) in the mural are not only for decoration, but also for stimulating the religious imagination of believers. The combination of vision and hearing makes the viewer enter a state of meditation, which reflects the core position of visual pilgrimage in religious practice.

3.2. Historical significance

During the Cao family's Guiyijun period, large-scale grotto projects often carried strong political demands and localized narratives. From the perspective of political function, the map is to achieve disaster elimination in the town and country [11]. During the period of Cao Yuanzhong, Cave 61 was built to pray for the protection of Manjusri Bodhisattva. Manjusri belief is endowed with the consciousness of protecting the territory and stabilizing the local regime, which turns religious belief into a strong support for the legitimacy of rule. From the perspective of political narrative, this picture reflects the trend of cultural identity at that time. The depictions of Zhenzhou, Taiyuan and other important towns in the Central Plains as well as the Hunan envoys in the picture reflect the intention of Dunhuang rulers to follow the traditions of the Central Plains, move closer to the mainstream of the Han culture in the Central Plains, and seek cultural identity and political ownership through regarding Mount Wutai as the national belief symbol in the complex situation of the Five Dynasties.

3.3. Cultural significance

The map of Mount Wutai is a true portrayal of Dunhuang as the crossroads of multiple civilizations along the Silk Road, showing cross-regional and cross-national cultural interactions.

The figure reflects the coexistence of multi-ethnic cultures at that time through figure paintings, scene descriptions and architectural features. The picture gathers the characters of Han, Sute, Korea, Silla, the western regions and other nationalities (such as Koryo royal envoys and the envoys of Silla), and also shows the common imagination of different nationalities on the holy land of Manjusri in this mural. At the same time, the fusion of architectural styles reflects the cross-regional exchange of culture. These demonstrate how Mount Wutai belief became a shared religious aspiration among believers across the region.

The detailed description in the picture records the history of cross-regional trade and dialogue among civilizations. The detailed depiction of camel caravans, hotels and envoys reproduces the prosperity of trade and cultural exchanges on the Silk Road at that time. This kind of image transcends the perspective of a single nation and embodies the characteristics of openness and inclusiveness of Chinese culture.

The map of Mount Wutai shows the significance of multi-ethnic exchanges, cross-regional trade, cross-civilizational dialogue. The scattered details in the picture, such as the Tibetan and Chinese inscriptions, the coexistence of monks in different costumes, a route shared by caravans and farmers, all point to a more macroscopic historical fact: Dunhuang was a crossroads of multiple ethnic groups and cultures characterized by interdependence and mutual prosperity in the 10th century.

4. Conclusion

The map of Mount Wutai in Mogao Cave 61 has successfully recreated the Buddhist holy land in the grottoes with its grand panoramic composition, fine realistic details and profound composition logic. In terms of visual features, its figures, scenes, architecture, and composition have some distinctive characteristics. It is represented by scattered perspective, repeated combination of independent scenes, and the combination of concrete and figurative modeling, which constructs an immersive visual ritual space.

Through the interactive analysis of visual details and historical background, this study demonstrates that the map of Mount Wutai not only records the geography and architecture of Mount Wutai, but also witnesses the interaction between the political appeal for the elimination of disaster and the multi-ethnic culture during the Cao family's Guiyijun period. It represents a pinnacle in the history of Chinese landscape figure painting, and it is also a living fossil for studying the cultural exchanges along the Silk Road in the Middle Ages.

Due to geographical restrictions, this paper failed to explore this map on the spot. At the same time, due to space constraints, it was difficult to study the corresponding relationship between the 195 cartouches in the figure and the specific literature one by one. Future research can use the Digital Dunhuang project and 3D restoration technology to analyze the remaining color textures in the mural, and combined with the archaeological excavation results, to explore the specific religious interaction mode between Dunhuang and the small countries in the western region during the period of Cao Yuanzhong, so as to provide more empirical evidence for the protection and utilization of cultural heritage along the Silk Road.

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